

# Not Quite Music Journalism

Published: Thursday, 20 September 2012

## DeeExpus and Manning – The Duchess, 08/09/2012

What's my favourite type of music? That's easy – prog-rock. OK, but what is prog-rock? Well, it's... errrrm.

The thing is, it's probably easier to say that a piece of music isn't prog-rock than to say that one is. According to the BBC's three part documentary on the genre, prog died in the 80's, it's endless noodling, strange sensibilities and twenty-minute songs about Hobbits killed off by the three-minute madness, pogoing and spitting of the punk revolution. Except that it didn't disappear and is now enjoying a revitalised wave of popularity exemplified by both chart success (album chart, obviously), magazine coverage and, recently, an inaugural awards ceremony. The concept albums are still around, although these days they are less concerned with fantasy tropes, but prog, while still revelling in its roots, is as its full name suggests still moving with (or past) the times and there are many varieties. Take tonight's double-header gig, which featured two Northern-based bands that, although I had heard of, I hadn't previously heard anything by.

[DeeExpus](#) are from the North-East and have been around since 2007, originally as a duo of Tony Wright and Andy Ditchfield and now as a full band, although Tony has had to take a leave of absence from the band. Coming on stage to an unintelligible voice-over, the band immediately burst into song which had a very heavy opening but which, in true prog style, included multiple changes of style and a keyboard-drenched instrumental section. This was followed by *King Of Number 33*, which started off quietly with acoustic guitar and keyboard before introducing a grinding electric riff and almost growled vocals and then leading into a second enthralling instrumental section. I didn't realise at the time, but this was at least part of the half-hour long title (and concept) track of the band's second album, proving at least one of my points above. The variation continued with the next track. A short instrumental introduced as a bedtime story, it once again opened in heavy fashion but with a jangly sound which evoked images of nursery rhymes in the background. After a false start with an unplugged guitar *Greed* featured keyboards which were slightly reminiscent of Genesis while *Memo* was introduced by Ditchfield as "I was going to sing this on the album but Nik Kershaw wanted to, so I let him..." I thought it was some kind of joke until I checked the album credits and found that the 80's alternative to Duran Duran had indeed provided vocals for the slightly folky track. After another false start, due to what seemed to be a malfunctioning backing track, which nearly saw *Maybe September* being ditched from the set, we were treated to a different version of the song that Ditchfield introduced as "the most beautiful thing Tony has written" which open with just vocals and keys but, once again, led into a much heavier section which included "parping" keyboards. DeeExpus have a very modern-styled prog sound and it became obvious why with the final song of the set. *PTtee* is Ditchfield's homage to his favourite band, written after he saw them live for the first time. And there are definite comparisons to Porcupine Tree in DeeExpus' output, although it has to be said that the recorded versions (yes, this was another gig where I bought a band's full back catalogue – thankfully, this time, just two albums) aren't quite as heavy as the live ones. A really enjoyable hour-long set, even with the slight problems.

Leeds-based [Manning](#), on the other hand, are more reminiscent of the older style of prog. I usually find it difficult to make comparisons between bands – my musical knowledge simply doesn't stretch that far – but the first thing that struck me about this set was how, physically anyway, it reminded me of Focus, with Guy Manning lording it over the band even while sitting behind a keyboard, stage left. This is a big band – two guitars, and three sets of keyboards, as well as the usual rhythm section and *Domicile* was delivered in a wall-of-sound style. The introduction of a flute for the second song inevitably invoked comparisons with Jethro Tull and Guy Manning's vocals also had more than a hint of Ian Anderson in their delivery. I wasn't to know it but *Charlestown* was about to blow me away (and, ultimately, decide one of the Manning albums I would purchase tonight). Another twenty-minute epic, delivered after a somewhat lengthy delay during which an acoustic guitar string was nearly replaced, it featured vocals suited to reciting a fantasy-story (or, indeed, one of the aforementioned concept albums) as it told a story inspired by the eighteenth century tall-ship voyages from Cornwall

to Liverpool and back. The band were promoting their latest release, *Akoustik* – a kind of acoustic Best Of... – so a number of tracks were being played in acoustic style, if slightly rocked-up for the live set. This gave some of them a more folky sound, especially the likes of *Margaret Montgomery*, the story of a Scottish Witch, and its thematic sequel *Revelation Road*, which also managed to incorporate a more funky sound, while *Lost In Play* was a superb mixed bag of somehow medieval sound, hard rock and bottle-neck guitar-playing. Like a growing number of bands, Manning don't perform encores but ended their set ("that was our last song and here's another...") with another brilliant track about finding love in the strangest of places. If I'd had more cash on me, I would almost certainly have bought whichever album that was from as well... This tour is the last time that the current line-up will be seen together, as guitarists Chris Catling and Kevin Currie are leaving the band (to be replaced by former member David Million). There was a remarkable camaraderie on stage, with both departing members joking with the audience and the rest of the band during breaks in playing. Strangely, most of the tonight's audience seemed to be there to just see DeeExpus and the crowd (if it could be called that in the first place) felt a lot smaller while Manning were on stage. That was a shame because, of the two, I slightly preferred Manning. But then, I've been a prog fan for a very long time...

Posted by [Ian \(The Druid\) Massey](#) at [20:41](#)