

THE OSBORNE BROTHERS
In Concert At Renfro Valley
Pinecastle 0107

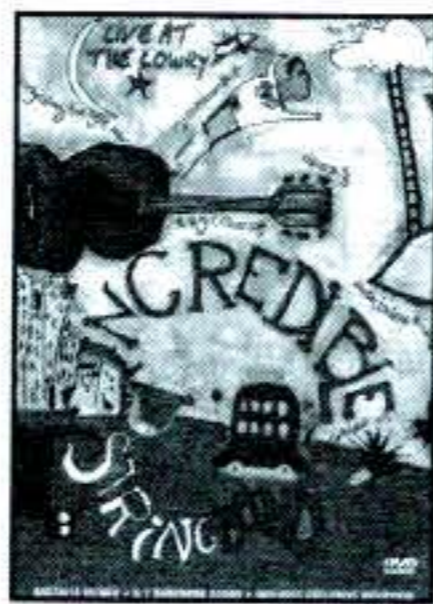
THE OSBORNE BROTHERS
Live In Germany
Pinecastle 0108 (CD)/0108 (DVD)

After more than fifty years as one of the pioneering acts in bluegrass, the long run of the Osborne Brothers came to an end a couple of years ago when lingering medical issues prompted Sonny Osborne to retire from the music business almost completely. Bobby Osborne formed his own band, the Rocky Top X-press and, at the age of 75, seems to have found a new lease on life while still keeping the faith with longtime fans of the Osborne sound. Much of the later studio work of the brothers was on Pinecastle, and these two projects result from the surfacing of live recordings of the Osbornes and their band made almost exactly five years apart, an ocean away from each other, and under very different circumstances.

On July 30, 1989 the Osbornes took the stage as part of a twin bill in Streeker Moor, Germany, that also included Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys. As both Sonny and Bob mention in the liner notes, both bands were dead tired from having driven 600 miles straight through from their previous gig in Switzerland cramped into two small vans. *Live In Germany* is the record of that Sunday afternoon, and it comes in two forms. The two CDs in the set were salvaged from a single track audio tape, while the DVD is taken from a single video camera positioned slightly to the left of center stage. While the video is a bit fuzzy and unfocused at times (the lighting was less than optimal), the Osbornes and their band (Terry Eldredge, guitar; Steve Thomas, fiddle; Terry Smith, bass) gave a typically spirited show in spite of their road-weariness, covering favorites like "Bluegrass Melodies," "Rocky Top" and "Ruby." Though there's little in the way of stage talk and song intros (presumably due to the language barrier), the crowd responded enthusiastically in a way that suggests a working knowledge of the Osbornes' music and history. The audio on the CDs is of higher quality, though Sonny points out that Glen Duncan and Charlie Cushman were brought in to overdub a couple of fiddle parts that were missing or beyond retrieval from the original tape.

Just over five years later, on August 6, 1994, the Osbornes performed at a venue that was musically and literally a lot closer to home. The venerable Renfro Valley Barn Dance has been a Kentucky institu-

tion for decades, and when the Osbornes (natives of Hyden, Ky.) take the stage there, it's sort of like watching the Yankees in front of their home crowd. Eldredge and Smith are still on hand for this show, David Crow holds down the fiddle slot, and the band features a sixth member in the person of the late, great Dobro player Gene Wooten. Whether in Germany or Kentucky, both these shows highlight all the elements that made the Osborne Brothers a success for more than a half-century. Bobby's voice remains instantly recognizable and continues to influence generations of new singers. The harmonies, especially the trios, have the chilling and distinctive sound that Bobby has said was designed to emulate the harmonic element added to classic country music by the pedal steel guitar. And, it's impossible to watch and listen to these shows and not be reminded that Sonny has always been one of the most innovative and enjoyable banjo players the music has known. — JL



INCREDIBLE STRING BAND
Live at the Lowry
MVD Visual 123

Well, this both is and isn't the Incredible String Band reunion I've long hoped to see. ISB founders Mike Heron and Clive Palmer participate. Robin Williamson doesn't. Since Clive left after the first album, leaving Mike and Robin to soldier on successfully after that, Robin's absence is most regrettable. Especially so since it rules out Robin's ISB songs from those presented.

Still Mike and Clive aided and abetted by Lawson Dondo and the lady known as Fluff put on a thoroughly delightful 98 minute show. Each of the 4 plays a dazzling assortment of instruments making recreation of ISB's magically eclectic sounds possible.

Virtually everything offered save a pair of fiddle and pipe tunes dates from ISB's first four albums, their most glorious period, when they felt totally free to experiment with wild, often bizarre combinations

of sonic and lyric textures and equally experimental structures.

From openers "Everything's Fine Right Now" and "Ducks on a Pond" all the way through to "A Very Cellular Song" and "Black Jack Davy" the performances are enchanting.

Camera work is pretty pedestrian and basic, but the gorgeous sound easily compensates.

Fans of those early Incredible String Band albums will embrace this DVD and like me wish Robin Williamson had been there, too, to make the reunion complete. — MT

TIM BUCKLEY
My Fleeting House
MVD 4566 (DVD)

Since his early demise, Tim Buckley's legend has kept growing. This DVD collects all the Buckley video performances I know of. They range from 1967 to 1974, the full length of his brief career.

I did see Tim perform live several times. His performances were transcendent with magic unlike anything else before or since. His high, keening voice was thrilling. Combined with his band of Lee Underwood on guitar and Carter C.C. Collins on congas — later augmented by David Friedman on vibes — his songs often with lyrics by his friend and collaborator Larry Beckett were an uncanny experience.

On the DVD, Underwood and Beckett introduce the songs and add historical perspective of the times and Buckley's restless evolution. Wisely, the disc gives the option of viewing performances only. Sometimes you just don't want the talking.

I liked some clips more than others. Admittedly I am most partial to the 1967-1968 material, the first half of the program. Some of his later, more experimental work eludes my grasp. But even these are riveting. And others will prefer them.

Technically some of the performances are better than others, but all are quite watchable with sound as good as it could be given the sources. The enclosed booklet adds full credits for each clip plus an enlightening essay by Buckley biographer David Browne and a generous photo album.

Tim Buckley was truly unique. For the many who never got to see him and love his work, *My Fleeting House* is a marvel and a must. Even if you are merely curious about Tim, I'll bet this treasure trove will convince you. And fans of his son Jeff Buckley will surely love getting a look at what came before. — MT