

MANNING - MARGARET'S CHILDREN REVIEW for Sea of Tranquility

The twelfth album from Manning proves that one time The Tangent multi-instrumentalist and long-time solo/band artist Guy Manning shows no sign of slowing his output. In fact Manning have now reached the dozen mark of albums in a baker's dozen of years! Thankfully the other thing that *Margaret's Children* ably demonstrates is that the quality of the albums also continues to get better and better as every year passes by. Reaching back to the band's 2006 album *Anser's Tree* for inspiration, this new effort continues the theme shown on that previous release, with all of the songs telling the story of members from the family tree of Dr Jonathan Anser. Storytelling really is Manning's forte, with the opportunity to roam through time via the varied characters who are lovingly described, being used to great musical and lyrical effect.

The album is brought to life with the lengthy, but wonderfully catchy, "The Year Of Wonders", where flute, fiddle, acoustic guitar and tambourine signify that we are heading back to the 1600's for the first tale on the album. The vibe is gently progressive, with the wonderful arrangements allowing the separate instruments to weave challenging paths, while all coming together in complete sympathy. The flute contributes a floating breathe of air to the more organic fiddle stabs, however what really catches the ear are the constantly driving drums and the irresistible chorus vocals, with which you will be singing along immediately. The song is up-tempo, but in a way where the music still sounds relaxed and unhurried, although I have to say that the little drum fills and flurries were the aspect that really kept me hooked, causing me to play air-drums every time the sticks power round the kit. Telling the tale of Jorgen Barras, "Revelation Road" takes a different approach to its predecessor, bobbing along on a languid beat that allows the acoustic guitar to sit on a relaxed riff that simply draws you into the song. This time it is the vocal orchestration that keeps you enthralled, as the variety of voices shout, chant, sing and holler against each other, before a searing guitar solo cuts through the insistent hand-claps to great effect.

From there we are off to the album's central, epic piece, with "A Perfect Childhood" combining all manner of approaches, themes and ideas for a thoroughly spell-binding seventeen minutes. Again the variety of more traditional instruments which jostle with the guitar, vocals and drums, results in a song that refuses to let your attention wander. This time colour is added by a tactful slice of saxophone, which dances about the flute and vocals. As with the rest of the songs on *Margaret's Children*, the really impressive thing is just how cleverly and subtly the hooks are introduced. There are simply so many little individual moments that you just can't wait to come round and unlike most progressive rock albums, most of the album is a genuinely sing along occasion, but never in a cheesy way. The bluesy jazz of "A Night At The Savoy, 1933" may prove to be little too laid back for some, but a sumptuous Peter Green, "Albatross" like guitar solo pulls everything back together again - although on the first few listens this song can be rather under whelming. "An Average" man steers things back onto a more expected path, although the melancholic subject matter and music makes this a pleasantly unsettling listen. James Fairfax is the member of the family covered in this song, with his routine life of work and attending football seemingly heading nowhere, before his Second World War call-up papers bring him to reality. A visit to the family home in Scotland, finds Fairfax planting a sapling next to Margaret's Cottage, where the tree grows to symbolise family, connection and self realisation. James however never gets to see the tree come to fruition, as he is killed in action during the battle of Berlin in 1945 - his ashes being scattered under the tree that he planted just a few years before.... Musically the song conveys the change from happy go lucky through realisation and ultimately the senseless loss of life in a deep, dark, sympathetic manner. Before "Black Silk Sheets Of Cairo" follows James' sister Amelia as she works for the OSS (forerunner of the CIA during the war) in Cairo, with the Eastern feel the title suggests being fully realised.

"The Southern Waves" closes the album out in scintillating fashion, with a variety of woodwind, voices and keyboards creating an atmospheric, emotional song that builds and builds. Flute once more takes centre stage, before the drums punctuate with sharp snaps and

rolls, although the guitar solo, courtesy of Chris Catling, which closes the album is simply stunning.

As with all Manning albums, you know that to fully appreciate the depth and intricacy of what has been created you are going to have to invest some quality time to the songs it contains. Cleverly however there are some more obvious, quick fixes that ensure that even early run throughs provide reward. However, as your familiarity with *Margaret's Children* grows, so will your fondness for them, both through their interesting lyrical stories and the wonderful, truly captivating musical accompaniment.

Track Listing

1. The Year Of Wonders
2. Revelation Road
3. Perfect Children
4. A Night In The Savoy 1933
5. An Average Man
6. Black Silk Sheets Of Cairo
7. The Southern Waves

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Reviewer: Steven Reid

Score: ★★★★★