

Manning - Charlestown



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If it's October, it's a sure bet the air will get more of a chill, the leaves will continue their autumnal turn, and Guy **Manning** will release another album. And it was certainly true this past October, when **Charlestown** was released.

Charlestown is comprised mainly of the epic title track -- a tale of tall ship at sea, being knocked about in a storm, and managing to make it back ashore. That brief synopsis, of course, doesn't describe the detail with which Manning (the band) illustrate this tale. I don't say epic lightly -- it's a full 35 minutes in length and takes you on a musical journey, incorporating prog rock, Celtic and orchestral textures. At times, in the early part of the voyage, it seems as if the guitars, light and breezy, have channeled Steve Howe (Yes), as they chase and are chased by the keyboards (this observed in the opening two movements -- "Intro" and "Starting Out."). In as much as Manning (the man) has been a progressive rock artist, here at least, that prog rock element is more pronounced, in the use of keyboards that reference, at varying times, ELP and The Moody Blues, as does the swirling flute. By reference, I mean incorporate a similar tonal quality rather than replicate any particular phrase. Of course, a certain nod to Jethro Tull is never far (about 14-minutes in, actually, with "Passed The Wreckers"* -- and I don't just mean the oft mentioned (to ad nauseum) Andersonian vocal tones of Manning himself. It's bedrock of folk that underpins Manning's compositional style, although here, it's of Tull's rockier edge we are reminded. As we have come to expect, there is also the presence of some fine saxophone work -- this time supplied by Alison Diamond.

The rocking outro of "Wreckers" (at the 20-minute mark), leads us into the resonant, mellow organ lead interlude "Before The Storm." It's simple, even as it's joined by an orchestral bed of softer keys and a sweetly singing fiddle. You can imagine, mainly because of the context, of sailing on almost glass smooth water -- the merest ripple tinged by reflected light..and then the heavens break open ("Maelstrom") and the storm hits with the rumble of drums; the pelting of heavy, distorted guitars and then screaming keyboards. Once it really gets going, it is a rocking section that both grooves and soars and lasts far too short a time.

The mellow organ/orchestral passage returns to take full flight with "The Tidal Bore" and "Outro." It's a lovely, soaring passage -- flutes, harmonized vocals, and orchestral flourishes. It concludes the epic tale satisfyingly, triumphantly. That sweet feeling we get when we have finally returned home, having been away and not sure we'd get there. As Manning himself has said, *Charlestown*, is a more challenging release than in the past -- I think that is true for both performer and listener. Challenging doesn't mean difficult, in terms of the latter. But unlike, for example, *Number Ten*, or some of Manning's earlier works, there isn't here in "Charlestown" that same immediacy. It's a track that will require more than even a few listens to really appreciate.

Charlestown the album contains a further five tracks, and all have varying kinds of sadness -- a counterbalance to the mostly happy ending to "Charlestown" perhaps; although no one survives that trip unscathed in some way (3 of the crew lose their lives). This quintet of unrelated tracks begins with the reserved, mellow "Caliban and Ariel," a fairytale light track with a dreamy atmosphere of a fleeting moment between the two titular characters. I say unrelated, but that is only in story - we have here waterside imagery with the pair dancing in the sand, and, of course, the two characters are from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, and that tempest -- storm -- lures a ship to shore. I won't detail the play here; I'll leave that to you to read on your own... "The Man in the Mirror" is an at times jazzy (soprano sax), at times like a Celtic reel (fiddle, guitar) piece -- rather sad, it is, and, if my reading of it is correct. Lyrically, it has the feel of another classic fairytale, but it takes a different slant than you'd expect. No one lives happily ever-after. "Clocks" is also a rather sad piece -- taken literally, the spirit (ghost) of protagonist has one last fleeting glimpse of the one he loves, longs for more, but time has run out. Like the other two tracks, this takes a mellower tack than "Charlestown," and from the track that follows, "T.I.C.," a rocking, poppy, toe-tapping track with a country twang and 50s-rock vibe -- except for the parpy, chirpy keyboards of the interlude, which later includes dueling guitar solos. Cool stuff, fun stuff -- infectiously upbeat.

The album closes with the "Finale (Instrumental)" -- I'd say it's wearing some of its prog influences on its sleeve, given the somewhat ELP-ish organs; but add in flute, throatier keyboards, and a wide assortment of other sound textures -- percussion, guitars, etc. and it's really hard to say just what Manning was thinking (or rather, of whom he was thinking). It all flows well together and doesn't sound chaotic (as not all the mentioned elements are happening simultaneously). It's spirited and upbeat.

Is *Charlestown* Manning's best album yet? Oh, even for me I think it's too soon to say that. It's definitely on par with his best stuff. It seems tighter, despite the epic-length track; more focused. Manning fans will certainly not be disappointed and will walk away with greater or equal respect for Manning as a musician. It's a darn good album.

Of course, the chill and turning leaves is only true for the Northern Hemisphere, as it'd be summer in Southern.

*while I hate to footnote, the tangent (no pun) I must go on, is that here, I recall a song Billy Joel did some years ago now, "The Downeaster 'Alexa'" from *Storm Front* - the comparison is that Manning here makes comment on the rough life that the sailors of these ships have; Joel sang about the harder life the shrimpers on the US East Coast were having... I might also note here, since I mention the US East Coast, where there's also a Charlestown, in Boston, Manning is singing about the town in Cornwall, in South-Western England.

Tracklisting:

Charlestown (35:09) / Caliban And Ariel (2:57) / The Man In The Mirror (6:26) / Clocks (4:27) / T.I.C. (5:14) / Finale (Instrumental) (7:14)

Musicians:

Guy Manning - acoustic 6, 12 and classical guitars, keyboards, electric guitars, mandolin, bouzouki, bass, percussion, lead and backing vocals
Dave Albone - drums and percussion
Chris Catling - electric guitars and backing vocals
Kev Currie - electric guitars and backing vocals
Alison Diamond - soprano and tenor saxophone
Steve Dundon - flute
Ian "Walter" Fairbairn - fiddle
Kathy Hampson - cello
Kris Hudson-Lee - basses
Julie King - backing vocals

Discography:

Tall Stories For Small Children (1999)
The Cure (2000)
Cascade (2001)
The Ragged Curtain (2003)
The View From My Window (2003)
A Matter Of Life & Death (The Journal Of Abel Mann) (2004)
One Small Step (2005)
Anser's Tree (2006)
Songs From The Bilston House (2007)
Number 10 (2009)
Charlestown (2010)

Genre: Progressive Rock

Origin UK

Added: December 31st 2010

Reviewer: Stephanie Sollow

Score: ★★★★★