

Guy Manning - Akoustik 2 (Duo Review)



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Track List:

White Waters (5:39), *Songs from Bilston House* (5:02), *Yesterday's Hero* (5:39), *A Strange Place* (6:11), *Moorland Skies* (6:49), *Flight 19* (6:45), *Saturday Picture Show* (7:04), *Blue Girl* (4:57), *Icarus and Me* (4:56), *Joshua Logan* (6:19), *Ships* (5:02), *Winter* (5:25)

John O'Boyle's Review

The only rule of the album is: "...to only record parts that we could reproduce live! No overdubs!"

Well folks, it's that time of the year again for one of Britain's most talented artists to step forward and release his annual album. It is a known fact that at this current moment **Guy Manning** has been a very busy man, releasing *Akoustik 2* that features nine re-imaged songs and three brand pieces and is also working with the United Progressive Fraternity, who will be touring and he has also been across the pond for a few dates in the US.

Akoustik 2 takes songs from *Tall Stories for Small Children*, *Songs from Bilston House*, *The Cure*, *Cascade*, *Anser's Tree*, *Number Ten*, and *The View from My Window* albums, five of which are DPRP recommended, so it's a brave move to include reworks of songs from said albums.

It is definitely worth noting that the re-imaging of the songs adds another dimension to the pieces, breathing new life into them. *Ships* for me is a perfect example of this, the original version has some power and rapidity about it where *Akoustik 2*'s version still maintains a certain level of urgency but is more mature, where you really sit up and listen to what is being conveyed. The real stand out piece for me that has caught the essence of the *Akoustik* approach is *Flight 19* with its air of desperation that perfectly captures the romanticism of the time, (*Flight 19* disappeared over the Bermuda Triangle on the 5th December 1945), and the emotional panic of the pilot as he cries out, "can you hear me", which just sends a shiver down your spine as you can hear his emotional state. This is what Manning does to perfection, offering vignettes that focus on the scene and character of reference, succinctly capturing the moment, where one can mentally see the scene unfolding before one's eyes. It is worth noting that being able to translate songs in a stripped back presentation and for it to still work shows the adeptness of the song writing and the strength of the song.

Like an expectant father, the excitement here for me are the three new songs, (not that any of the other pieces are less important in the grand scheme of things), *Yesterday's Hero*, *Moorland Skies* and *Saturday Picture Show*. The presentation and sound of these three sounds would in my mind point towards *The Root, the Leaf and the Bones* sessions, especially with *Moorland Skies* and to be honest more so with *Saturday Picture Show*, capturing an innocent childhood of yesteryear much

like *Palace of Delights* did.

Saturday Picture Show is the strongest of the three songs with its construct that undulates and flows freely and displays a really nice dynamic especially with the guitar work. It's also worth noting that Marek Arnold's contribution really brings the song to life, something that is very noticeable throughout the whole album if I am totally honest as it did with *Akoustik 1*.

Moorland Skies could be the cousin of *Autumn Song*, a forlorn love song that quite cleverly uses reference to Turner, (Joseph Mallord William Turner, who was known as the painter of light and is purported that his dying words were, "the sun is god", he was the man who elevated landscape painting to an eminence, his use of colour to capture the emotion of the setting was second to none), to capture the emotion of a relationship that has come to an end without closure. Like *Caliban* and *Ariel* off *Charlestown*, *Moorland Skies* could be seen as an analogy of Turner's life and his relationship with Sarah Danby, his mistress, who he never married and is believed to have been the father of her two daughters.

Yesterday's Hero with its Celtic feel really uses word play to maximum effect being very clever in how it handles the subject matter, a narrative of failure and change, a recount of how it was not recognised until it was too late, preordained, very much in the same sort of vein as *The Root, the Leaf, and the Bone* did, but more subtle.

Akoustik 2 continues the journey that *Akoustik* started taking it one step further with three new songs, which makes it even more desirable and not just a complete purchase. As ever IMHO you cannot go far wrong with Manning as a recording artist, he touches on all the important parts of his art, he is creative, lyrically succinct, challenging and thought provoking, creating cinematic landscapes that one can wander through adding your own colours or not as the case maybe. When I read Steinbeck, such is the power of his work I see the scenes in black and white as they build; the more time you invest in his work the more you get out of it. Manning for me has the same effect such is the power of his approach and penmanship.

Alison Henderson's Review

Guy Manning's body of work, now spanning 15 albums over his band project's 15 year history, certainly makes him one of the UK's most prolific prog artists. Such a significant output means he now has the luxury of revisiting some of the songs from the past albums in order to give them a different treatment so that they now fall under the label "acoustic" rather than electric prog.

The first *Akoustik* collection appeared in 2012: in between this and the new *Akoustik 2* collection, there came *The Root, the Leaf and the Bone*, one of the outstanding albums of 2013 with its overarching heady air of times past, the stories within the songs told within complex but always fascinating arrangements.

For this album, he has again gathered together his trusty band of resident minstrels including guitarist, David Million, vocalists Julie King and Kev Currie, Martin Thiselton on piano, Ian Fairbairn on fiddle and mandolin, Jonathan Barrett on bass, Rick Henry on drums, Mark Arnold on saxophone and clarinet, and Steve Dundon on flute.

However, unlike *Akoustik* where his contribution was pared down guitar and lead vocals, this time, Manning takes a greater part with his customary vocals, guitar, mandolin, keyboards, percussion and

drums.

Starting with the laid-back vibe of *White Waters*, all 12 songs bring out all the component ingredients of Manning's music, in particular the story-telling which invoke interesting times and haunting places.

Interspersing each of the songs with fiddle, saxophone, clarinet or flute gives the songs their own definitive character with splashes of folk and bursts of the blues.

Manning's distinct voice conveys a range of emotions, none more so than in the slightly spooky *A Strange Place* that first appeared on his second album, *The Cure*.

The new songs comprise *Yesterday's Hero* which is a natural successor to those which appeared on *The Root, the Leaf and the Bone*, *Moorland Skies* delivers an intense sense of place, a feeling of being in open countryside, while *Saturday Picture Show* returns us to days of youth.

One of the most dramatic songs is *Icarus and Me*, drawn from the 2007 *Songs from the Bilston House* (along with the title track) with its unusual Arabian scale-type arrangement. It contrasts with the bluesy *Joshua Logan* and the gorgeous yearning of *Flight 19*.

I had the pleasure of seeing Squire Manning perform acoustically at London's Resonance Festival in July and his power to deliver his compelling songs was there for all to see. What they deliver here is akin to enjoying an evening out in a northern country pub with a blazing log fire, the intimate atmosphere only heightened by a group of masterful musicians providing the entertainment. This is an album to curl up with on a cold winter's evening.

John O'Boyle: 8 out of 10

Alison Henderson: 7 out of 10