

Manning "Charlestown"

by Paul Baker (ARFm Soundscapes Radio)

The new album from Manning is an excellent blend of musical styles all with the 'Manning' signature. Not for this brave band a gradual build up to the epic track, no, here you're straight into the tale of 'Charlestown'. The track evokes the full gambit of musical emotion, drama, despair, anticipation and triumph.

'Charlestown' is a thirty five minute adventure on the high seas of progressive music, superb Hammond, rousing flute, different guitar textures and this is a song that does tell a tale, the lyrics and emotion in the vocals adds to the overall feel of an amazing song, you will find yourself singing along to sections of this splendid opus.

'Charlestown' is a long track, but it doesn't feel like a long track, the song doesn't meander for the sake of it, it tells the story and delights the musical ear all through the journey, close your eyes, listen and enjoy the adventure.

'Caliban & Ariel' by contrast is gentle and less complex sounding, but no less absorbing. Gentle orchestration and layered vocals all blend to form a beautiful track.

'The Man in the Mirror' is what I would class as a 'classic' Manning track; again the lyrics are part of the musical portrait painted to delight the ear. The signature 'sax' adding to the overall sound.

'Clocks' brings to the table yet another set of thought provoking lyrics wrapped in a gentle melody that builds and throws you headlong into a catchy chorus that pulls you further into the music, but somehow doesn't lose the overall slightly melancholy feel. Melodic and graceful, this track adds another dimension to the overall feel of the album.

Now, a Manning album wouldn't be a Manning album without a track that makes you go, "what?" 'Charlestown' is no exception, when the almost 'reggae' beat of 'T.I.C' kicks in, it certainly got me listening. Don't fear, it soon evolves into a catchy, foot-tapping workout of splendid complexity while remaining totally accessible. Some nifty guitar with a blues edge works wonderfully well in this track, not forgetting the sax & flute.

Just when you thought it could get any better, 'Finale' comes along. An instrumental from start to finish, (is this a first for Manning? I think it might well be.) 'Finale' brings back some musical themes from the title track, but this is Manning so don't expect a bland 'copy', oh no, reworked, revamped and with some extras thrown in, this is another amazingly complex but absorbing slice of modern progressive rock that you will find yourself whistling, air keyboarding and air guitaring along to!

To sum up, for this listener (and fan), this is probably the most 'complete' album that Guy and his band have put together. All of the pieces fit together so well, but there is still the variety and challenge to the 'norm' of music by numbers that Guy puts into the music. Never one to do the same thing twice, Guy has put together what I firmly believe is his best album yet.