

FIREWORKS MAGAZINE – Feb 2011

MANNING – ‘*Charlestown*’ (Festival Records)

The melodic progressive rock band Manning – whom it may be recalled is named after frontman Guy Manning (also well-known for his work with Parallel Or Ninety Degrees and The Tangent) – continue to plough a quintessentially and often quirky, folksy “English sound” on this, their eleventh studio album. And there’s absolutely nowt wrong with doing that either when it leads to an album as tasty as this one – and one that resides just below my top 10 albums of 2010 - for it is arguably their strongest and most compelling album to date.

The title of the album refers to the Cornish village and harbour of the same name, a Georgian creation by the Rashleigh family for the export of china clay and copper. To this day, it remains a small but active port involved in the china clay trade – but the story threaded together by the illustrious and talented Guy Manning is of its early years and of the perilous journeys undertaken by mariners in a variety of vessels from tall ships to coastal luggers. The epic, 35-minute, multi-part title track that gets the album underway weaves a rich and emotionally-charged story of the thirty crew members on one such perilous journey making use of an expressive assortment of instrumentation that is not afraid to give plenty of space to the development of its recurring themes and yet reveals a piece of work of staggering grandiosity and epic proportions in its use of contrasting moods and tempos. It is especially successful in capturing the melancholic and frantic extremes that characterise this incredible story.

Five (much) shorter songs complete the album, of which the first ‘Caliban And Ariel’ is one the shortest in the entire recorded canon by the band. It is a somewhat whimsical piano-led song with cello embellishment, loosely based upon two of the characters in Shakespeare’s ‘The Tempest’. It reminds me so much of something by the Strawbs: Manning’s voice sounding oh so close to that of Dave Cousins here! ‘The Man In The Mirror’ is, by contrast an upbeat and wonderfully layered piece, instrumentally diverse with subtle Hammond organ, cello, acoustic guitar, a great bass line plus a sprightly infusion of saxophone and finally a fabulous fiddle solo that curiously succeeds in belatedly steering the song in a Celtic direction! Amazing!

‘Clocks’ succeeds in bringing mandolin and flute to the fore, further emphasising the instrumental variety found on ‘Charlestown’. It is also a highly charged and emotional number, and includes some of the best vocals ever heard on a Manning song! ‘T.I.C.’ brings a more upbeat focus to proceedings – a sort of blues rock number laced with horns a touch of Jethro Tull plus a smidgeon of country rock sensibilities thrown in for good measure I kid you not!!) I remain undecided whether its inclusion on the album is absolute folly, or a stroke of genius! The instrumental ‘Finale’ is the concluding piece: at times a rather funky number that allows the rhythm guys (Kris Hudson-Lee, bass and Dave Albone, drums) full rein – but is also a cleverly written piece that allows for a modified revisitation of some of the themes from the gargantuan title work.

Believe me, this is British progressive rock music at its consummate best, with the production, musicianship, arrangements and execution of the material pretty damned near to perfection in my view. Simply wonderful!

Paul Jerome Smith