

***This Being Human* Transcript
Ep. 20 – Ian Whiteman**

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today.

IAN WHITEMAN:

There's so much actually inside one's sort of inner universe that you actually really can't put into words. And if it comes out in words, it comes out in music, comes out in a bit of art, actually comes out in just people speaking, poetry and writing. But it's got to come out, you know?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Ian Abdal Latif Whiteman was a staple in the '60s counterculture music scene in the UK. At ease on the piano, the guitar, the saxophone, even the oboe, he backed some of the biggest folk stars of the day like Shirley Collins and Fairport Convention. He shared a stage with The Rolling Stones and worked with the legendary producer George Martin, commonly known as the "fifth Beatle." Ian's band Mighty Baby never broke into the mainstream, but they released two albums that became cult hits from the psychedelic era. These days those albums trade hands for hundreds of dollars amongst vinyl collectors. Mighty Baby was also central to Islam entering the UK music scene. While the hippie search for knowledge led some musicians to a life of drugs, Mighty Baby turned to a higher power for inspiration. Ian ended up joining a Sufi order in Morocco and soon left the music scene altogether. He stopped performing for decades, before returning to the stage with his friend Yusuf Islam — also known as Cat Stevens — for a major peace concert in the aftermath of Bosnian War. He currently lives in Spain, which is where I reached him to talk about those early days in music, what led him down a spiritual path, and how that's affected his relationship with his art.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Ian Abdal Latif Whiteman, welcome to *This Being Human*.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Nice to be here. Wherever here is anymore.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, Abdal Latif, some people might think of jug blowing and noodly guitars when they think of psychedelic music. You're actually a classically trained musician. So how did you first start playing music? What were those early experiences like?

IAN WHITEMAN:

I grew up in a very musical environment actually. At home. I learned piano when I was about six. There was always singing and music in our house, because those days people had a piano, every house had a piano, and people actually recreated music. But when I got to, when I went to sort of secondary school, they start you off on a recorder, then they put you up to an oboe. But behind this whole thing there was actually playing the piano, which I'd already taught myself. But the piano — behind the serious music I was discovering the — the piano kind of teaches yourself and you always start off with sort of the 12-bar blues. And in fact, the blues really featured in my life from very, very early on. There was a kind of inherent logic in the way that a blues pattern works. And that's been a kind of theme through my life right up to now, you know. And I could play, you know, I can play anything if it's blues-y.

When I was at school though, we did every kind of music you could imagine, from choral music — we had, I think the music staff outnumbered the arts staff like six to one. It was incredible. The music master put on like huge operas like Verdi's *Requiem* — which we performed to a professional standard, I promise you. It was with a double, a double orchestra, triple choir, soloist, everything. We performed it in London. It was just — but it's so powerful. I mean, you're a sort of teenager of about 17, quite sensitive. It's almost overwhelming. It was great fun. We had jazz groups as well. But interestingly, we had a jazz club, and the people like the jazz — they would sit in sort of tweed coats in chairs, listening to mono LPs, some American imports. And we were suddenly sitting down listening to Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, Gil Evans. It spoke to us in a way that nothing else did, particularly to me. And, of course, that year in 1961, we had a school, a club trip, but it was to see John Coltrane Quintet playing in the Gaumont State Kilburn, along with and supported by the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band. I mean, people faint if you tell them these things.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Jazz became everything to Ian. After secondary school, he moved to London and began to study architecture. But he really wanted to be a jazz pianist. And whenever he could, he'd go out to see the greats in concert, legends like Ella Fitzgerald and Thelonious Monk. Ian bought an electric organ and started playing at some parties around town with friends. And soon everything changed.

IAN WHITEMAN:

We did this amazing gig in Queens College, Oxford, alongside — get this — the Hollies and the Yardbirds. And the Hollies played before us. We played, and when I saw The Hollies playing live

in a tent — which is the best acoustics for it — I lost all my jazz snobbery. I thought they were incredible. I mean, they were so slick.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

But the real turning point for Ian came when he was taking a year off school. He was working at an uninspiring job, craving something different, when he picked up an issue of *Melody Maker* magazine and saw an advertisement that caught his eye.

IAN WHITEMAN:

This is a moment that changed my life. Actually, this was one thing that when you suddenly think, “I’m going to phone number” and your life is never the same again. There was a band advertising for a keyboard player. This was a working band. And I thought, I’ll try out. And the man who answered was a guy called Roger from a group called The Action, which was a kind of — at the time, a very famous sort of mod soul band playing around London. Anyway, I was suddenly overnight shoved into showbiz. It was the strangest experience because music then was really a showbiz thing. You had managers and you had recording managers and you had publicists and we were suddenly on radio shows and having your photograph. And it was kind of weird. And I was suddenly also going on gigs like four times a week.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

The Action put out some records and were respected on the scene. They worked with the producer George Martin, who was famous for his involvement with The Beatles. But they never had anything you could call commercial success. Their singer ended up leaving to pursue an ill-fated solo career, but the rest of the band stayed together. They hired a new guitarist, Martin Stone, who brought more than musical skill to the band. He also brought his interest in Eastern religions.

IAN WHITEMAN:

From that point on, everything changed.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

With this new lineup, the band started to experiment with the new sound that was taking hold at the time. Bands like The Byrds were showing up for gigs in England, pushing folk music in new directions. At a meeting with a record executive, Ian’s band renamed themselves Mighty Baby.

IAN WHITEMAN:

We didn’t like the name particularly, but it was better than The Action. You know, those days you heard of a band called something with opposites in it — you know, the Grateful Dead or the Soft Machine. And we said, “Well okay, well fine, we’ll become Mighty Baby.” It’s kind of a pretty weird name in a way, but it’s — I got kind of quite attached to it in time.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Mighty Baby toured widely. They played to hundreds of thousands of people at the Isle of Wight Festival, alongside people like Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, and Miles Davis. They would mix their folksy, poppy, jazz-influenced tunes with long jams inspired by those jazz legends that Ian adored. And they released two albums. Neither of them were hits, but both are highly coveted today, selling for hundreds of dollars online. A lot of people romanticize that time in music, an era that birthed psychedelic, spiritual music, and the peace-loving flower power era. But Ian's definitely not a romantic about it.

IAN WHITEMAN:

There were a lot of casualties in in that period, from either drugs or whatever. A lot of the musicians I knew at that time aren't with us anymore.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

It was a tough way to make a living. But still, Ian reminisces about what felt like the boundless creativity of the time.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Behind the scenes, you got all these record companies and managers manipulating it, trying to — inventing flower power, you know, ways of making money out of it. But actually a lot of the music was very different. Now, nowadays there's a kind of homogeneity about music and everyone sounds the same, partly because the technology is the same. But in those days, every studio sounded different. Every band sounded different. You know, there was a lot of individual quality. But we weren't a commercial band in the sense that we weren't sort of doing it for the money. Mind you, we needed the money desperately, but we weren't doing it for the money. And in fact, you weren't even allowed to mention money if I remember rightly -- it was just sort of verboten. *No, no, don't talk about the money.* I think in a way, we were kind of like pioneers of some strange frontier because we weren't really looking for — to sell records. Although it would have been nice, but we were looking for some kind of ultimate, you know, philosopher's stone, some ultimate thing, which we didn't know what it was.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

How did Islam first enter this counter-culture scene for you?

IAN WHITEMAN:

Okay, this is quite easy to explain. Now, the guitarist is Martin, who was really I became — he was the one who really took us all into it. He had, in secret, gone to Morocco and met this great sheikh, who wrote this book, and become Abdulmalik, like you. But he didn't tell us. So he came back and we were sort of gigging. And I remember we were in Germany, we were in Munich, you know. I'd had some of this Munich beer, which was actually — I'd seen why they're all jolly in Bavaria; they just laugh. You have a small amount and just can't stop laughing. Anyway, that afternoon, I remember going into Martin's room in the hotel and I thought he was looking under the bed. So I said, "Martin, have you lost, have you lost something?" No answer. So I left it and thought nothing more of it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

He would later learn that Martin was praying. And then another clue hit him over the head — literally.

IAN WHITEMAN:

On the way back to England on the Autobahn, we had this kind of white van, which was a transit van with equipment at the back, and I was in the backseat. The driver suddenly braked very hard and all these books fell on my head. What were the books? Two big Yusuf Ali English-Arabic Qur'ans. I didn't get it even then. You know, it's like... and then bit by bit, I think then Martin and the drummer, Roger went to Morocco, went to this thing where this Sufi order gathered, they went. We were rehearsing to make this last album and they came back quite changed, actually. Suddenly their music was better. Martin wasn't spending 10 minutes tuning his guitar. There was much more sensitivity. But the big thing is that Martin was wearing a red — no — a brown striped djellaba, a gold turban and kohl in his eyes, standing, playing very loudly on stage.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And the djellaba of course is the long is a long, full-length tunic, right down to his ankles.

IAN WHITEMAN:

This was like quite a shock. But the thing is, he was, what he was playing was really amazing. I mean, it was also — he came up with the most beautiful lyrics.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Ian can't pinpoint the exact moment when he embraced Sufism himself. It was gradual.

IAN WHITEMAN:

It's something, it's very hard to just — I can't just say, we did this, this and this, because it's not that simple. You know, it's a sort of inevitability about it. And I think that what we did over, you know, the gigging, the travelling, the gigs, all that stuff, it kind of knocks the corners off you. If you're with like four other people traveling hundreds of thousands of miles up and down motorways doing things, there's a kind of chemistry that takes place. This is why I'm saying we were like these sort of pioneers of a strange frontier. And you change. There's this chemistry that happens. And when that happens, it kind of prepares you for something. But it's not, there's not a science to it. I think Sufism, and this whole sort of science behind it, was kind of inevitable because we, in a way, we were already doing it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

And yet, a major moment for Ian was his own journey to Morocco, to the zawiya — or Sufi lodge — that his bandmate Martin had been to first.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Well, it was the very first Ramadan, actually, give you, put the context. And the very first Ramadan was two weeks in that Zawiya. Not easy. The very first Ramadan you sort of find out

when you're fasting from water and food all day, in Morocco, in a situation where the old sheikh was still alive. I mean, there's nothing really in the kind of Western lexicon that could describe what these people are like. There is there's no equivalent in the Western scenario. It was like seeing a biblical prophet with his disciples. That's the only way I can describe it. And someone of that kind of station — I mean, he was very old. He must have been 100 years old at the time. But he was still speaking, talking every day after the afternoon prayer. And there were a lot of people there. But, you know, the atmosphere was unbelievable. It was so luminous, you could just slice it. And we were in agony. I remember my knees were shrieking out. My stomach was starving, you know. But at the same time, there was this there was this incredible Qur'an singer who would sing this stuff. And it was like, it was agony and ecstasy all wrapped up at the same time. And it was, I don't know, it was pretty overwhelming actually, to tell you the truth.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I remember you mentioning to me one time that when you were leaving Morocco, there were two things that you took back to England with you, to the tour with you. It was prayer mats and song books. Song and poetry was a really essential and important part of this spiritual work that you were engaged in.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Yeah, the thing that drew me into it, tell you the truth, wasn't some kind of theoretical idea about religion or Islam. It was just hearing the singing. Music's been with me all my life and it took me right up to Islam and through the other side, actually, it's always been something near to me. And I think it's a -- it's a controversial subject for Muslims. I don't know why, because there's good music and bad music as far as I'm concerned. Anyway, the singing is kind of a really important part of it, I think, because these kind of poems in which it's like, it's really a kind of instruction book for how to take this spiritual path from the very beginning. But the thing about singing it is it's dumping it into your heart. It's not just a -- it's not intellectual process. Because it's singing is it's where the intellect and emotions connect, because I could read it out and it might have some emotional effect on you. But actually if I sing it, something's happening to your emotions. You know, and I think a lot of people I know, a lot of dear brothers -- they're actually all pretty unexpressed as far as I'm concerned. You go to Morocco, you -- anybody you find will sing. It's not about how bad the voice is [imitates bad singing, coughs]. People are very frightened to sing here. They think it's like gonna, you've got to be kind of perfect in some way, you know, and that's the problem with this society. We live in a kind of world of perfectionists. And you know, what matters is that you sing. I mean, there's this one of course you don't know what sort of me singing this, [name of qasida]. Or maybe we had a --

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Please, I'd love to I'd love to hear you sing from this collection of poetry that moved you so much.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Okay, this is actually an Algerian tune, this is not just a strictly -- And it's nice because it's slightly rocky. [sings qasida]

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

That trip to Morocco made a huge impact on Ian. And shortly after he came back, Mighty Baby split up.

IAN WHITEMAN:

People got on very well. We were really close, close, but it just wasn't going anywhere. Life was getting so hard.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

He didn't quit music entirely. He got a contract to put out a new record, with free creative reign. He brought in some of his new musical influences, and called the group The Habibiyya.

IAN WHITEMAN:

We just put together like an album of music that we thought was Moroccan. And it was it was a funny record, it was a strange record in a way, because it really did no no service to traditional Andalus music. It was pretty terrible in some ways, and the Arabic song on it was diabolical, but it had a kind of certain spirit. And some of the instrumental music, like it was really quite beautiful, it sounded like it was scored.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Ian toured as a backup musician with British folk duo Richard and Linda Thompson for a bit. But he pretty much gave up on making a living as a musician. Instead, he returned to architecture, as well as taking up calligraphy and book design. But music was never far from Ian's mind. He ended up getting to know Yusuf Islam, otherwise known as Cat Stevens, who had given up playing musical instruments when he became a Muslim. And the two of them would go on to perform side-by-side after decades off the stage. It started with some new music that Yusuf was particularly excited about.

IAN WHITEMAN:

We went up to his house and he played me these cassettes. I said, "what is it?" And it's like weird music from Sarajevo -- during the Bosnian war. It sounded like kind of rehashed Pink Floyd and with with Bosnian lyrics. And he wanted to do something with it. Reason why is because the man called Irfan Ljubijankić who was the foreign minister of Bosnia at that time, during the war, had been to London and met Yusuf, I think. And he had actually given him a cassette of some music he'd written himself on a kind of home keyboard and written this song, and that's the last he thought of it -- until he found out he was killed in a -- when his helicopter was shot down, flying from Bihać to Sarajevo. And Yusuf was very, you know, I remember seeing him on that day, he was really sort of shocked. Because the last thing Irfan had said to him, "I hope you can do something with it," so he he dug out this thing and we found the song and he turned it into, which was actually a song called "I Have No Cannons That Roar." But at the same time, Yusuf was suddenly sort of realizing he really liked the idea of recording studios and singing and writing songs. But the point is it -- Yusuf is very famous in Yugoslavia for

various reasons as Cat Stevens, but also because he provided a lot of aid during the war and he -- I think he visited it and so forth. So they decided to put on a concert in Sarajevo.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Just after just after the siege of Sarajevo.

IAN WHITEMAN:

This was two years after the war had finished. So they decided to put on a concert that was sort of just Bosnian music -- and with Yusuf starring in it. And it was actually mind blowing. It was electric. The thing is they had the Sarajevo Symphony Orchestra, half of whom had been killed in the war. So it was all made up by amateurs. So at times the music kind of almost falls apart. It didn't matter at all. It was beautifully done. And I had to play, I had to sing solo stuff. I had to sing three solo things myself in front of like 10,000 people. And I hadn't performed for 20 years. It was actually very, very moving because in front of the stage, there was this sort of gap. Then there was all the kind of the prime minister's, there was the president and all the ambassadors and the TV. And I, somehow in that gap, I felt all these young men who had died in the war, I sort of imagined they were all sitting there watching. Anyway, it was an amazing experience for me. And then we came out of that and I think it had a big effect on Yusuf, you know, and it was only it was maybe about another 10 years, 10 -- yeah it must have been another ten years before he picked up a guitar again. But I think he was slowly coming back to being what he was really in his heart, which was like the stuff he's been doing since he picked up his guitar.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, the Aga Khan Museum's director and CEO. Did you know we have posted dozens of fascinating talks about art and culture to our Youtube channel? Hear from contemporary artist Ekow Nimako, whose awe inspiring Afrofuturistic Lego sculpture, "Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE," just joined the museum's permanent collection. Or, discover the story behind Remastered, our exhibition celebrating the museum's world class collection of Iranian Ottoman and Moghul Indian miniature paintings. For all that and more, search Aga Khan museum on Youtube and click the subscribe button. And now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Abdullateef, you live a pretty quiet life in Spain these days. Meanwhile, in the in the world outside, albums, you know, old albums of of Mighty Baby now sell for hundreds of dollars online. How do you feel about that music now, so many decades later, when you look back on that time, what does it mean for you today, living in the mountains outside of, of Granada?

IAN WHITEMAN:

It's pretty odd, it's like someone, someone else, it's like was it, was it me, you know, I have to honestly think -- I don't understand why people get so -- what's the word? Precious about it all, you know, there's this thing called The Action Mighty Baby Fan Page on Facebook. I find it bizarre that people find so - because two of the band have died, actually, and, they had a big renaissance, sort of. What do you call it, um,

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Reunion.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Reunion. That's right. Which had Phil Collins because Phil Collins was a great big Action fan. And he played -- actually he played at this gig they put on in the 100 Club and I went to it. I didn't actually play with them. I was just in the audience. And Phil Collins said that, you know, he said, "playing with them, it's like playing with the Beatles for me." And I thought, you know, I never I can't see it as other people see it, you have to realize, I'm kind of inside it all. It doesn't mean the same to me. It just feels like someone else that wasn't really me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Well, someone who very much does feel like you is the is the person I hear in the album that you've just released called Poor Man's Prayer.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Oh.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Which is which which has a jazzy folk sound. It feels like you're borrowing from some of that early career of yours.

[Poor Man's Prayer plays]

And it got me thinking as as I was listening to it, how do you think about music and its place in your life these days?

IAN WHITEMAN:

Well it's still very big, actually, to tell the truth, I'm a compulsive musician, even over the last 40, 50 years, music has been going on all the time. Every human being has something inside they want to express. I mean, music is like a window into someone's soul. And I have things inside me which have to come out. I can't just sort of sit on it forever. I think the center of it is just love, you know, it sounds a bit corny, but actually love is what motivates everything, you know. There's so much actually inside one's in sort of inner universe that you actually really can't put into words. And if it comes out in words, it comes out in music, comes out in a bit of art, if it comes out in just people speaking, writing poetry and writing. But it's got to come out, you know, and I've done so many things -- you say I'm a Renaissance man, polymath, whatever you want to call it, not by design. It's just that, you know, that was the next job going, you know, "can you build some shelves?" "Yeah I can build them." "Can you write some film music?" "Yeah I can do that." That's the only reason I've got all these different things. I'd quite like to have just done one thing all my life, it might have been nice, but, I think it also, I think actually you know the typical Andalusian is a is a kind of polymath. They all did lots of things. I think everyone should do everything as best as they can because it just enriches people's lives. You know, in the end, I don't know, because I don't know if what comes out of me means anything, but I still have to do it. And if you're doing some sort of this artistic creation, whatever you want to call it, at a certain

point, you just have to let it go and not care. That's the thing I'm having to learn, because you can get so self-conscious about it you never do anything.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Ian Abdullateef Whiteman, what does this being human mean to you?

IAN WHITEMAN:

This is people's experience, you know, every day something different happens, but we have something which is so kind of precious, which is how to deal with this. This is why this book I was singing from, this kind of well of knowledge is to help people through this, because what else is there? You can go to psychology, you can go to drugs, you can go to pharmacy, to doctors and things, but in the end, you have to help yourself. And there is a way to get the best of life. You can ask God to send you something good and to repel darkness, or you can do the opposite. And it makes life possible and and sort of joyful and it's a way of removing people's fears, people's anxiety about things. It's all these things that bother people in the modern world. It's a very, very simple cure for it, And if you get up in the night, and most people notice, if you bring the night to life, God will bring your daytime to life.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Ian Abdullateef Whiteman, This has been such a joy. It's been such a pleasure reconnecting over these incredible memories of your life. Thank you for joining me on *This Being Human*.

IAN WHITEMAN:

Well, thank you very much. It's always nice to talk to you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our Senior Producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Production assistance by Nicole Edwards. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's Executive Producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. *This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual, and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum go to www.agakhanmuseum.org. The Museum wishes to thank Nadir and Shabin Mohamed for their philanthropic support to develop and produce *This Being Human*.