

Clive Palmer's name is rightly revered by all fans of Britain's 1960s folk revival. A renowned musician and founder member of the Incredible String Band, he featured only on their 1966 debut before moving to Cornwall, playing in various other groups and forming the wonderful COB with 'Little' John Bidwell and Mick Bennett. Their two albums, 1971's 'Spirit of Love' and 1972's 'Moyshe McStiff and the Tartan Lancers of the Sacred Heart', have long been hard to find and highly prized by music fans. COB are one of the few remaining musical mysteries of the period, and so it was a particular pleasure to chat to Clive shortly before a hugely enjoyable gig by the reformed Incredible String Band in Oxford. Still visibly enthused by performing and sharing with audiences his extensive repertoire of traditional songs, his genial manner belies the considerable enigma that has arisen in his wake over the years.

PT: COB seem unfairly neglected given the exposure their contemporaries are getting nowadays.

Yes, this is the first time I've ever been interviewed about COB. I get asked a lot about the early days in Scotland, the String Band stuff and so on - but never COB.

CP: When did you get involved in music?

When I was about eight years old. I was mainly a banjo player, and always picked up influences, mainly from the turn of the century, thirties, music hall, all of it. Eventually I went up to Scotland and played in a lot of clubs there, met Robin and then Mike.

Let's bypass the ISB days and move on to your departure from the band.

It just happened. It wasn't intentional or at all difficult. We made the first album and nothing much seemed to be happening, so we all decided to have a break. It wasn't a logical decision. I went off travelling around

India and Afghanistan and Robin went off too.

Was your decision not to continue with the ISB after your travels affected by their increasingly psychedelic direction?

Not really, no. The whole hippy thing didn't really involve me, though. People used to tell me you could write fantastic music on LSD, but it didn't affect me at all. It was rubbish, I couldn't do anything. I just wanted to sit down.

then, they ran a mile. It wasn't that good, actually. It was before I really got a grip on things. I was never sent an acetate of it or anything and I still haven't heard it - it still hasn't come out. Billy Connolly was interested in buying the rights to it recently, but they could never tie Peter Eden down.

Next you joined the Famous Jug Band for their first lp, 'Sunshine Possibilities'. How did that come about?



BY RICHARD MORTON JACK

Legend has it that in 1967 you made an orchestrated folk lp with Wizz Jones.

Yeah, that's right. After the travelling Robin and Mike were doing the 5000 Spirits and Wizz Jones asked me if I'd be interested in doing an album. It turned out to be very experimental, with some very strange and obscure stuff on it. It had songs from my schooldays, a lot of Victorian and Edwardian banjo tunes, bits and pieces. Peter Eden was producing and couldn't get anybody to take it, tried everybody. If you said 'Edwardian banjo music' to record companies

I worked with Mike Heron for a bit, then went off to Cornwall, where I joined the Famous Jug Band. At the time I was also going up to play in Scotland a fair bit. I quite liked the album we did together, but they decided that they wanted to go on without me, which they later discovered was a mistake. They didn't notice how important my input was until it had gone. Still, we played a few quite prestigious gigs and it's quite a good album.

Most would say that your song 'A Leaf Must Fall' is the album's high point.

That's nice. Most of the things I write just come to me while I'm mucking about, little ideas.

What came next?

I knew John Bidwell from Cornwall. He and Mick Bennett were playing around Newquay and Penzance, and we gravitated towards one another and started to write material together, along with another guy called Tim Wellard. We also started running a little club ourselves, on a Thursday, in a place called The Folk Cottage where we met Ralph McTell. John and I were living in a caravan together a lot of the time. We had little groups, like the Templa Creatures and the Stockroom Five, but we only played in Cornwall. The Templa Creatures played Eastern music and the Stockroom Five played country stuff.

Did either of these groups record?

We made a tape with the Templa Creatures and gave it to Julia Creasey to pass onto Roy Guest, but it got lost. She might have put it in the scrap bin for all I know. We didn't make any copies, unfortunately. That was all.

How did COB come together?

Eventually Tim left us and we started calling ourselves COB - Clive's Original Band. The name was Jo Lustig's suggestion. He wanted to

make the most of my String Band connections, I suppose. Spirit of Love came together quite naturally. We came up with what we thought were some good numbers and gave them our best.

How did you come to record on CBS?

Through Jo Lustig. There were a number of labels that wanted to sign folk bands at the time. Sales didn't really matter to Jo, he just got a flat payment from the record company. The main reason he set up the deal was to give Ralph some production

How did you choose which songs to cover?

From whatever came out of my head. From my traditional background in Scotland I knew lots of old songs, and the dialects they were in, so I was able to handle songs like that.

Do you remember the sessions for Spirit Of Love?

We didn't record live in the studio. It was done separately in most cases and then put together, with the vocals on top. We worked hard on our vocal harmonies. It was tough to do those sorts of vocalisations and it took a long time to get them right. Instrumentally I wasn't really aware of doing anything new.

Who wrote the material?

I came up with most of the tunes and the others added other things. Mick was doing all the lyrics and no music. He'd do the words and we'd come up with music that seemed to fit their mood. We'd improvise the rest. We decided to credit the songs three ways because we'd all had an input and wanted to be egalitarian about it.

Was the album promoted much?

The three of us did an English tour with the Pentangle, which went down quite well. We never played abroad and I don't know if the albums came out anywhere else. Spirit Of Love didn't get much radio play but got a very good review in Melody Maker. It never took off, though.

Were you disappointed?

I wasn't too disappointed as I knew it'd be difficult to sell. I didn't really mind. You dream of things happening, but it's not easy and you learn that. The companies made these things just to get in on the market and see if one of them might take off, just like people are doing now with music DVDs.

What was COB's next move?

We moved to London and started to gig through an agency Jo got us, supporting people and filling in cancellations. When we were with the Pentangle we were looked after, but on our own we went everywhere in an old van and had to sleep in it! It

was pretty funny most of the time. We played in the Half Moon in Putney regularly and built it up from ten people to capacity in about two months.

Why did you move from CBS to Polydor?

The change of labels was all through Jo, nothing to do with us. It made no difference to us where we were, really.

COB's second album, Moyshe McStiff and the Tartan Lancers of the Sacred Heart, has an extraordinary title.

It's quite simple, really. We couldn't decide what to call it. Mick Bennett's half Jewish and half Scottish, so Moyshe McStiff was him. John and I were the Tartan Lancers. The Sacred Heart bit was just for fun, a throwaway addition, really. There's nothing deep for people to read into it. It doesn't mean anything apart from the wordplay on Mick's name, which also describes the music quite well, I suppose.

Does it surprise you how much it's admired and sought-after now?

Those sorts of judgments come from other people. If they think that, I'm delighted. I just made it and moved on. I hear people say that Moyshe is this great masterpiece of early 70s British folk, but it's never hit me because I've never had anything from it – a small advance and tiny little piddly payments, that's all. The first String Band album I still get money from, but not that, so it's not something that comes up in my mind a lot.

A lot of the album's appeal stems from the mystical, sad and faintly religious atmosphere that permeates it.

That might have been what held us back a bit, actually. It's Middle Eastern, it's contemplative, and it's about quite serious subjects. There was no religious intention, it just came out that way. A lot of the time we felt like painters, making pictures with no definite purpose.

It has a fantastic sleeve as well.

The painting was commissioned. It had nothing to do with us except that we approved it. It seemed all right, so that was that.

How many copies did the albums sell?

I don't think we were ever talking about big sales – a few hundred here and there, that's all.

Did you tour to promote Moyshe McStiff?

Not really. We did a gig at the Royal Festival Hall with the Pentangle that I remember. I brought up a traditional singer from the Borders called Willie Scott. They paid his expenses and we put him on in the middle. He was an old shepherd and just stood there and sang with his crook. People were a bit surprised but it went down well. Another of my mad ideas!

Do you have a preference between the albums?

I like them both. They've each got good points. I'd have to sit down and listen to them again, really. I've heard them off and on over the years, but I don't have copies myself.

How about a favourite song?

I think Lion of Judah's great, a very good song. I did the introduction for that one, the Moyshe McStiff intro. We enjoyed all the songs, really. We were having fun. We'd been playing crummy clubs in Cornwall and suddenly had the chance to develop. It was great.

The non-album single 'Blue Morning / Bones' had a more conventional pop sound.

That was released at the same time as the album. Blue Morning was my song. I was playing around on my guitar and just came up with it. A friend of ours from Cornwall, Jenny Val Baker, plays the drums on that. Her sister Demelza sang back up on Moyshe McStiff. I'm afraid the 45 didn't make any difference to anything for us. It got some very strange reviews, like 'the singer sounded like he's got bronchitis'.

Why did COB break up?

It started to wear down a bit, so I felt it was time to try something else for a while. Maybe we were with the wrong agent, maybe we weren't being pushed in the right direction – we were





it takes time. But I'd be happy to play COB songs at a gig. The main thing is to play what the fans want to hear, and that's what we're working out at the moment. Most of the COB songs are in my head, though, and I could quickly relearn the others.

Why aren't the albums easily available?

I don't know about the contractual position. Spirit Of Love has been reissued, but I'm still not getting any royalties. The Polydor catalogue was sold to Sony or EMI or someone, but you need someone to run around for you trying to work it all out. I doubt it's worth their while to reissue them now. I'd love to see them properly reissued, but only if I can control it in some way. The best way to do it from my point of view would be to rerecord the damn things and bypass the record companies. But I'm glad Moyses's been bootlegged because it's free publicity, if nothing else.

Are there other tracks in the vaults?

There's no unreleased stuff that I remember.

What are you doing these days?

I do tours with the String Band and we're having a good time. The fans like it and we're selling places out. I'm living in Brittany and have just done recorded some new stuff with a friend from Cornwall, which has come out quite well.

Finally, were you aware of the mystique that has developed about COB and you in particular?

Not at all. That's the strange thing. I haven't cultivated any image like that, I assure you! These things just spring up around you. Maybe it'll all change. Having said that I'm just as likely to be gardening or doing carpentry as making music, other activities have always been just as important as music.

Cliver Palmer was interviewed by Richard Morton Jack, © Ptolemaic Terrascope 2003.

an intimate group and got lumbered with doing big concerts. Perhaps that was the problem.

What was next for you?

All sorts of things. I got married, did a solo banjo lp, worked in a dental company, worked in engineering, and then worked at Boosey and Hawkes making instruments. I was working more or less continuously until about 1990 when I came back to music.

What did the others do?

John's a teacher in Manchester and Mick's living in Islington, I think. We're not in contact, but we're all still friends with Ralph.

Do you miss the COB days?

I'm not nostalgic. It's nice to be younger, but like all artists, you finish one project and move onto the next. You change from one album to the next, your influences shift, you feel and think differently.

Would you play together again?

I'd gladly do a reunion if somebody made a financially feasible proposal. That's the problem with these things. You have to spend ages going through the material, working it all out and



(left) - A rare and beautiful handbill for a mid-1970s folk concert in St. Ives, Cornwall, featuring Clive Palmer, the legendary Lazy Farmer (featuring ex-CoB members) and a young Nigel not-yet-Mazlyn Jones.

All courtesy Colin Hill, Pyg Track Archives.