

MANNING – 'MARGARET'S CHILDREN' (*Festival Music*)

My reviews of the last three Manning albums have stated "British progressive rock music at its consummate best" ('Charlestown') [Fireworks 44] "a fine album by any standards" ('Number Ten') [Fireworks 36] and "an end of year progressive rock highlight" ('Songs From The Bilston House') [Fireworks 31]. High praise indeed, but completely justified for three excellent releases from the "Britprog" scene.

The present album takes a step backwards, chronologically, to the album before 'Songs...': the 2006 release 'Anser's Tree'. This provided a broad canvas for the band, where each of the tracks was about someone on the family lineage of Dr Jonathan Anser (born 2089). That album and this new release have a strong bond and interdependency, and features the stories of seven more of the individuals on the family tree that has Margaret Fleming (hence the album's title) at its head.

A more wonderful and infectious start than 'The Year Of Wonder' would be difficult to imagine. Mellifluous and engaging – both lyrically and musically – here is a band at the top of their game with a song of nearly ten minutes duration that seems to pass in no time at all. It really does set the scene for an album of tremendous ensemble and solo excellence from all the instrumentalists, but I must individually mention flautist Steve Dundon, saxophonist Marek Arnold and cellist Kathy Hampsore in particular for their exquisite contributions to the overall sound and success of the album.

The five part opus 'A Perfect Childhood' is the album's blockbuster, not just in terms of its length (17:05) but also in terms of lyrical quality – Guy Manning really is an amazing storyteller – here, about an especially wonderful human being, Amy Quartermaine, and based upon the real life heroine Edith Cavell. It also succeeds in delivering so many emotional highs with the music. It will get my vote as "track of the year" on the CRS voting form! This is intelligent progressive rock music of the highest order.

It is the following number ('A Night At The Savoy, 1933') that took me a long time to appreciate, as it tries to replicate the sounds of a hazy, tobacco-filled club with a band fronted by Miss Harriet Horden (the next character from the tree) performing a swing jazz number of the era. Julie King has her moment in the spotlight here, and a curve ball it may be, but I've come to really rather enjoy how Manning have so successfully replicated the desired effect!

Closing song 'The Southern Waves' is the other song I want to specifically mention, beginning and ending as it does with a thunderstorm. In between there is quite simply the most majestic music and including lead guitarist Chris Catling's moment in the spotlight. It is another deeply emotional number, and time for the hairs on the back of the neck to stand up once again!

It's another marvellous release from Manning, making 2011 another exceptional year of progressive rock and metal releases.

Paul Jerome Smith