

Progression



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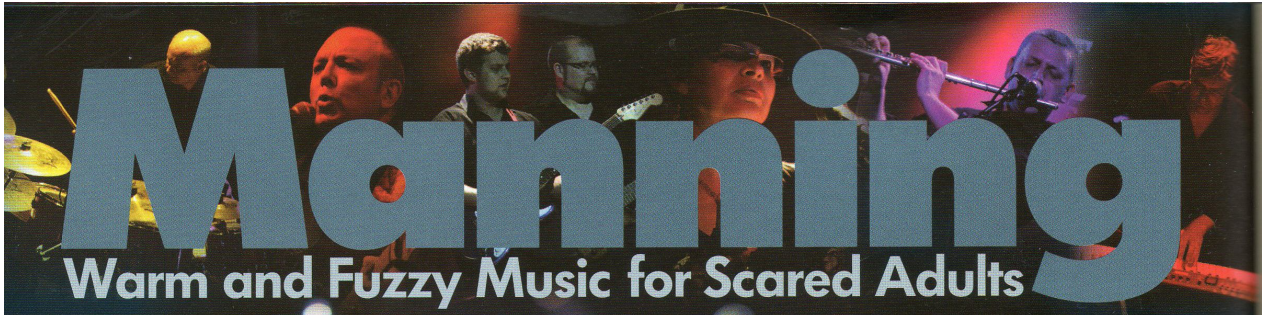
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Manning

Warm and Fuzzy Music for Scared Adults

Portrait of a Sensitive Guy

By DAVID TAYLOR



"These days, especially in the U.K., the demand for original bands playing music that one has to actually take time to listen to is waning..."

English musician/composer **Guy Manning's** first release in 1999 was entitled *Tall Stories for Small Children*, which can be assumed to include the child within us all. Indeed, world-weary souls will sense a certain nurturing quality to this music. As the Rites of Spring Festival audience learned on a beautiful Pennsylvania Saturday in early May, **Manning** the group serves up colorful progressive arrangements of carefully conceived, Celtic folk-flavored melodies -- the aural version of hot chocolate on a cold winter's day.

The caring humanity brought to this endeavor is reflected in Guy's use of his own children's drawings for artwork on *Tall Stories*. A modestly sentimental gesture, perhaps -- like the onstage lighting of a single candle for the tune "Antares." We're well advised to pay close attention, as such precious details give insight to the creator's muse.

"My songs always tell narrative stories, so I like to bring these to life," Guy says. "Not only in the music and lyrics but in the accompanying artwork and onstage persona. The very fact that you can recall the candle and the song name and its story is proof that a visual aid helps this process!"

"The stories are very, very important to me, and the lyrics are there to be read and talked about.



I try, however, not to overuse props. We are not **Genesis** or **Alice Cooper**, but I do like to add little touches here and there."

If theatricality enhances this band in measured doses, the music itself spares little. Manning adamantly maintains that his eight-piece ensemble is needed "to recreate the sound of my music fully and to allow us a sense of freedom in any light and shade we want to bring to our performances." Of course, such uncompromising artistic liberty comes with a price tag, especially when performing live.

Therein lies the challenge for progressive acts like Manning. Which, in Guy's view, fight a perpetual uphill battle for due recognition. "These days, especially in the U.K., the demand for original bands playing music that one has to actually take time to listen to is waning, in my opinion," he says. "The tribute artists recreating a bygone age and supporting the nostalgia market are replacing the newer, more 'demanding' and 'off-the-wall' musicians, which is a great pity."

"Also, progressive music is catering to an aging population, whether we want to admit it or not. Those people that remember the 1970s as the 'golden age' of new progressive music are diminishing. These people also now have families, budget



responsibilities and not so much spare time to devote to hunting down new music or attending weekly shows. New bands, lack of venues, lack of budgets all lead to a decrease in the ability of competing bands to get successful gigs on a regular basis."

Then there are the myopic Top-20 radio industry and commercially focused mainstream music press to contend with. "The Internet has, indeed, opened this void up and allowed the more challenging music to be heard, but there is a fight to get through the massive catalogue being released today. Plus, you have to have more technology at hand to tune in to these. And the time zones! In the U.K. we find it hard to stay awake for U.S. programming," laments Manning. "Most of us are forty-plus and need our beauty sleep! Oh, I do indeed wish back to my youth and a more mind-expanding environment for new music. But I don't think we will see its like again, sadly."

Such grim assessments aside, Manning -- the man and the band -- have doggedly persevered for more than a decade. Through successive affiliation with independent labels Cyclops, ProgRock and F2, the band has issued 10 albums, its most recent being 2009's appropriately entitled *Number Ten*. Guy also has contributed to works by the **Andy Tillison**-led groups **Parallel or 90 Degrees** and **The Tangent** during that span.

The Manning website describes its music thusly: "Manning produce an eclectic mix of music which broadly falls within the 'progressive' genre, but in reality spans many different musical forms from beautiful ballads and folk-tinged songs through to awesome all-out rock workouts and true progressive epics -- no two songs sound the same!" Out front both in the studio and onstage is Guy's guiding presence. And whether accompanying himself on keyboards or acoustic guitar, his earthy, melodic vocals are a defining element.

There is ample evidence throughout Manning's discography for likening Guy's voice to that of **Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson**, though it does have its own special cadence. That influence receives official acknowledgement on bonus track

"The Willow and the Pine," which is dedicated to Tull on the 10th-anniversary edition of *Tall Stories for Small Children*.

Given that many prog groups in the late 1970s were pressured by record companies to shorten their pieces for prospective radio play, it's amusing to note that in the late '90s, Cyclops Records urged Guy to emphasize epics on his first studio recording. Now in the process of working through an 11th studio work (entitled *Charlestown*), he is thankful for artistic autonomy.

"Luckily, I have always had my artistic freedom -- maybe because [music] has never been my sole source of income, or because I am not too well known. My albums tend to 'progress,' or at least veer away from where I have already stood and encapsulate their own flavors, I think. I do not have to reproduce any sound or style that I have covered if I do not want to," Manning says. "As a smaller and less well-known artist, I feel I do not have to pander to expectations from existing fans / reviewers / record labels.

"I can only speak for myself, but the best part of the whole musical process for me is the writing/demoing. In fact, I like to do a lot of it. The album recording/production, etc., gets in the way of more of just that! With PO90, I was there with Andy when that started, and so I contributed. With The Tangent ... Well, who could resist being a part of such a fab project and stellar cast of musicians? Other things, like the [Musea Records multi-artist concept *Colossus Project*] tracks to which Andy and I have contributed -- these have been fun, and a vehicle for working together unfettered by preconceptions of Manning, PO90 or The Tangent."

Not that size *always* matters, but the fact that Guy lists only six tracks on his website for the forthcoming *Charlestown* suggests some epic material in process. Manning doesn't mind letting the cat out of the bag, explaining what fans can expect. "Those six pieces include one large-scale epic title track, one instrumental echo of that, two shorter, more acoustic-based pieces, and two more

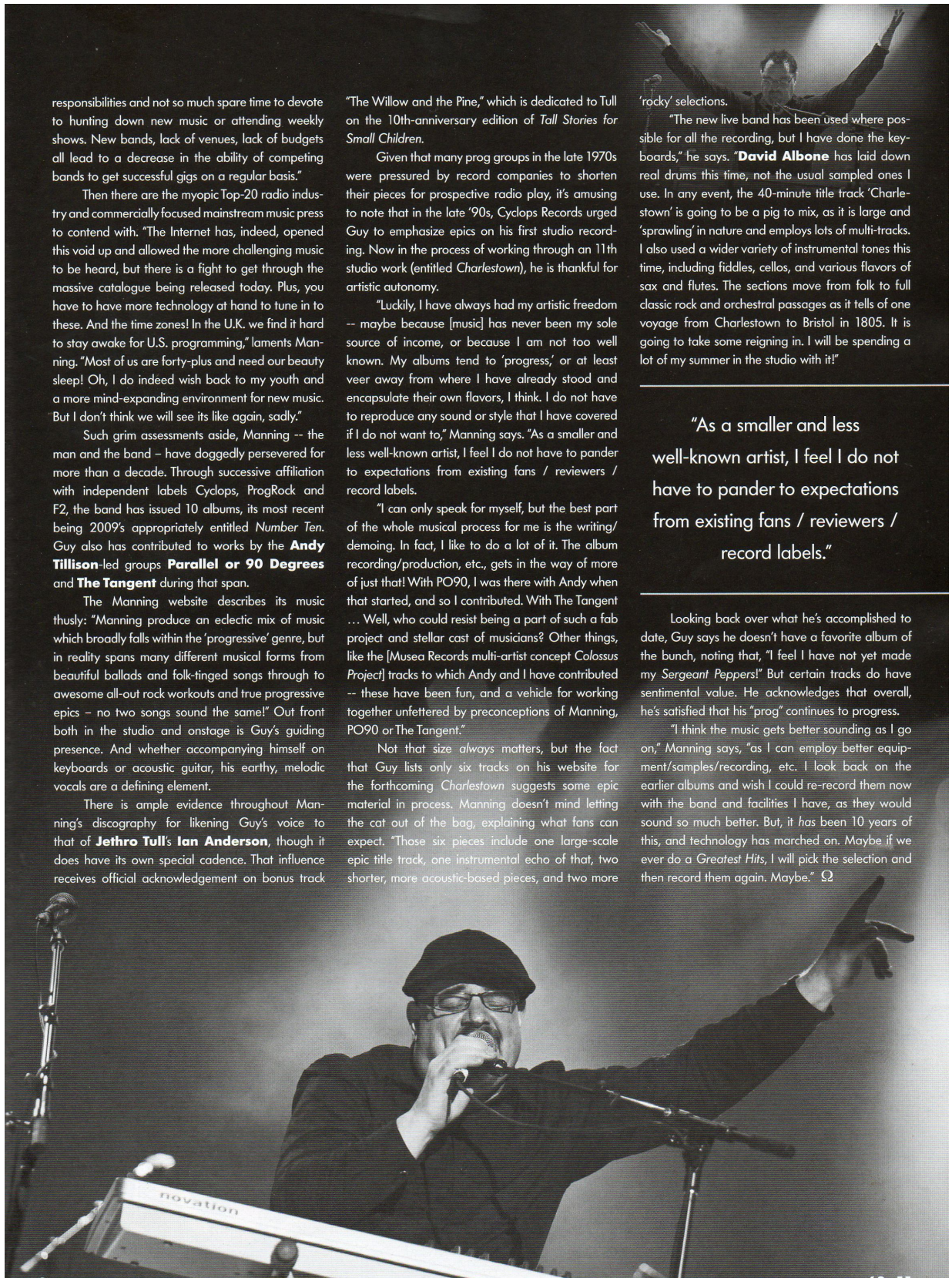
'rocky' selections.

"The new live band has been used where possible for all the recording, but I have done the keyboards," he says. "**David Albone** has laid down real drums this time, not the usual sampled ones I use. In any event, the 40-minute title track 'Charlestown' is going to be a pig to mix, as it is large and 'sprawling' in nature and employs lots of multi-tracks. I also used a wider variety of instrumental tones this time, including fiddles, cellos, and various flavors of sax and flutes. The sections move from folk to full classic rock and orchestral passages as it tells of one voyage from Charlestown to Bristol in 1805. It is going to take some reigning in. I will be spending a lot of my summer in the studio with it!"

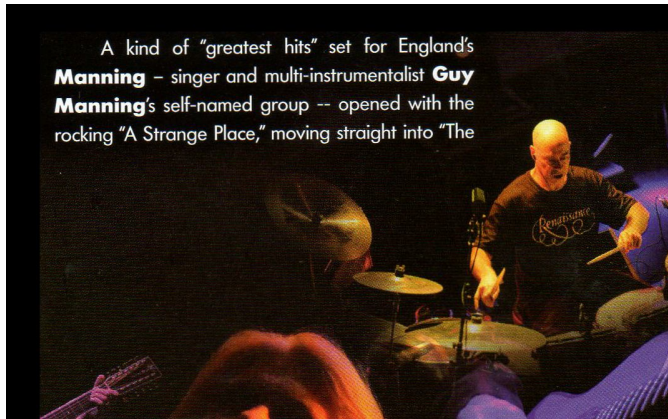
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Looking back over what he's accomplished to date, Guy says he doesn't have a favorite album of the bunch, noting that, "I feel I have not yet made my *Sergeant Peppers!*" But certain tracks do have sentimental value. He acknowledges that overall, he's satisfied that his "prog" continues to progress.

"I think the music gets better sounding as I go on," Manning says, "as I can employ better equipment/samples/recording, etc. I look back on the earlier albums and wish I could re-record them now with the band and facilities I have, as they would sound so much better. But, it has been 10 years of this, and technology has marched on. Maybe if we ever do a *Greatest Hits*, I will pick the selection and then record them again. Maybe." Ω



ROSFEST 2010



Dream." The beautiful "Antares" featured excellent flute from **Steve Dundon** and tight backing vocals from much of the band. "T.I.C." -- from the forthcoming *Charlestown* album -- featured great tuneful soloing that traded between keys, guitar and flute, sounding a bit like early **Wishbone Ash**.

Heavy folk influences colored the "Holy Ireland" excerpt and encore "Lost in Play," suggesting classic **Fairport Convention**. Echoes of Fairport, **Jethro Tull**, and even **Donovan** are sprinkled throughout Manning's catalog, yet the results never sound derivative. Manning is flying the flag for a blend of symphonic progressive rock and folk rarely explored these days and rarely done this well.