

REVIEW OF "SONGS FROM THE BILSTON HOUSE" BY JOSH TURNER (PROG4YOU.COM)

With the buzz surrounding Phideaux's *Doomsday Afternoon*, it seems as if this year's best album may have gone overlooked. In *Songs from the Bilston House*, Guy Manning has totally outdone himself. When my hands weren't giving the air guitars - or those equally phantom keyboards - their due, my mouth was agape with shock and awe.

For several days straight, I was humming this very music. I just couldn't get these catchy tunes out of my head. And believe it or not, I'm not talking about one or two songs. In general, Manning's latest album is littered with accessible passages and mantras. Every time I hear it, I am befuddled at how long it took him to craft this masterpiece. It seems like only yesterday he released *A Matter of Life & Death*, *One Small Step*, and *Anser's Tree*. How in the heck did he fit so much onto a single disc?

Looking at the credits, I see he had assistance from Andy Tillison. This might explain why a number of the numbers parallel *The Tangent*. While that might fulfill a piece of the puzzle, this extraordinarily gifted Englishman deserves a glut of accolades for his wholesome efforts. He has 77 minutes and 14 seconds of confectionary goodness, and it's completely absent of marshmallowy minutiae or fluff. Even his hazelnut gelato isn't cut with lesser fillers.

To describe this concept album, I keep returning to the same correlation. This is like *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* on shuffle. As Tim Burton has done for *The Demon Barber*, it would come as no surprise if the prince of dark fantasy came knocking on Manning's door with the possibilities of a screenplay. To that end, this material is not only incredible; it's as sing-able as an east coast musical. Then again, it's more up to date than a sacrificial lamb on Broadway.

Playing the role of Oompa-Loompas are Laura Fowles and Julie King whose backing vocals round out the equation by adding a sweet eeriness to the mix. Since they are females and neither pygmies nor munchkins, it seems as if Deep Roy, Warwick Davis and Kenny Baker, will have to keep looking for employment. Not to mention, Fowles brings her saxophone to the table; thus making her more desirable to the stage manager.

Even though every ditty is to die for, "Lost in Play" is leaps and bounds ahead of the rest. That's my personal opinion so there's should be no question which cocoa-covered nougat holds the golden ticket. I'm sure the fair-haired rosy-skinned demoralizing dwarves of Loompaland would agree with me that this song has the commercially acceptable vibe of the *BoDeans*. Piled upon the heap, Steve Dundon's flutes are fabulous too; creating so much stickiness that it would have been impossible to flush this down a garbage chute.

Foregoing my favorite song, *Veruca Salt* is the center of attention in "The Calm Absurd".

Persisting to stir diverse ingredients into the mixer, "Understudy" has David Million borrowing his lead guitar from *RPWL*. While his methods pass the litmus test, only when

I checked the bill did I realize that Blind Ego's front-man and shredder was absent. As I hold the highly-regarded Kalle Wallner responsible, it's plain to see that this union buster has done his job and duplicated a precious recipe that's one in a million.

In concordance with the suspicions of Mike Tevee, Genesis is clearly referenced in "Skimming Stones" - up until that point where Manning bribes the ferryman with delectable gelt.

"Icarus & Me" proves that this working prototype from GM is the newest model to come out of Neal Morse's showroom. When taken for a spin, it seems as if Morse's offshore cartel has incorporated a twist on the popular model: That would be the keyboards and brass from Spock's Beards' Snow.

In contrast, "Pillars of Salt" is a blast from the past that goes even further back. In a way, it's reminiscent of The Beatles and The Doors. If I saw this on Ed Sullivan in black and white, I wouldn't have known that the broadcast was a fake.

Bridging the connection between Italy and Ireland, the worldly infusion from "Inner Moment" comes without the layover. As it's on the candy dot in terms of punctuality, it has no need for a flux capacitor to put a wrinkle in the time either. It does however feature an accordion and if you squint; you might find Iona running away with a piece of the action.

The only songs I didn't mention were the title track and "Antares". Trust me; these don't deserve to be treated like chopped liver, but truth be told; the respective themes do correspond with Augustus Gloop and Violet Beauregarde. They also sound like The B-52's. [That would be the band, and not the long-range working-class plane manufactured by Boeing or the uncommon gal's beehive hairdo. To be absolutely lucid, I have cited one of the leaders of pop who has been styled after a coif that was strategically named after a Subsonic Stratofortress. Got it? Or were you just as confused as I was when trying to follow the chocolatier's convoluted speech patterns.]

By the way, the startup program initiated from the knocker is extremely well-written. Plus, I love how the lexis posted on the artwork is chimed as we pass through the foyer.

In retrospect, my first thought was that this album was very good. Once the conclusive note expired, I wanted to hear it again. Out of impulse, I reset the player and surreptitiously hit play. Now that I've had time to ascertain what's been done, I assert that he's produced a hole in one. When weighed against his priceless ingots, bar none this is his best. It's simply beyond compare even if it does appear to pay homage to spoiled brats.

While I purposely try not to use the same words twice, I have no qualms calling it a masterpiece more than once. Not only is it a marvel in and of itself, it puts a twist on that renowned phenomenon that queerly binds Dark Side of the Moon to the escapades of Dorothy Gale. This is more than just a clever analogy; it's virtually reality. I was

flabbergasted by the coincidence between this and Johnny Depp's take on Willy Wonka. Also I was bowled over by the fact that an album with hair-raising effects went relatively unnoticed. You know what? It's better than Cats. In translation, Songs from the Bilston House is just too good to miss.

So that's the album more or less. Now that I have this critique out of the way, all I ask is for a moment of silence as I veto a misguided panel and announce the actual winner of last year. If there was something called the Programmy, the slip inside the envelope would read, "And the award goes to Guy Manning!!!"

Score: 9.5/10

[Don't get me wrong: Doomsday Afternoon is an excellent album. It's not as if it's a stinker or being considered for the Golden Raspberry Award. To be frank, Phideaux's latest opus is a masterpiece as well. I just think that this one is marginally better.]