

Round Table reviews of "NUMBER TEN" from Sea of Tranquillity

REVIEW by DUNCAN GLENDAY

Number 10. Ten albums in Ten years, number Ten Downing street on the cover, and Ten out of Ten for an energy level and a production rate that would leave most artists breathless.

In a discussion with Guy, we opened by saying that "Guy Manning writes music with a purpose". His lyrics make sense, have depth and meaning, and we appreciated the fact that he avoids the esoteric cop-out that is so popular among his contemporaries. The songs in Number 10 stand alone, rather than converging on any central theme or concept. But they have sensible, audible lyrics and clear messages in common - with themes ranging from lost love through cynicism through romantic and philosophical introspection.

"An Ordinary Day" is a standout, celebrating the underestimated value of an ordinary day. It starts with vocals over a pastoral piano, and over its 6 minutes it swells gently with the introduction of more instruments, before it slowly fades into a gently receding piano line. Delicate, very pleasing, and a nice contrast to the upbeat, jaunty tone of many other tracks on this release. Another high point is the 10-plus-minute "A Road Less Travelled". A constantly developing piece that starts gently, builds up gradually, and about half way through it morphs into a rich, multi-layered wall of sound before easing up, and returning to its opening theme.

Himself a talented multi-instrumentalist, Manning has - as usual - recruited a more or less consistent list musicians who contribute tremendous depth and musicianship to the album. Thankfully, Laura Fowles's fluid sax is a Manning-constant, and his other guests provide electric guitars, backing vocals, bass, keyboards, fiddle, flute, tenor sax, soprano sax, bass clarinet, and drums. But that impressive array of instruments wouldn't work without skillful songwriting, and it is here that Manning excels. His music has always been characterized by strong melodies, clear references to the Genesis / Yes / VdGG era, a slightly jazzy edge, strong contributions by saxes, Hammonds and Synths, and his distinctive mid-range vocals. Number 10 continues in that tradition. Production standards are high courtesy in part of long-time collaborator and contributing keyboardist Andy Tillison (The Tangent, Parallel Or 90 degrees, and others), and 8 songs in 63 minutes yield a proggy average of nearly 8 minutes a track - plenty of time for each song to develop a distinct character, build its themes, insert rich instrumental bridges, and present the listener with a composition rather than just a song.

The only departure from Manning's regular one-a-year production rate stems from frequent comments - including those in the hallowed pages of Sea Of Tranquillity - about his year-end releases being too late to hit the annual "best-of" lists. Hopefully, Number 10 won't be too early - and will remain on reviewers' lists for the rest of 2009. Despite the timing issue, Manning has several entries in our annual best-of lists.

By all accounts Manning's live performances are memorable, and American festival organizers would benefit from his appearance west of the pond. Guy has a very dedicated, growing fanbase, which would easily justify that investment. Score: 4.5 / 5

REVIEW by DEAN PEDLEY

The cunningly titled Number Ten marks ten albums in ten years for the prolific Guy Manning and continues in the strong tradition of much of his previous output by proving to be a quality collection of well crafted songs delivered in his own inimitable style. Andy Tillison from Guy's other musical endeavour, The Tangent is once again on hand to provide co-production together with a virtual roll call of collaborators who all play their part in ensuring Number Ten is another worthy addition to the Manning catalogue. "Ships" provides a jaunty opening with some enthusiastic Hammond, smooth guitar work courtesy of David Million and sparkling sax from Laura Fowles. The up-tempo vibe is continued with "The Final Chapter" which effectively combines power and melody and is followed by a significant shift in mood with the stand-out "An Ordinary Day", both reflective and sincere with Guy's vocal conveying the emotion expressed in the poignant lyric.

"Bloody Holiday!" takes us on another sharp curve with a tongue-in-cheek look at the stresses that can be caused on a long haul flight and a subtle reference to 10cc's gem "I'm Mandy, Fly Me" sneaks into the lyric. Another song that works extremely well on all levels and also comes with the most infectious chorus on the whole album. Julie King adds her voice to the elegiac "Valentine's Night", a gentle duet which chills and soothes in equal measure. The first of the album's two epics is "The Road Less Travelled" which evokes the spirit of 70's Tull, the instrumental breakdown at the six minute mark building to a sweeping coda. The sax returns for the jazzy "Another Lazy Sunday" which has another direct lyric that will strike a chord with many. Finally the mesmeric "The House On The Hill" is a fifteen minute piece divided into four parts that has an exquisite vibe of tone and melody and is thoroughly captivating.

In our review of Songs From The Bilston House, the point was made that the timing of Guy's year end releases often meant they were overlooked for "best of" lists. There is no such chance that the same will happen with Number Ten which will undoubtedly feature prominently.

Essential listening.

Score: 4.5 / 5