

MANNING "Margaret's Children"

A review by John Sealey (Imperial @ Progressive Ears) 02/11/2011

It's been just twelve months since musical story teller, Guy Manning, gave us the album, Charlestown and introduced us to tales of dangerous seafaring times, shipwrecked us on the island from Shakespeare's The Tempest, haunted us with a wistful tale of ghostly love and gave his take on the tragedy of being a gentle misfit in an often cruel society. After all that, especially seeing that Charlestown's title track was a full thirty-five minute epic sail against the mast, one would assume that Guy would be taking a long, well-earned rest. How fortunate for us that resting, apparently, is not what Guy Manning does.

So, how do you follow what many have described as Manning's finest album? Well, in the case of Manning's new album, you just carry on with the art of great story telling in song. Margaret's Children takes up from where 2006's album, Anser's Tree, left off, with tales of seven more members of the family that Guy Manning "propagated" for that earlier album. There are obviously some links between the two albums but it certainly isn't necessary to have heard the former album to enjoy the latter.

The album opener, The Year Of Wonders, kicks things off in fine rocky fashion. Telling the tale of one, Fleming Barras, a contemporary of Isaac Newton, whose links to his ancestor, Margaret Montgomery, lead him on a slightly different journey to Newton, eventually to mysteriously disappear! The up-tempo nature of this track is lead by the driving drum rhythm and some raucous flute playing. The energy in this song is a perfect attention grabber for the rest of the album.

Revelation Road follows on with its gospel-tinged chant augmented by some American "old-time" guitar and fiddle playing as Manning tells the story of Jorgen Barras and his opportunist role as part of a travelling show in nineteenth century America. Although one of the shortest songs on the album I find that the opening chant has stuck in my mind already!

A Perfect Childhood tells the tragic story of Amy Quartermaine (roughly based on the real life story of Edith Cavell - one familiar to me from as far back as my own childhood and seeing her story being told on Blue Peter!). This is the longest track on the album at just over seventeen minutes and is certainly the nearest that Manning gets to an "epic" on this album - although I don't necessarily feel that was the intent here. My view is that the story just needed the length of song to do it justice. A gentle acoustic guitar and voice introduction sets the scene to Amy's life - "a perfect childhood" where she learns that life is a precious gift and living it is about doing good things. As the First World War begins so the music takes on a more frantic pace. Amy's fate is an untimely execution for trying to help allied soldiers escape home. This is a well-told story of dedication and self-sacrifice in which an ordinary person is thrust into extraordinary situations simply because "it certainly seemed like the right thing to do". This longer track gives all the band members the opportunity to extend themselves and bring the lyric to life through the ebb and flow of their playing.

It's back to America for the next track, A Night At the Savoy, 1933, where Julie King gets a lead vocal in the role of Harriet Horden, a nightclub singer during the Great Depression years. The club provides a place of escape from the drastic events outside as Harriet sings "Sugar Daddy, buy me a drink, find me somewhere inside this glass where I don't have to think, outside the real world is as lost as can be, but inside here the night is alive with possibilities". The nightclub feel is recreated perfectly - right down to the brilliant and poignant Benny Goodman style clarinet solo.

The life stories told in Margaret's Children (and Anser's Tree) are tales of individuals from one family, who all seem to have experienced extraordinary events of one kind or another. Most of us, however, experience ordinary lives where, regardless of our individual value to friends and family, nothing of real note happens to us. The story of James Fairfax, An Average Man, is one such story. Here is a man who has no outstanding qualities and yet is aware that he wants to be remembered for simply being alive. He's a man who "had his hair cut every fortnight, liked eating chicken and a nice lamb chop" (for some reason that chicken and lamb chop line just won't leave my brain!). James eventually dies in the last battle of the Second World War but not before he's travelled up to Scotland and planted a sapling as his "family's tree" - thus perpetuating his name. The rolling march of this song is hugely effective in illustrating the almost unbearable burden of time slipping away from James as his almost inevitable end marches towards him. In many ways this song may be the centrepiece of the album - it's certainly how it feels to me.

Black Silk Sheets Of Cairo is the story of Amy Fairfax, who joins the OSS and goes off to Cairo to use her special gifts to extract classified information on behalf of the American government. This Mata Hari figure turns out to be very effective in her chosen field - or should that be bed? The use of the lyric "uniform of lace" certainly works for me, on so many levels! Musically, Manning weaves a seductive Egyptian-style rhythm to perfectly illustrate this story of espionage and intrigue. The outro to the song, to my ears, alludes to the hypnotic piped music played by snake charmers - a more conventional form of snake charming than that performed by our heroine, no doubt!

The closing track on the album, The Southern Waves, is a wonderfully presented and very topical story of how the power of nature is to be respected rather than ignored, as is often the case in today's world. The story of David Logan, a studious fisherman, who could see that a great change in the Earth's form may not be far away; although he and his son would campaign to have their voices heard, sadly the world would not listen. The melody and lyrics to this song are, to me, outstanding - "the Tropic of Capricorn, a line on the globe, a marker on a fluid changing floor, a seascape flood of primal nature, joining with the power of the downward skies". What impresses me most is that Manning chooses to use such a sumptuously beautiful melody to underpin the story of the massively destructive force of this natural but devastating evolution of our planet. Many would have chosen bombast over beauty but Manning presents his story far more effectively here. In a similar manner to how he ended his last album with an instrumental, Manning allows this album to finish with a stupendous tidal wave of a guitar solo. Fabulous.

Lyricaly, Guy Manning sets himself apart from many of his contemporaries in the prog world in that he understands the value of a well-presented story. Overlaid on top of the lyrics themselves, Manning uses a wide range of instruments on his albums, which add their own expressive vocabulary to those wonderfully descriptive words. The combination is both impressive and fluid, never once allowing the music to become derivative - never repetitious. Guy Manning is obviously the leading light here both musically as well as lyricaly, but all the players on this album give great performances. I have to make mention of Steve Dundon, whose flute playing is tremendous throughout and Ian "Walter" Fairbain whose fiddle adds so much texture - especially on Revelation Road. That guitar solo at the end of The Southern Waves is a thing of impressive beauty, too! I must also mention the additional bits of percussion that crop up all through the album which, I assume, come from the guest playing of Tinyfish's Leon Camfield - a bit of a latter-day Jamie Muir, me thinks!

I didn't think Guy Manning would produce an album to beat Charlestown but in Margaret's Children I reckon he may well have just done that! Whereas I think Charlestown, the epic track, is still my favourite piece of Manning music, it's my belief that this album may well have the edge on consistency in both story telling and musical ideas. It's a great shame that Guy Manning, along with so

much other talent these days, may never be heard and appreciated beyond his loyal fan-base. One can only hope that, as people hear his music, so the fan-base will continue to expand - it certainly deserves to.

Just this morning, I saw an interview with American country singer, Toby Keith, who passed the comment that, as reality singing shows continue to thrive and concentrate on image, the song has been forgotten. As far as Guy Manning goes, that's certainly a long way from being the case.