

MANNING...CHARLESTOWN



Living as I do in a town that has just hosted the biggest tall ships gathering in Europe, I was very much at home with the nautical theme to the title track of “Charlestown”. Reading the brief synopsis within the CD booklet allowed me understand what the album was all about.

On first listening to the folk overtones of “Charlestown”, it made me wonder if this isn’t the kind of music that Jethro Tull would have made should they have dared commit to a more progressive style.

“Charlestown” really does conjure up a picture of an epic voyage around Land’s End to Bristol aboard a tall ship laden with china clay. Guy Manning’s folk-like lyrical expression add further to the authenticity of such an event. This really is prog as good as it gets.

What sets it apart from many such musical excursions is its upbeat, brisk and open sound, rather than the dark and bleak approach so often portrayed by bands trading atmosphere for musical content. The whole soundstage demonstrated by this piece is wide and full with an engaging clarity.

Following the thirty five minute opening opus “Caliban and Ariel” brings about a more gentile approach with delicate touches of percussion, acoustic guitar and a rich cello. Contrasted by the following “Man In The Mirror”. This song reminded me very much of caravan of yore and was dancing around in my head for days. A fantastic blend of traditional instruments like fiddle and saxophone make this song sheer joy.

“Clocks” can only be described as haunting and slips back into the folk theme

running through this truly excellent album, which is a credit to the multi-instrumental talents of Guy Manning and his cohorts. It's a song that seems to represent desolation yet steers clear of becoming dour.

Shifting up a gear or two, the penultimate "TLC" shifts from wholesome prog to blues and beyond. I found this song to have a very high feel good factor and really uplifting. Listening to this track brought a smile to my face in the belief that it demonstrated all the things I love about prog rock music.

I found myself not wanting the album to end, but end it did with "Finale". Like the rest of the album this piece was packed with exciting and interesting textures. The vintage keyboard sounds and patches like Moog, Mellotron, Rhodes, Wurlitzer and Hammond are of the very best I have heard anywhere and add to the magic.

Did we like this album? You bet your ass we did. Guy Manning has recorded his best work yet with Charlestown and with the aid of gold standard musicians created a tour de force. Beautifully packaged and oozing quality, miss this one at your peril.

Steve Petch (The Progmeister) – Nov 2010