



[The Incredible String Band](#)  
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(Fledg'ling; US: 13 Apr 2010; UK: 29 Mar 2010)



## [The Incredible Strong Band](#)

**The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion**

(Fledg'ling; US: 12 Apr 2010; UK: 29 Mar 2010)

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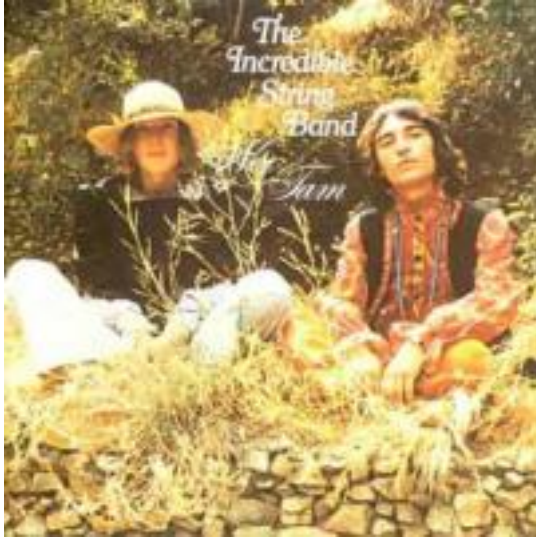


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### **Wee Tam and the Big Huge**

(Fledg'ling; US: 13 Apr 2010; UK: 29 Mar 2010)

## **The Incredible String Band: Very Cellular Songs**

By [George de Stefano](#) 3 June 2010

The year was 1969—I'm pretty sure—and a bunch of us underage hippie freaks went to the Fillmore East to catch this far-out folk group from Great Britain called the Incredible String Band. My companions all dropped acid, but I stuck with cannabis. One of us had to be the “minder” or else we might have all ended up wandering around the East Village in a psychedelic daze and have missed the late train back to Connecticut. Boy, would we have been in trouble then.

The Incredible String Band were, as well as I can remember, well, a trip. There were two guys and two girls, all dressed in colorful countercultural finery. An eclectic assortment of stringed, percussion, and wind instruments was strewn across the stage, along with various hippie *tchotchkes*. They played songs about minotaurs and Chinese emperors, hedgehogs and slithering amoebas. I remember best the one about amoebas. The band played it right before the intermission, and they turned the chorus into a chant that seemed as if it might go on forever, like a British folkie version of James Brown “doin’ it to death.” “May the long time sun shine upon you / All love surround you / And the pure light within you / Guide you all the way on”, they blissfully warbled. As I recall, they, or some members of their entourage, ran through the aisles tossing flower petals at us.

I hadn't thought much about the Incredible String Band in the many years since that Fillmore East show until I heard that the U.S.-based Fledg'ling label would release remastered versions of the albums they recorded for Elektra between 1966 and 1968. Talk about the return of the repressed. Hearing these recordings again decades after my first exposure to them brought back everything that captivated, amused, and sometimes bugged me about this odd and endearing group.

The Incredible String Band was founded in Edinburgh in 1965 by Mike Heron, Robin Williamson, and Clive Palmer. Their 1966 eponymous debut album was a pretty straightforward traditional British folk record. Most of the songs clocked in at two to four minutes, and the trio played them on guitar, banjo, violin, and mandolin. The sprawling fantasias with their exotic instrumentation would come later.

Despite good reviews and support from influential figures like the BBC's John Peel, the album wasn't a breakout success. Palmer took off for Afghanistan and India, Williamson went to Morocco, and Heron stayed home in Edinburgh. But when Williamson returned from Morocco bearing North African instruments and musical ideas, things started to get interesting. He and Heron moved to London and, guided by Joe Boyd, their American manager and producer, they began to establish themselves as a distinctive presence on the British folk scene.

In 1967, right in the midst of the "Summer of Love," the Incredible String Band released their second album, *The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion*. Folk music, British and American, remained the core of their sound. But Williamson and Heron's growing interest in Indian and Arabic music was evident in the songwriting and the vocals, especially Williamson's use of microtones, and in the instrumentation, with the duo and guest musicians on sitar, *tamboura*, *oud* and *gimbri*, as well as acoustic guitars.

"The Hedgehog Song", "Painting Box", and "First Girl I Loved" (covered by Judy Collins and Jackson Browne) proved that the Incredible String Band could turn out tunes as hooky as anything on the pop charts. "Way Back in the 1960s", the musings of a 91-year-old about his youth in that epochal decade ("Yes, you made your own amusements then") showed they had a sense of humor.

The new direction came to full fruition with 1968's *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, whose centerpiece was the number that blew my young mind at the Fillmore East: Mike Heron's "A Very Cellular Song", a 13-minute opus that incorporated excerpts of "Bid You Goodnight", a Bahamian funeral song by Joseph Spence and the Pindar Family. The Incredible String Band's third album showed how well they could adapt foreign influences from India, North Africa, and the Caribbean. But Heron's "The Minotaur's Song", with its anthemic melody and whimsical lyrics ("His habits are predicta-bull / Aggressively relia-bull"), was a wonderfully weird homage to homegrown musical tradition: the comic operas of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

The Incredible String Band hit their creative peak in 1968, following up *Hangman* with the double LP set, *Wee Tam and the Big Huge*. (The discs also were released separately

in the United States.) Band girlfriends Rose Simpson and Licorice McKechnie were now full-fledged members, as singers and instrumentalists. Much of the Incredible String Band's best material appears on these albums. The contrasting writing styles of Williamson and Heron yielded catchy folk and country tunes (Heron) and long, epic ballads dense with Christian imagery and pagan mythology (Williamson). I prefer Heron's more down to earth approach ("Log Cabin Home in the Sky", "You Get Brighter"), but Williamson's cosmic questing pays off on "The Half-Remarkable Question" and the brilliant, nine-minute-plus "Ducks on a Pond."

The Incredible String Band at their best exemplified the virtues of the '60s counterculture, especially its creative daring and open-hearted spiritual yearning. They paved the way for "world music" by incorporating, with taste and intelligence, elements of non-Western musical cultures. (And, for better or worse, they paved the way for the "freak folk" movement.) At their worst, they could be twee and pretentious. And after 1969, when they embraced Scientology, the spirituality devolved into kozmic krapola. But their best work is pretty terrific, and thanks to producer Joe Boyd's deft re-mastering, it sounds better than ever.

Robin Williamson, in notes he wrote for the re-issued CDs, sums up what the Incredible String Band was all about: "What I wanted to make was innocent music, straight from the well spring of the heart. To forget all cramping skill, to play instruments one couldn't play, link audiences and performer, jump styles and themes with the logic of dreams and visions..." Yes. That's it, exactly.

The Incredible String Band

Rating: 6

The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion

Rating: 7

The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter

Rating: 8

Wee Tam and the Big Huge

Rating: 8

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