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Incredible String Band

Live at the Lowry [DVD]

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by Tom Useted

The Incredible String Band's *Live at the Lowry* is filmed with all the excitement one might expect from a PBS pledge-drive special, but it often surpasses in warmth, charm, and relaxedness.

This particular incarnation of the ISB, circa 2003, features mainstay Mike Heron, original member Clive Palmer, and multi-instrumentalists Lawson Dando and Fluff. This means it does not feature the third founding member of the group, Robin Williamson, who also crafted many of the ISB's best-known and most-enduring songs ("First Girl I Loved", "Way Back in the 1960s", "October Song"). Consequently, the program features only two of his numbers, performed as a tribute. Despite Williamson's being responsible for the ISB's "hits," those songs were somewhat uncharacteristic, as much of his work was ponderous and potentially inaccessible. Thus, it might not translate as well to the video format. (But perhaps the opposite is also true: It could've worked *better* on video to see the group playing such intricate, experimental tunes.)

Mike Heron, in comparison, often favored pleasing melodies, straightforward (if occasionally hippie-dippy) lyrics, and relatively simple time signatures. As a result, his songs exude kindness and communality, and function perfectly in a live setting. In fact, watching the ISB—particularly Dando and Fluff, who are comfortable and agile soloists—play Heron's songs on this disc illuminates the fact that there was a lot going on instrumentally in his seemingly simple songs. Heron, though, is something of a letdown, at least in the instrumental department. While the original recordings of songs like "Painting Box" featured some deft finger-style guitar, Heron has been largely reduced to strumming his way through this performance. This could be because of the demands of singing lead on the majority of the songs, or the necessity of producing a fuller sound in concert, and really it's a minor complaint, but part of the appeal of the early ISB was the facility of their guitar work. What we get on "Painting Box" this time around is Fluff's violin in lieu of crazy guitar, which isn't quite the same, but it still produces an interesting sound.

As Heron points out in the interview that constitutes the only real bonus feature of this disc, "A Very Cellular Song" is a special treat for ISB fans, as it was only performed a few times back in the day. So watching the group play the whole complex, multi-part composition on *Live at the Lowry* should theoretically be an exciting experience, but it really isn't. It's not a total drag, of course, and the "Bid You Goodnight" segment is still gorgeous, but "A Very Cellular Song" is a very sore thumb when placed in the company of many of the group's least-indulgent songs. It might've even been the point at which the original group fell off the wagon. But hey, the audience just eats it up, maybe out of feeling obligated to do so.

For fans of the ISB's earliest work, *Live at the Lowry* is a wonderful viewing (and listening) experience, as more than half of the program consists of songs from their first three (and best) records. Heron's work on those albums was particularly strong, and songs like "Everything's Fine Right Now" and "How Happy I Am", with sing-along choruses and good-time lyrics, are tailor-made for live performance. Additionally, two of his best anthropomorphic ditties, "Cousin Caterpillar" and "The Hedgehog's Song", make appearances here. (Sadly, no "Little Cloud".) And even though he seems a bit dazed at times, Palmer's involvement is welcome, as we're treated to a slightly sloppy rendition of his great "Empty Pocket Blues" (with additional piano from Dando).

Anyone interested in the Incredible String Band, who were one of the finest semi-forgotten groups of the '60s, owes it to themselves to see *Live at the Lowry*. Hardcore fans will want to own it, of course, and it's certainly an enjoyable concert program, one where the performers seem to be having a fair bit of fun and the music radiates happiness. I suspect their enthusiasm will be contagious.

(Extras include a pre-gig interview with Heron and Palmer, during which they discuss the songs one by one. Their personalities shine through, even if it's hard not to wish the discussion was more enlightening.)

RATING: 6

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