



Manning's barbecue was disappointing.

Brood Awakening

Manning

Margaret's Children F2

As prolific as he is bluff, Guy Manning has built up a delightfully idiosyncratic back catalogue since 1999's *Tall Stories For Small Children*. Our chat with him in our January issue, *Prog 13*, said much about his practical approach to lyrics: he doesn't live on the street so won't 'do social comment'; last year's work *Charlestown* was simply inspired by a trip to that Cornish port. Perhaps it was only a matter of time, then, until he revisited one of his more fertile and inspired works: 2006's *Anser's Tree* was a raft of songs inspired by fictional characters linked throughout the centuries. Musically it crossed from prog's quainter pastures into its grittier backstreets, borrowing from Renaissance music, hey-nony English folk and 70s rock. Album 12, *Margaret's Children*, revisits some of the other characters emanating from the same family tree.

Again, there's copper-bottomed songcraft on display here. These people are lovingly placed into their musical worlds, and live and breathe. In *The Year Of Wonders* we meet Fleming Barras, a contemporary of Isaac Newton born in 1645, set to a soaring pop/rock tune with a throaty flute line and catchy chorus. *Revelation Road* is about a travelling preacher and rainmaker ripping off dustbowl farmers, and, with its big riff and backwoods fiddle, could be JJ Cale's *Cocaine* orchestrated by Steve Earle. With Mumford And Sons and The Arcade Fire taking folk to the masses, there's no reason this one couldn't get radio airplay.

Guy Manning's lovingly rendered

stories are set to some sublime playing by Manning

the band. Keyboardist/backing vocalist Julie King enlivens the evocative *A Night At The Savoy, 1933* with a sultry jazz vocal; Tim Leadbeater's grand piano and Marek Arnold's clarinet takes you right to that Depression-era club. The delight of *An Average Man* is in its quotidian details: the character watches football and likes a nice lamb chop, before war changes his fate. The proggiest moment, *A Perfect Childhood*, is the five-part story of a nurse during WWI (based on the real-life of tragic/heroic Nurse Edith Cavell). This mini-microcosm segues from the nostalgic, mandolin-led idyll of *Before The War*, then we're taken through the war and into its aftermath.

But it's the album's sweeping closer that's the clincher. From its lilting woodwinds to soaring guitar outro, *The Southern Waves* foreshadows the futuristic, drowned world of Dr Jonathan Anser in its sister album. The waves 'forge the child once held in Pangaea's arm/With Gaia's voice reshape the land, reshape our Earth.'

It's a cliché to compare Manning to Jethro Tull, and while the singer's Anderson-like delivery and the giveaway flute lines are here, there's also something of the spirit of a Robert Wyatt about this Guy. He really sells these tales, with an eccentric English spirit and unerring conviction. Wordy, heady, perplexing and joyous, *Margaret's Children* is an album to get lost in.

Grant Moon

