

REVIEW

Music DVD Review: Incredible String Band *Live At The Lowry*

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One of the ironies of music is how quickly it can change allegiances. Songs that are so blithely referred to as Americana were brought over by immigrants from the British Islands and have their origins in Irish, Scottish, and Anglo Saxon folk lore. Musical anthropologists as far back as the 19th century discovered the songs and folklore of the people in the Appalachians and Tennessee Valley areas were modified versions of traditions they had carried with them across the ocean.

"Pretty Saro", "Two Sisters", "Barbara Allan", and countless other similar songs had stayed lyrically intact, even if their manner of presentation had changed. Adapted to the instruments and accents of the new world, their cadences might have changed, but their meanings hadn't changed a whit.

In North America, these songs have never really become part of the mainstream, and, even in the folk "revival" periods that we periodically go through, these songs are largely ignored. Its only been in recent years, with movies like *Songcatcher* and *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?*, that they have come to the general public's attention.



In Great Britain, it's been a different story, as those songs remained part of the cultural heritage throughout the islands. They may not have been part of the mainstream popular music scene, but neither did they vanish from view as completely as they did over here. In the great British folk revivals of the early 1960's and later, groups like Renaissance, Clannad, Steeleye Span, and Fairport Convention drew upon that history for both their material and their inspiration.

One of the groups who led the way from the early 1960's to the mid 1970's was [Incredible String Band](#). Playing a mixture of adapted traditional music and original compositions, they created a sound that became loosely referred to as psychedelic folk music. Dressing like troubadours and courtly ladies from days gone by, they had great success with their musical hybrid, routinely scoring high in the British musical charts.

Of course, all good things come to an end, and so did the Incredible String Band. But individuals from the band still played together on and off throughout the years, and, for the Millennium celebrations in Edinburgh, some of them joined together and gave a reunion concert. Because of that gig the band reformed, and, a few years further down the road, the line up became a quartet with two of the founding members, Mike Heron and Clive Palmer, being joined by Lawson Dando and Fluff.

It's this line up that's been recorded on the newly released *Live At The Lowry* DVD on the [MVD](#)

[Visual](#) label. The concert was filmed in 2003 and features eighteen tracks representing the band's first five albums. It would seem like this disc represents a perfect opportunity for those fans looking for a filmed record of the band's greatest hits or those interested in checking them out for the first time.

Unfortunately, what's on display on this DVD won't serve either purpose, as it bears little if any resemblance to what the band was in their heyday. It has nothing to do with the new members either, as they are both gifted instrumentalists, with Fluff, in particular, having a wonderful singing voice and a great stage presence. The trouble lies with the two original members of the band, whose abilities on this night range from the barely competent to the abysmal.



While Heron still retains some presence on stage, he is constantly straining to reach notes with his voice, and, when he sits at the keyboard, he plays with the tentativeness of a hunt and peck typist. But even sadder is Clive Palmer, who simply looks lost, confused, and barely able to play his banjo or sing in time. The occasional missed note is understandable, but it became embarrassing to watch his fingers stumble along the fret board as he hunts around for the right notes.

While the sound and picture quality of the disc were superb, and the efforts of Fluff and Lawson Dando were admirable, there was nothing for them to support. The two supposed leads in the group were uninspiring, and the performance was boring. *Live At The Lowry* is a performance by the Incredible String Band in name only. Former members of the band might have been playing songs they had performed thirty to forty years ago, but that's the only thing that bore any resemblance to the original.

If you want to hear the Incredible String Band, I'd recommend you buy some re-mastered CDs of their original recordings and not waste your time with this DVD.



Richard Marcus is a long-haired Canadian iconoclast who writes reviews and opines on the world as he sees it at [Leap In The Dark](#) and [Epic India](#).

Comments

#1 — September 3, 2007 @ 13:26PM — Kristine Nicholson

I just got done watching Live at Lowry and I enjoyed it very much. If you want all the pitches and rhythms to line up in the same place as they always have, no need to be disappointed, go back to the old records; they're still there. But these are new versions just like the second takes of the album versions were and just like all live performances are. To enjoy the Incredible String Band "aright" throughout all their formations and reformations, you only need to love the fact that "This moment is different from any before it." Give it a (nother) try. Smile.

