

Guy Manning – Interview by Paul Jerome Smith

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Over the last five albums released by the band, named for its creative genius, songwriter, vocalist and multi-instrumentalist GUY MANNING, PAUL JEROME SMITH has become a firm adherent of the sometimes quirky but always intriguing narrative 'Britprog' they produce. He has seen the band on several occasions at the Classic Rock Society and with the imminent release of Guy's twelfth album 'Margaret's Children', felt it was about time to interview the Leeds-based musician and hopefully bring greater attention to his band...

Note that this turned into a wonderful and lengthy exchange, and much, much longer than could be included in Fireworks. The full version will therefore appear on www.rocktopia.co.uk.

Guy, it is a pleasure for me to introduce you to the readers of Fireworks Magazine. I am sure there are a number for whom, like me, you are a household name, but for all of others please tell me a little about yourself and of your musical pedigree...

Hi Paul, thanks for having me here! A lot of my musical history/career can be found in a quite tongue-in-cheek biography on my website; but briefly: I played in a number of local Leeds / Manchester based bands (some better than others) in the 1980s and during this time started to work with another local musician (Andy Tillison), firstly in a group called Gold, Frankensense & Disk-drive and then later in Parallel or Ninety Degrees (PO90). I then left to work abroad and upon my return turned my hand to recording a debut album of my own. I hawked this around various record labels but found a home eventually with UK independent label CYCLOPS. I went on the record five in total for them before a label change to Shawn Gordon's ProgRock Records based in San Diego, USA, who seemed to have more resources to hand. I recorded three albums for PRR and used renowned graphics artist Ed Unitsky as the graphics artist on each of these. By the time I came to want to release a further album, I was hankering after a more local UK based company to work more closely with, as the communications between UK and USA were proving frustrating. I found F2 (who were releasing a number of well known "prog" artists on their roster including Magnolia at that time) and they seemed genuinely interested in working with me. The relationship has proven to be a happy one and 'Margaret's Children' is the fourth release on F2 (Festival Music). Of note, Ed Unitsky has reprised and updated his fantastic original Anser's tree artwork for this new album as well.

Whilst in the middle of all this, I also got invited to take part in an Andy Tillison solo project (...he thought it would be just that at the time!), Andy assembled a group of musicians to produce a more overtly progressive flavoured musical approach than that of PO90. With a cast including members of Sweden's The Flower Kings, PO90 and David Jackson (from Van der Graaf Generator), an album "The Music That Died Alone" was released to some critical thumbs up.

Although line-ups have changed over the years with the Swedes eventually being replaced by more local UK musicians, The Targent has always had Andy driving it and writing 95% of the content and so it has remained faithful to its original path. However, in 2010, I decided



that I really needed to concentrate on my own musical direction, output and band and therefore I left the band although not without much soul searching.

So twelve albums in as many years! That's some work rate (irrespective of all the other things you were often simultaneously involved with)! You sound like a very "driven" person to me, Guy....

I do get bored quite easily and the best part of all, in the whole album production process, is the song writing bit! So, after spending a large part of the year recording, producing, creating artwork and all supporting material for a Manning album, by the time of its release I really feel the urge (normally) to write songs again. So the annual cycle renews itself and I start again! I could simply decide not to release the output at the time it was ready to go out but I feel that I like to keep myself in the minds eye of my fan base and always try not to repeat myself and find new ways of creating some alternate slant / angle to my musical styling (such as is it).

[Actually, that point itself is quite an interesting observation. Is it better to release often (annually) or wait and release more occasionally? Is there a factor of 'ennui' from the audience, a view that it is simply just another MANNING album and ignore it?]

For me, each set of songs have been successful - I would not have put them out if I felt this was not the case.

Some songs in the bunch I have enjoyed more than others naturally, but each listener will have his/her favourite which may not coincide with mine of course. It could be argued cynically that by stong on finished albums and releasing less often or even splitting up the band and having a well publicised reunion it would actually aid my album sales! But, if I have an album ready, I usually want people to hear it currently. I take my music seriously, it is my life's passion, my reason to get up and go to a day job and earn money (other than support my family).

So yes, I guess I AM driven!

Anyway, looking across your impressive discography most of your albums seem to be conceptual or at least thematic, and there are two linked pairs of albums, including the new one which links back to your sixth release 'Anser's Tree'. What tends to provide your inspiration and would I be right in thinking you are something of a dreamer, or at the very least have a very fertile imagination?

Yes, to date there have been two of what I call 'Narrative' concept albums ('The Cure' and 'A Matter Of Life & Death') where the album follows a linear narrative story telling like 'The Lamb Lies Down...', 'Snow, Tommy' and so on...four of what I call 'Container' concept album (e.g. a house in which each song is set in its own single room) or 'Anser's Tree'/'Margaret's Children' (where each song is the life story of one member of one single family lineage) plus the remaining six albums which normally feature longer multi-part suites ('Cascade' being the exception).

though I could try and argue that 'Charlestown' (as one epic track lasting 35mins...the length of a decent 70's LP) is a narrative concept album in its own right (especially when coupled with its last track 'Finale'). I think all the albums however are vehicles for some quite elaborate or alternatively very simple story telling.

2005's 'Anser's Tree' as I said, featured stories behind members of the Anser family. The premise is that in the near future, Dr. Jonathan Anser (an archaeologist) is found digging in the highlands of Scotland researching his own lineage at the site where it all started with Margaret Montgomery (nee Fleming) in 1581. There has been some ecological disaster and the ocean levels have risen significantly leaving few places above water (his family seat being one such one).

'Anser's Tree' and 'Margaret's Children' are intrinsically linked (MC being the sequel to AT). There is a lot of cross-pollination and inter-dependencies found here. Cause and effect...if Jorgen Barra's (MC) father William had not been killed in the Wallsend Mining Disaster (AT) he would never have left for the US to seek his fortune; if Fleming Barra's (MC) had not inherited Margaret Montgomery's Diary (AT) he would never have become the master of mystical cabalistic magic; David Logan (MC) directly influenced his son Adams (AT) passion and obsession with Global Warming and ecological disaster research...and so on. But this is not the first time I have looked back to early pieces of mine as inspiration for later designs... 'A Matter of Life & Death' explores in much greater detail and colour the story first visited on 'Tall Stories', called 'The Fall & Rise of Abel Mann' It takes that vignette and expands it out fully to reveal the thoughts and events that underpin that earlier suite and what happened next.

Musically, I always want to create almost a visual tapestry with the arrangements and choices of instrumentation employed. I close my eyes and I can see the stories play out as if written down or in a film.

Sometimes a standard rock line-up is not quite going to 'cut it' and more over-the-top instrumentation is required. I love the challenge of that stitching of the tapestry or that 'Tetris' approach to writing. I encourage/suggest parts from my collaborators and fit them in, move them around edit them and build up a hopefully engaging arrangement over the skeletal outline of an embryonic song. This can then be finalised or enhanced, new sections added, sections removed as befits the piece. The actual song and its lyrics are the most important factors and all other elements must bow down before it, for me...

Lyricaly it is tremendously important to me that I draw the listener in (like being curled up with a gripping book). The more I can empathise with the story line / players, the more I can choose just the right word or phrase to bring it all to life. I have chatted to folks

however, that have bought my albums and love them but have not bothered to really understand or listen to the words at all...which I think is a bit sad actually...OK I love a good tune as much as the next man, but with my music, the lyrics, the artwork AND the music all come wrapped up to make the essential Manning package!

Ideas for songs can come from anywhere really. A theme - played on guitar or keyboard. A rhythm - played on a drum machine or virtual instrument. A lyrical phrase - that might suggest a song title... 'The Cure' came from my thinking a lot about the nature of perception, reality and madness; 'Ragged Curtains' as I floated face up, off the coast of Rhodes, musing on the relationship between man and the sea of the ages; 'One Small Step...' came from me seeing on the news that people would soon be allowed to buy tickets to go to the Moon and my musings on whether, as a race, we were suitable candidates as Earth Life Ambassadors to go out there into space and perhaps meet other species. Should we not get our own house in order, I thought, BEFORE we pollute the far reaches of the Universe! I try to get inside the mind of the central characters and see their POV, the context in which their stories are set in times of history and also at the same time use the opportunity to get some of my own thoughts/feelings on subjects across. For example, there is quite a lot of coverage of ecological concerns throughout the track catalogue 'Tall Stories...' ('The Last Psalm'), 'The Cure' ('Domestic'), 'The Ragged Curtains' ('Ragged Curtains'), 'Anser's Tree' ('Prof. Adam Logan' and 'Dr. Jonathan Anser') and 'Margaret's Children' ('David Logan'). The running joke in the Manning camp is that I write primarily about Water and Death! And with 'Charlestown' I managed for once to combine the two themes!

Am I a dreamer?...yes most probably! I certainly project the visual/emotional aspects of my various creations into the musical arena and hope they flourish and I work hard at it to improve!

So, tell me more about 'Margaret's Children', Guy....

Well, Paul on the website (www.guymanning.com) there are individual biographies created for each new character plus a view of the full Anser genealogical tree that is available to download.

I try to do quite a bit of research into the historical context behind the stories I do that so that I empathise more and therefore can select just the right words to bring the tales to life. From a more in-depth understanding, I can also decide which the salient pieces to include and the bits which can be inferred or can be used in supporting documentation (such as the biographies now published).

Some of the 'yarns' for the new album were written before I had a clear idea as to the nature of the project ('Savvy' and 'Southern Waves') These were important songs that I wanted to write specifically about. The others were written once I had a clearer idea as to the subject matter, historical context, names etc. I normally write and demo the pieces quite fully before letting the others get to them. Though pieces can change and the arrangement be amended, the basic song tune and initial lyrics are normally carried through to the end. The enhancements come through use of collaborators and the band bringing their own POV into the mix. The stories clearly show the level of inter-dependency between the 2 albums ('Anser's Tree' (AT) and 'Margaret's Children' (MC)).

Finally, Guy, any hints on what album 13 might have in store?

As we talk, Paul, there are no plans for a number 13 yet, but I may start to get ideas by the end of the year (as per the normal annual cyclical scale). Maybe it is in fact time for the long overdue (and much discussed between band and F2) MANNING Live album!

Perhaps you should call it 'Unlucky For Some', Guy! Anyway, thank you for spending so much time with me. Your new album will have been released by the time this interview is published, and my review of it will be found elsewhere in this magazine...

Thank you Paul for allowing me the forum and opportunity to say a big "Hello!" and "Thanks!" to people who may listen to or buy my music!