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MANNING

THE ROOT, THE LEAF AND THE BONE

AS MANNING RELEASE THEIR FOURTEENTH STUDIO ALBUM IN AS MAY YEARS, GUY MANNING TELLS ROCK SOCIETY WHAT THE ALBUM IS ABOUT, WHERE HE GETS HIS INSPIRATION, AND WHY THE IDEA OF A LIVE ALBUM SCARES HIM...

WORDS: MILES BARTABY / PHOTOS: KEVIN BRUNDELL-MAYLIN



The Root, The Leaf and The Bone is Manning's fourteenth album and once again sees Guy Manning telling stories in his songs. We begin by talking about the album and what it is all about, and he tells me that it is not a concept album. "I know people think that all I do is write concept albums but I don't always," he says. "I have to caveat that by saying that when I started to write this I did think it might be a concept album, but I never know whether it's going to be a concept album until I get into the process itself because I don't like a concept album where the concept is weak. I had some ideas – I was basically thinking about progress and how things change over time and I wanted to set it in something so I thought, what about a village that's been overgrown and been built over and has disappeared? It was there in the 1600's and it was built up and became a town, then it was flattened and built on again, and eventually it sinks further and further down in the layers of mud until you get to the present day and the village green is now the car park for a leisure centre.

"I thought that's quite interesting, the way things change – some things are good and some things are bad. I'm not saying progress is a bad

thing, but what I'm saying is each time we make a choice and physically change something we have to think about the consequences and what's lost in translation between where we are and where we're going. I thought that's going to be a great concept album, I'm going to have all these different places in the village."

However, once he started writing it didn't work so well. "It was too restricting to shoehorn all of these ideas in. I had these ideas for the village but then I had things like Autumn Song and Amongst The Sleepers which didn't really fit into the village concept, so I just made it about the way we view change in general.

"The title track tends to set the theme as it's all about geophysics. It's about looking beneath the surface of things and digging down, past roots, leaves and bones as you go, until you hit the foundations of whatever you're looking for. We're obsessed with the past, so the track explores that.

"That was the starting idea, and I always knew that was going to be the opening track of the album because it sets the scene and it starts quite gently then builds up, and then ends quite mysteriously with the organ at the end. I'd also written Amongst The Sleepers and I knew that was going to be the end – you always tend to know the end song on an album because it's the one track you couldn't think of anything following. It's about contemplating people we've known in our lives while walking very quietly through a graveyard, with the sleepers being the people under the ground, and taking a moment to think about how we got to where we are.

"So that sort of bookends the album with Root, Leaf and Bone digging into the ground to try and find things and Sleepers putting things back into the ground, so there is a sort of flow to it."

Guy continues to explain the stories behind the other tracks. "Mist Of Morning, Calling To The Day is a ghost story all about the early days of the village where they saw off these trading

people – the tinkers that came up the river on the barge – and there was always trouble when they arrived so the elders of the village decided to see them off once and for all. It's quite a bloody and aggressive confrontation so every now and again at midnight this ghostly barge appears up the stream and they all lock themselves away in the pub with the doors barred and wait for morning."

"The Huntsman & The Poacher is again set in the old days of the village. The poacher goes out after the deer and the huntsman goes out after the poacher, so it's a chase across the hills. And of course the huntsman was probably the poacher five years ago but now he's got a sense of respectability by working for the lord of the manner."

Autumn Song is not a village song. "It's about natural change; it's about the way we see ourselves and about time passing. It looks at change from quite a pastoral perspective.

"Decon(struction) Blues is my Big Yellow Taxi number. I don't tend to do social commentary very much. I just wanted a short pop song with a tower of power brass section in it – just a short snappy toe-tapper. It was about the idea of tearing things down without heeding the consequences; acknowledging in passing that it's a shame but things move on.

"The Forge was definitely a village song. It's a very romantic view of the blacksmith – you've

"I WENT TO ONE OF THOSE SCHOOLS AND I OFTEN THOUGHT OF BURNING IT DOWN!"

got that beautiful image of the one man in the night with the glowing embers and he's silhouetted against them with his hammer held high, but it's actually a very hard job!" It was all about individual craftsmanship but nowadays it's all about mass production and everything is identical. "It's about measured performance now, not the craftsmanship."

"Old School is a tip of the hat to Lindsay Anderson's *If*. It's the daydreams of a boy locked away in a very old fashioned pretty nasty boarding school where it's very high and there's a window at the top of the corridor, and all the classrooms look the same. There's a master who walks up and down slapping the back of your knuckles with a ruler or throwing a board duster at you from the front of the class. So in his fantasy he decides to burn the place down, but it's all a daydream really because it ends up with him standing in the corner getting the slipper. Just for a moment in time he manages to break through the tyranny of the whole place and make a stand for what's right. So it's about the way old values have changed, hopefully for the better. I went to one of those schools and I often thought of burning it down!

"Palace Of Delights is a song on two levels. Overtly it's about one of those shops that you find in a very out of the way village. If you go to the [Yorkshire] Dales or the Lake District and wander round these small villages you'll always

find one of these shops where you walk in and there's a bell on the door, and there's dust in the air, and you look on the shelves and there's stuff that hasn't been seen since the early 50's, or a Charles and Diana commemorative mug next to Commonwealth stamps and old fishing nets next to Brillo pads; it's one of those places where you're immediately transported back to your childhood because you start jumping up and down and saying 'I used to have that Beano album'. Palace Of Delights is one of those; a place that transports you back in time to when you grew up.

"Of course, everyone has their own Palace of Delights. If I find an original James Bond Aston Martin Dinky car with ejector seats and everything else I'd go ape, but you try explaining that to someone born in 1985 - it doesn't make any sense. So it's about the shop and it's also about how we see time, how we judge time in ourselves - the things that resonate for us in our own memory bank.

"So this isn't really a concept album. I hope that the stories come through - I am one for lyrics and I think on this particular album there are a couple of places where I almost got it right. I do take the words quite seriously. The song is the most important thing. I tend to write [the music] quite simply and make the arrangements more like a tapestry which make it sound far more complicated than it actually is."

Picking up on that the story telling aspect to the lyrics, and noting that Manning have produced an album a year for the past 14 years, I ask Guy where he gets his inspiration from for all the stories he tells.

"I think I'm not bad at knocking out tunes, the thing I find hardest every year is having something to write about; I think that's the more difficult thing. I'm a fairly comfortable balding middle-aged fellow, you know, who isn't living on the streets so it's difficult to find anything to write about that has any resonance, so I tend to write stories. The lightbulb moment for me tends to be when I suddenly know what I'm writing about. For example, when I was writing *Anser's Tree* and *Margaret's Children*, once I'd decided that each of the songs was going to be about a particular character then all I had to do was find a particular period of time I was interested in and set the characters there."

"Once I know what I'm writing about it's easy. *The Root The Leaf And The Bone* was written in about three weeks. Recording and arranging takes a hell of a long time - I arrange as I go; we make it up as we go along."

"So nothing really happens until I know what I'm going to write about. The year of Charlestown was an absolute nightmare. I had all these ideas for song parts but not a hope in hell of finding anything to write about. We went off down to Cornwall [on holiday], it was a rainy ▶



Manning: Kris Hudson-Lee, David Millon, Julie King, Guy Manning, Martin Thistleton, Rick Henry

Interview



► day and we went down to Charlestown port." While they were there the lightbulb came on. "I thought it can't have been easy getting [the ships] all the way round Land's End and up to Bristol – it's not a great run. And that's how it happened, and when I came back it was 'Right, this is all going to be about this voyage'."

"So there's no great mystery to it – if you've got the time and the will to do it you will just do it. I just enjoy doing it, that's the reason; I love writing songs."

There have been a couple of line up changes in the band since Margaret's Children. Guitarists Chris Catling and Kev Currie left the band and guitar duties are now handled by David Million.

"Chris and Kev – it was a real shame but they've moved too far away now. Luckily Dave Million who played with me previously on *Bilston* and *Number 10* and *Anser's Tree* was around and wanted to get back into music. He'd taken some time off so it seemed like the right timing. Steve [Dundon, flute] plays with us more occasionally now as he's off with his own band, Molly Bloom. The rest of the band is pretty much the same."

There are some special guests on the album too. Chloe Herington from *Knifeworld* on bassoon, and Marek Arnold from *Toxic Smile* on sax. "I've never met him yet. Every year I send him stuff and he sends back an amazing amount of saxophone parts – all these symphonic ensemble saxophones which I've used a lot more of on *Root* than I have on previous albums; I wanted to give it a different flavour. I wanted to do more brash brassy arrangements this time and Marek sent loads of stuff – more than I could use."

"We experimented with real strings this time – we created these little string arrangements for *Sleepers* which work quite nicely as opposed to sampled strings. Ian [Fairbairn, fiddle] has been with us since 2000 and played on pretty much

every album. It wasn't as folky this one – normally I give him plenty of folky fiddles to do. The one he contributed to in a major way was *The Huntsman & The Poacher*. He plays a lot of other fiddle on it but I morphed it and changed it.

"The other person to mention is John Young. I was struggling with a keyboard solo and I happened to be talking to John about the live dates and I mentioned it to him. He asked me to send it over and sent back four variations. He's one of those keyboard players who can just play!"

With so much material and so many years behind them I wondered why there has not yet been a Manning live album.

"There are two things that frighten me about making a live album. One is the outlay. We sell a modest amount of albums and we have a very loyal fanbase, which makes it worthwhile to go back into the studio. But when you want to do a live album you have to have the right venue and

you have to have all the sound equipment hired for however long you need it, and if you're going to record it these days you're probably going to film it so you need camera crews. And then, if you're not doing a lot of dates, and we don't tour all the time, then you have to get it absolutely right on the night. I wouldn't record a concert and then nip into the studio the next day and mic everything up and play as if I was in the gig. If I'm going to do it live then I'm going to do it live, but then you're under tremendous pressure to get it all right. I think we could do it but I'd like to do it on the back of a lot more dates, and get really comfortable playing live."

At the time of writing the recent live shows featuring Phideaux were yet to take place. I asked Guy how that came about, and whether we could expect some collaboration in the future.

"We've got this little mutual appreciation club going on where he likes my albums and I like his albums. I met him when they came over for *Summer's End* and we got on really well. I said to him if you ever want to come over to the UK I'll put you up and I'll show you around, and maybe we'll write a couple of songs, who knows?"

"We thought he might come over last year but at the last minute he couldn't. This year we were talking about it and I said if you come over in November we've got this gig for the CRS so he said he'd come over and watch us. Then he said 'can I do a song?' Then 'can I bring Ariel?', then 'can I bring Valerie?' So that's how it came about – it was more a sort of happy accident."

With that tempting prospect it was time to sign off and look forward to the gigs. Ideas are already taking shape for the next Manning album, due in 2014, but for now check out *The Root, The Leaf & The Bone* – it is another fine piece of work from a master story-teller. ☺

The Root, The Leaf & The Bone is available now the Festival Music label at www.progrock.co.uk

