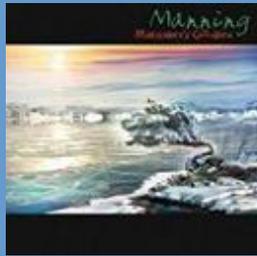


Manning - Margaret's Children



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Manning's 2011 release, *Margaret's Children*, is a follow on from 2006's *Anser's Tree*. Here we have a different set of characters from that tree, spanning the years 1645 to 2022. Manning has taken a lot of care with this release, not that he doesn't take care with all his releases. But this one especially, as you can find on the website a complete family tree for the characters, both for this album and *Anser's Tree* (which I believe is/was included only with pre-ordered versions).

Whether intentional (probably not) or accidental (probably so), there are again moments that recall Jethro Tull. Maybe it's the bit of flute (which later is violin) on the opening track. While nothing stomps quite that hard, I'm left with "Hymn 49" running through my head... but don't get stuck on that idea, please.

While I try (often unsuccessfully) to *not* write a track by track review, in this case, it seems necessary. We can't use a broad stroke and say this album is this or that, because Manning, band and man, is/are eclectic in many respects. You will find the music has, while not necessarily a worldly influence, certainly it crosses the Atlantic to mix the Irish/English influence (Celtic, for example) with an American influence (Americana) and then on down, over, to the Middle East. But, all this fits entirely with the story Manning is telling. And each song is about not just about that character, but also about a place and time in history. Not that these characters are necessarily historical (or faux-historical) figures - they are everyday men and women doing sometimes extraordinary things or... in at least one case, something a bit reprehensible. And, I have to say, this is one of the most detailed concept albums I've had the chance to review, at least since I reviewed [Anser's Tree](#).

If you recall, in *Anser's Tree* Jonathan Anser was researching his family tree, and so we learned a bit about some of his ancestors. One of those ancestors was Margaret Montgomery, who disappeared mysteriously in 1605... and this sequel explores more of her family tree/legacy. There are enough characters named on the family tree but not (yet) sung about that I fully expect that in a few years' time, we'll have part three. But let's talk about this one; as the Manning website has complete bios for each of the album's characters, we won't do a full bios here, as it's the music you want to know about from me, right? But a bit of

background is necessary: Margaret had three children, one of whom married and had three children (though one was stillborn). One of *those* children, Margaret Montgomery (yes, named after grandma), had two children, one of whom was Fleming Barras (missing Margaret Montgomery's maiden name was Fleming). It is with Fleming that this particular chapter (album) begins.

"Year Of Wonders (Fleming Barras)" is a rocking track that I can only describe as a 60s surf folk jazz. How so? The swooshing guitars and rumbling percussion are surf-rock like, Manning's vocals and the trilling flute bring in that folk (yes, Tull, too) element, but in that, it also swings like jazz (never mind the Rhodes piano solo at around the 5-minute mark, tinkling piano nearly a minute later, and even a bit later, some smoothly warm sax all adding to that jazzy feel). And it all works together; it's an energetic and electric way to start off an album. Sometimes when you say, "it's got everything but/including the kitchen sink," it's a polite way of saying it's busy. Well, "Year Of Wonders" isn't busy in a negative sense. Oh, it's certainly active, but not busy. It's a song full of wonders! (Oh, and Fleming disappeared just like Margaret...). I guess the irony in all that about it being surf folk jazz ... the setting is England in the 17th Century...

"Revelation Road (Jorgen Barras)" comes next. Jorgen is Fleming's great-great-great grandnephew and son of William Barras (see *Anser's Tree* for his story). The track will put you right in the midst of south/southern-Midwest revivalist gathering; it's both as energetic as a gospel choir (joyous vocals) and as mellow as the wide open plains of Kansas with its acoustic guitars and laidback percussion. Having emigrated to the US, Jorgen becomes a traveling preacher man, but of a very shady type (we might say shyster, huckster), taking advantage of families and towns left destitute or near-destitute in the severe drought that took hold of the mid-west in the early part of the 20th Century... the "Dust Bowl" as it was termed.

The longest track on the album is the suite "A Perfect Childhood (Amy Quartermaine)," which is, at first (and at last), minstrel-like for the "Before The War" section - bucolic, in a way. This transitions into a sprightly mid-tempo rocker -- which seems a bit contradictory, but it's some perky, effervescent keyboards that give it that refreshingly light feel*even as the tale overall is anything but light. Amy, a nurse, moved abroad to help set up nursing schools in Belgium; during World War I she tended to the wounded (any and all)... Her story is at once both life-reaffirming and tragic. Amy helped British soldiers escape from occupied Belgium, and upon being caught was sentenced to death... Her story, as Manning tells us in the bio: "... is based upon the true account of the life story of Edith Cavell but was adjusted to fit into the original Anser's Family tree." This track has multiple sections and demonstrates (again) how easily Manning and company can transition between tempos and styles and moods.

Manning's band on this outing is the same as on 2010's *Charlestown* release, but is mostly different from that on *Anser's Tree*. And yet, they're still able to capture that Manning sound whilst adding their own voices. The third section of "A Perfect Childhood...", "Outbreak," is an instrumental transitioned into by a sweet sax solo, a brief guitar solo, and then a flute solo. The fourth section

"Within The War" is more frenetic, but still holding true to the overall rhythm and feel of the song (a bit more flute, perhaps here, and percussion is punchier, reflecting the concussions of war. It has the odd effect of having a toe-tapping rhythm and sing-along-able chorus while the lyrics paint a grim picture. Even the parpy (neo-proggy?) keyboards at the 13-14 minute mark all fit in within the fabric of the track. The bucolic atmosphere of "After The War" serves not only to bring us back to the beginning to reflect on Amy's innocent beginnings (read the bio), but also, perhaps, a certain peace after death... she is recalling that same innocent youth...

Contrast Amy's selfless story with Jorgen's selfish story - they are opposites... Jorgen using religion as pretext for preying on those with next to nothing and Amy risking her life to tend to and save soldiers, no matter who they were, giving her life because of it.

Amy, in this narrative, is linked to the family through her husband (a war correspondent who also died during the war), Earnest Horden (they had three children). Earnest's brother Robert also had three children, one of whom was Diana Holden, who was murdered in 1922 (and as told in *Anser's Tree*. Her death bequeathed her belongings to Peter Horden, Earnest's son, and the father to our next character, Harriet Horden, a nightclub singer in 1930s New York...

Shifting gears from "A Perfect Childhood," we get tinkly piano jazz in "A Night At The Savoy, 1933 (Harriet Horden)." You can almost visualize the setting... a dimly light night club, where an amber light illuminates the room from sconces on the wall and flickering candles on the tables; an intimate club.** It's a bit melancholy, this track, but then we're talking Depression-era, and so, although perhaps the music didn't always reflect times, this night at the Savoy, it did. There comes a point, where guitar comes out of the mix quite startlingly. Not with any bombast, just that it becomes very much the focus, in this torchy, bluesy tune. There's lots of brass, especially towards the end. It's a very nice track, with some sweet lead vocals from Julie King, and nice harmonized vocals from the band.

So, from Depression-era New York, we travel to the 1940 and World War II for "An Average Man (James Fairfax)." Here's where, in the story, we see an ordinary man, as the bio tells us. How is he connected to the family tree? I *think* his mother Rachel is the daughter of Winston and Victoria Horden; she married and had three children (yes, like in Macbeth, everything comes in threes... ok, if you study the tree, some only had two...), one them being James.

The track is anything but ordinary ... that is, it's not dull 4/4 or anything. Like the character it sings about, there is something very orderly about it, the pace is tight. It's not exactly martial, but there is slightly percussive element to the pulsating keyboard phrases. Keyboards or various types are always at the forefront. At one point, a sparkly piano frills arcs across the main rhythm; later we get a more off-kilter piano note, that kind of throws in a bit of chaos to James' orderly life. That represents the character's being drafted into the service, and his desire to not to be forgotten -- he visits Scotland where Margaret had lived and planted a tree near her cottage, planting, as it were, his

spot in the family lore. It is a track that at first seems light, but as it progresses the atmosphere gets increasingly dark. Young James dies in the war at age 23... well, how different is that from nearly everyone else in this family tree? I mean, who here hasn't died tragically? That was a common occurrence in *Answer's Tree* as well. On the other hand... people do often die tragically, so...

On the other hand, there's James' sister Amelia, an agent of the O.S.S. (precursor to the CIA). So, while she was doing a great deal to be recognized for as she helped the Allies, she had to keep her anonymity. As Manning tells it, Amelia was a carefree individual (I pictured, by the way, Katherine Hepburn, who was rebel herself... if you read the bio, you'll see why I say that). So, as you'd expect, "Black Silk Sheets Of Cairo (Amelia Fairfax)" is energetic, a swirling mix throaty guitars and trilling flute, but it's heavy. Not metal-heavy, but... like a thick blanket heavy... thick, I guess, in a very positive way. Frankly, this is when I thought of Jethro Tull mostly, despite its decidedly middle-eastern flavor. And it's down to the chugging, throaty guitars that recall, at least to me, "Hymn 49," as I mentioned above. Not the whole track, as we later get a wheeling keyboard solo that seems to spin off into chaos at any moment. It's a dense piece, with lots of elements including closely spaced, resonate, and harmonized voices, with Manning's in the forefront.

And then we come to a one of the best pieces on the album -- which is saying something, since all of them are wonderful -- "The Southern Waves (David Logan)". It begins with a "simple" piano phrase and vocals, fragile yet resonant. As the canvas of this track unfolds, within short order a cello joins in, then flute. And unfold is apropos to this song, in two senses, as it truly grows and expands, it subtle and not so subtle ways. And, there's a fab guitar solo here - one those where notes just ring out, soar, swoop and dive. This one is carefree, like a bird flying overhead (seagull perhaps)*** - while tonally it does not, you can put this in the classic Rothery/Gilmour class of guitar solos (and if you've been following my "story so far," you know how love me some Rothery or Gilmour solos. Exultant... epic...very cool.

Also, Logan (or, as the bio says "Professor" Logan), is a man of the sea. You know, it sounds nothing like "Sailing," but it does, at times, give you that same sense of being on the open water (and at some point, yes, the line "the canvas can do miracles..." came to mind (can you spot where?). It is Logan, whose love of the sea leads him to further studies of "weather patterns and natural phenomena..." as Manning tells us. That leads him to a theory, prompted by severe weather events of 2010 and 2011... events that that came to pass later, after his passing in 2022.

There was a moment on this track that reminded me a bit of the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields" - a particular passage where everything seems to inhale/exhale like the organ passage that begins "Strawberry Fields." As another indicator of how layered this release is, like sunlight glinting off the waves, there is a very subtle shimmery keyboard effect that appears during passages between vocal sections.

Musically engaging. If we were to review this album in a broad stroke, it would be simply that, musically engaging. It's definitely one of Manning's best releases. And I find that amazing for someone who releases an album a year; you'd think music this well thought out would take a lot longer to pull together, so that alone says something about Manning as a composer.

**funny, that sounds like I'm talking about the soft-drink/soda pop Sprite. Ha! Product placement!*

***Looking online at some pictures of the Savoy, it was much larger than my description above, as there was a dance floor.*

****ooh, I said that about seagulls, not even remembering there's on the fabulous artwork (back cover). Artwork again by the amazing Ed Unitsky.*

Tracklisting:

The Year Of Wonders (Fleming Barras (1645 - ???)) (9:49) / Revelation Road (Jorgen Barras (1834 - 1900)) (5:11) / A Perfect Childhood (Amy Quartermaine (1862 - 1916)) (17:05) / A Night At The Savoy, 1933 (Harriet Horden (1912 - 1955)) (5:05) / An Average Man (James Fairfax (1922 - 1945)) (6:31) / Black Silk Sheets Of Cairo (Amelia Fairfax (1926 - 2010)) (7:58) / The Southern Waves (David Logan (1967 - 2022)) (8:47)

Musicians:

Guy Manning - acoustic 6, 12 and classical guitars, electric guitars, bass, drums, keyboards, samples, bouzouki, mandolins, FX, percussion, lead and backing vocals

Chris Catling - electric guitars and backing vocals

Kev Currie - electric guitars, guitar synth and backing vocals

Steve Dundon - flutes

Kris Hudson-Lee - basses

Julie King - backing vocals; lead vocals (4)

Tim Leadbeater - grand piano (4,7) / electric piano solo (1)

Guests:

Ian "Walter" Fairbairn - fiddle

Kathy Hampson - cello

John Kennard - backing vocals, darbuka and drum program consultancy

Mark Woodward - additional violin

Marek Arnold - clarinet, alto, soprano and tenor saxes (courtesy of Toxic Smile)

Leon Camfield - various percussion items (courtesy of Tinyfish)

Phideaux (as the MC at the SAVOY)

Added: March 10th 2012

Reviewer: [Stephanie Sollow](#)

Score: ★★★★★

Artist website: www.guymanning.com

Hits: 36

Language: english