

BACKGROUND MAGAZINE Feb 2011 – Henri Strik

Since I listened to *A Matter Of Life And Death (The Journal Of Abel Mann)* in 2004, I became more interested in the musician **Guy Manning**, who's also known for his work with **Parallel Or 90 Degrees** and **The Tangent**. His solo albums very much appeal to my musical taste. In many respects his music reminds me of the more progressive rock orientated albums by **Jethro Tull** mainly due to the flute work and Guy's vocals that has a strong resemblance with **Ian Anderson's** voice. However, it's not fair to compare Mr. Manning to Jethro Tull only, since he has much more to offer on the outstanding albums he released after the above-mentioned ones. *One Small Step...* (2005), *Anser's Tree* (2006), *Songs from the Bilston House* (2007) and his latest studio album *Number Ten* (2009) are all excellent albums released as **Manning**.

This review is certainly not about Guy's earlier work, but about his latest release *Charlestown*, his eleventh album since he released his first one *Tall Stories For Small Children* (1999). I discovered a comparison with **Yes** on the first and the final track of *Charlestown*. Both songs are excellent pieces of work containing the finest progressive rock music, but they come pretty close to the material Yes wrote for *Fragile*, the legendary masterpiece released in 1972. The songs also deliver fine musicianship and excellent instrumental parts played by professional musicians. Yes were also a band that could write great epic pieces such as *Close To The Edge*. The title track of this album that lasts 35 minutes is quite similar to this epic having many different moods and fabulous solos on guitar and synthesizer. Manning delivers a piece of music that can be described as one of the finest he ever wrote and recorded. A visit to Charlestown with his family inspired him to write a piece of music dealing with a harbour and with ships transporting goods to China. The seven musicians made it all worth while to listen to the complete song without losing interest in the music. The fine melody and the fascinating guitar and keyboard parts keep you focused all the time and especially the synthesizer parts played by Guy Manning give the music a fine retro sound. I was a bit surprised that he didn't call in the aid of **Andy Tillison** this time. On most of his previous albums, Tillison used to play some excellent Moog-solos. I guess Guy learned enough from him to do the job on his own...

On the final track you can enjoy the same kind of strong instrumentals parts. *Finale* is a strong keyboard-dominated seven-minute instrumental piece. Together with the electric guitar, saxophone and flute the musicians create a very enjoyable piece of music to listen to. It's a perfect ending of the album that made me almost forget the four songs between the first and the last track. However, for me these tracks were less interesting. Those songs gave more room to the other side of Guy Manning, namely the singer-songwriter. These pieces are much more song-orientated and have less instrumental parts. That doesn't mean that these songs are just rubbish; most certainly not. Skipping these tracks never came to my mind and especially the track *T.I.C* in the vein of Jethro Tull has its charm.

Looking at the artwork of *Charlestown*, I noticed some resemblance with *Fragile* as well. It was one of the first albums that contained the outstanding cover designs created by Roger Dean. Rosie Manning created the same kind of artwork for *Charlestown*. Both covers show our planet from outer space with houses and trees drawn along the horizon. Only Rosie's view at Mother Earth isn't as profound as Mr. Dean's! Rosie's artwork is more childlike and looking at the drawing makes you smile, but still it's cleverly done!

I can only conclude that Manning recorded an album that not only will be appreciated by the fans of Jethro Tull. For people who would like to hear outstanding music made by a modern minstrel I highly recommend *Charlestown*.

This album certainly deserves a much larger audience than it gets now.

**** Henri Strik (edited by Peter Willemsen)