

Interview Guy Manning

**British multi-instrumentalist Guy Manning:
“I like my albums to be more than just songs”**

(December 2011, text by Henri Strik, edited by Peter Willemsen, pictures provided by Guy Manning)

For several years Guy Manning asked me if I would do an interview with him. After every new album I said I would love to talk to him, but there was always something that prevented me from doing so. With the release of his twelfth studio album *Margaret's Children* (see Manning Web site Press page) I finally managed to do what I had promised to do for such a long time. Guy certainly deserves this attention, because he certainly is one of the most underrated musicians in the progressive rock community. So finally here it is: the Guy Manning interview for Background Magazine!

Can you tell me please why you made a sequel to the Anser's Tree album? What's the story behind Margaret's Children?

Guy Manning: “Okay, let me start with the story first! There really is no linear narrative storyline concept in either album, that is, no storyline like in *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*, *Snow* or *Tommy*, but there is the container concept which is a concept that binds the songs together under one umbrella idea, like a single family or a house. The idea behind both albums is that this is one family and the songs are the stories about the characters in it. From

the earliest Margaret Montgomery set around 1600 in Scotland right through to Dr. Jonathan Anser in the near future. The loose storyline is that Dr. Anser is an archaeologist and is researching the roots of his own family digging at the spot where Margaret lived in Scotland. The world has suffered ecological disaster and the sea levels have risen. So this spot in the Highlands is one that is above water and can be excavated. However, each one of the stories in both albums, stands alone but there is some interdependence ... things that happen in one story may impact another. I'll give you some examples. If Fleming Barras on *Margaret's Children* (MC) had not inherited his great grandmother's (Margaret) trunk in *Anser's Tree* (AT), he would never have discovered his magical heritage! If William Barras (AT) had not died in the Wallsend mining disaster, his son Jorgen (MC) would never have



Guy Manning

gone to America to seek his fortune. If David Logan (MC) had not had a passion for climatology and sea studies, he would never have fired the obsession in his son Adam (AT). And there are still more interdependences for you to discover...

Why a sequel? I had some clear ideas for a couple of pieces, *The Southern Waves* and *A Night At The Savoy, 1933* and set about writing these, but how to use them on an album? I was talking it through with Julie (Manning's wife: Editor) and she said why not go back and revisit the earlier *Anser's Tree* album? So, we looked at the full Anser genealogical tree that we had created for that album and looked for likely characters. We soon found David Logan and Harriet Hordern. Then I looked at other characters there, their births and deaths and researched into events that would have been happening at those times so as to come up with the rest of the tales. Fleming Barras, for instance, lived around the same time as Sir Isaac Newton. I imagined the narrative storyline for Fleming and Isaac to meet, become friends but have opposing views on the nature of science and mysticism!"

Did Ed Unitsky create a cover based on the Anser's Tree especially for Margaret's Children?

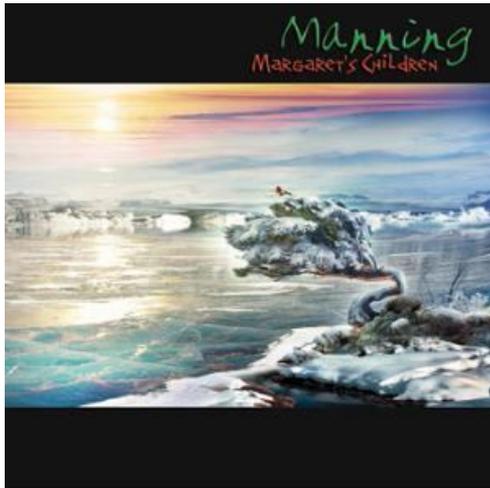
"Yes. Ed did the front cover on this one. I asked him to use his original *Anser's Tree* artwork, but to change the season from summer to winter. In this way again, the two albums are intrinsically linked and yet things have moved on ...spooky!"

Are all the people mentioned on both the albums fictional persons or did some of them really exist?

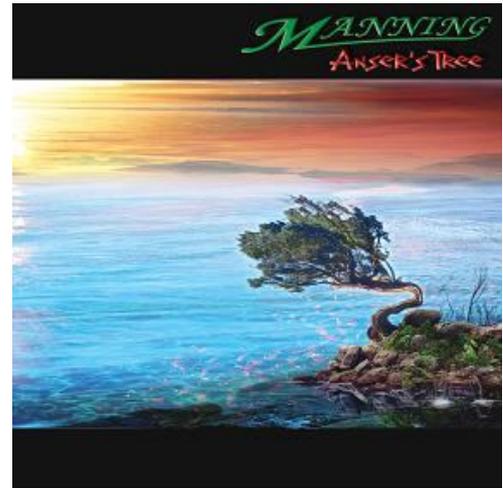
"Yes, all the people are fictional, however the name of William Barras was mentioned in the Wallsend Mining disaster information I researched for *Anser's Tree* and I used the actual real life story of nurse Edith Cavell as the basis for my Amy Quartemaine story on *Margaret's Children* and changing a few small details here and there to make it fit into my family tree. However, having worked with them all for so many years now... they all seem real to me! It's only by investing time into their backgrounds and context research that you can come to know these people and therefore be able to find the right words or images to tell their stories."

Do you think that lovers of prog rock music read the family tree on the inside of the booklet? How much work did it take to create such a tree?

"Yes I do, because I do! I love the old albums like *Thick As A Brick* where a lot of thought went into the artwork. It makes it all so much more interesting and absorbing for me and I hope for you too! The original *Anser's Tree* tree took a few days to conceive and work out in terms of lives, births, marriages, deaths and then Ed Unitsky drew up the original tree design to put them into place. With *Margaret's Children* all I had to do was bring it up to date with the new characters! I wish the artwork was bigger though. It's very small to read on a CD booklet! That's why there's a whole series of character biographies to read and the family tree blown up in PDF-format on my website www.guymanning.com"



Cover art Margarets Children



Cover art Anser's Tree

Did you use drum computers and sequencers on the album or real drums?

"I used Toontrack Superior Drummer 2 to create and program the drum parts into Cubase 5. I was helped out by John Kennard, who was our drummer at the time, to make these sounds more 'human'."

Once more you played almost all of the instruments yourself. I guess you play almost all the instrument in the world, don't you? You even played on the kitchen sink!

"There are plenty of instruments I can't play like the flute, clarinet, brass, violins and so on, but I can use samples of them! A whole load of kitchen utensils were played for me by **Leon Camfield** from **Tinyfish** under the electric piano solo in *Black Silk Sheets Of Cairo* ! Now that was a real fun session!"

Did you use a real Mellotron on the album?

"No, once again it's a virtual instrument, the superb M-Tron Pro by GMedia. But even an authentic Mellotron is just a tape sampler with a keyboard!"

I believe your latest release is more song-orientated than the older material. Do you agree?

"I believe all my material is song-orientated actually. If there's no real melody or hook under there then they don't get through! The only differences is the length of the songs and how complex they are or whether they are joined together to make suites I think."

Can we expect a follow-up album to Margaret's Children or is this the end of the story?

"I have been asked that question a lot! No, I think this album is the end. We should just turn around and leave the Anser family in peace."

Why doesn't Andy Tillison play Moog or Hammond parts on the new album like he did on previous releases?

"Andy played some keyboards on quite a few of the older albums, but not all the keyboards! Many times, people assume that Andy plays the keyboard parts whereas in truth, a lot of the keyboard playing was done by me... He just played the really hard bits. Andy is so busy with **The Tangent** now that I didn't want to bother him for the latest albums. Moreover I'm confident with the way the recent albums have been received. I can manage on my own. Andy may well come back and do some more guest work for me, but for now, we'll keep the two projects separate."

Your wife Julie King did some fine vocals on the album and also made the Anser's genealogical tree. How did the two of you meet?

"I met Julie in local Leeds band called **Through The Looking Glass** in the mid eighties when I joined as their keyboards player. We stuck together and yes, now I know her better as Julia Manning! She is a

talented singer and has provided me with great vocals for my stuff plus of course, a guest appearance on The Tangent's album *Not As Good As The Book*."



Left to right: Laura Fowles, Guy Manning and Julie King

Aren't you afraid of getting a writer's block someday since you have released so many albums? Are you already writing a new album while recording the current one?

"Of course I am, but it hasn't happened yet, so I choose not to dwell on it! Most years I get very grumpy about this time and say, that's it, I can't think of anything to write about, I've got no good ideas, but in the end the light comes on and I get down to work! I never write ahead; the process of the album takes me a year... In November and December I start writing songs and create rough demos. In January and February I tight up ideas and start to get other players involved. In March, April and May I record other people and guest appearances and in June, July and August I produce, arranging the artwork and so on. In September I send the music to the record label and get CDs off to the pressing plant. Finally in October or November the album is released and then I start all over again. I have not started the process yet for my thirteenth album as we may do a live album this year instead!"



Charlestown (see MANNING web site Press

page) is one of the few albums without a cover of Ed Unitsky. Do you agree that the artwork for this album has a strong resemblance with the cover of *Fragile by Yes?*

“In fact Ed only did the artwork for four of the twelve Manning albums!!

Charlestown was done by my daughter Rosie who also did the artwork for *Songs From The Bilston House*. When Rosie showed me her design for *Charlestown*, yes, it did occur to me that it was reminiscent of *Fragile* but, as Rosie had never seen any of Roger Dean's artwork, it was purely coincidence. I liked the cover she came up with and so we used it.”

It seems you always need to have a concept or a theme for an album. Why is that and can you explain the concept of albums as *A Matter Of Live & Death*, *One Small Step...*, *Songs From The Bilston House*, *Number Ten* and *Charlestown*?

“Well, I like my albums to be more than just songs! To me the music, the lyrics, the artwork and the idea behind it all are all very, very important in making up a Manning album. Also, I think quite smugly, that it's clever to come up with this sort of thing and so it gives me even more pleasure to surround the pieces with that context. Of the ones you mention here, only *A Matter Of Life & Death* is a real narrative concept album as I explained the term earlier. It tells the story of the character first created on *Tall Stories For Small Children*, which was the first Manning album, in the suite called *The Fall And Rise Of Abel Mann?*

This album simply takes that short story and explores it in far more detail, adding in events prior to and following those that were explored in the first suite. The basic story is that Abel Mann, the central character, starts his life full of drive, wonderful dreams and ambitions which ultimately consume him, driving all those around him away that care for him. Being isolated, he then starts to see omens warning him of his doom and feels he's being stalked by Death. Eventually driven mad by it all, he commits suicide by throwing himself off the ledge of a tall building. When he comes to, he sits in a warm comfortable library-like room at a large oak desk with a leather bound journal open before him. He understands that he has to write his own life story into the journal before he can leave this life behind and either go on to whatever awaits him next or to choose to be reborn in a new body. He chooses rebirth.

One Small Step... has no central concept at all to the album, but the main piece on it is the thirty-minute title track. The basic idea for that piece is that before we go off pushing into outer space, we should get our own house in order! Are we fit as a species to contaminate the universe with all our failings such as war, greed, violence, bigotry and so on, or should we learn to love each other more before we inflict ourselves on other alien races!

Songs From The Bilston House is a container concept album, see my explanation earlier. The songs all stand alone, like on *Anser's Tree* and *Margaret's Children*, but each song is set within a single room within the same old dilapidated house!

Charlestown again is not a concept album, but has a very large scale epic suite which tells of the voyage of a ship from Charlestown in Cornwall, England up to Bristol and the many things that befall the crew! Needless to say, things do not go smoothly for them! As far as the other Manning albums are concerned: *The Cure* is a full-blown narrative concept album dealing with the nature of perception and reality and madness but on a biblical scale!

Cascade is simply a set of diverse songs, *The Ragged Curtain* isn't a concept album, but has two large multi song suites on it and *The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell* is dealing with the lifecycle of a broken relationship and the title track which explore man's relationship with the sea and stone. *The View From My Window* isn't a concept album either, but contains a large epic *Suite: Dreams* which examines the nature of sleep and the subconscious."

In 2010 you reissued four of the older albums. Why did you do that?

"We had run out of original copies of the albums and we thought by releasing a slightly cheaper, re-mastered version of them with bonus tracks included, it would be good for keeping the music in the public eye. As an unknown artist, which is what I am really, I want my music to be heard and most people haven't heard a lot of my albums, so I wanted them to be still available!"

Why did you release most of your albums on different record labels like ProgRock Records, Cyclops and Festival Music?

"Well, mainly down to money and logistics! Cyclops gave me my first break into professional album releases, but ultimately as a small indie label couldn't afford to put all my albums out.

Progrock Records took up the next three albums and did a great job, but based out in the US, in San Diego I felt I need someone to work with a bit closer to home. Festival Music (F12) were very interested in helping me out and so we have now released our fourth album together!"

You seem to have a close connection with Andy Tillison. You both played in PO90 and The Tangent and he has been playing on several albums of yours. How did the two of you met?

"We have worked together and apart for over 25 years now! Andy ran a local



Guy Manning @ Rosfest 2010

recording studio where I ended up recording some radio sessions for the BBC. We soon found we had a lot in common when it came to the type of music we wanted to create, so we joined forces!"

Why did you leave PO90 and The Tangent?

"With PO90 I had to go abroad to work in Munich, Germany for a time and the band couldn't wait for me. Andy needed to get on with it, so understandably, I was replaced. This was just the jolt I needed to get down and start writing *Tall Stories*, though!"

With The Tangent it was the right time to do it, both projects were competing for my time and I felt I wasn't contributing as good a quality to The Tangent albums as was needed because of the constraint of time and deadlines. So something had to give up and I love my work more. It was sad to go, but the correct thing to do."

Your music is often compared to Jethro Tull due to your voice that sounds like Ian Anderson, but also because of the use of the flute in your music. Do you ever get sick and tired of these comparisons?

"Yes! If you go on YouTube there are some fantastic Tull tribute bands like the **DayGlo Pirates** for example where the singer really sounds like Ian Anderson! Me? I have a similar timbre and vocal range to Ian and that's all! The real 'problem' is that I happen to love Jethro Tull! When I got a chance to get **Steve Dundon** to play the flute on the albums - Steve has worked in Tull tribute bands and in the **Mick Abrahams Band** - he was always going to reinforce that view of me as a Tull clone! And I'm not! Yes, there are places where the music sounds similar to Tull, okay, but equally others sound like **Roy Harper, The Strawbs, Camel, Al Stewart** or **Caravan** and a lot of my other influences."



Steve Dundon and Guy Manning

How is the 'view from your window' (a title of one of Guy's solo albums, edt)?

"A bit foggy and rainy today, but metaphysically it's very good, thanks for asking."

"I'm optimistic about 2012 for the band and some big festivals and other opportunities await us there."

"We want more though so all you promoters out there please ask us!"

Do you think yourself that you're one of the most underrated musicians in the progressive rock community? I certainly think you are. Is there anything that might change that?

"Well, that isn't my place to say, really as I may come across vain, but I'm certainly quite unknown given the amount of albums I have produced. Do I think I deserve a bigger audience? Well, yes... I do hope so, but I can't make you all listen to it and there are many bands out there competing for the same ears! All I ask is that you all give my music a little time to bed in, don't judge too quickly and I think it will pull you in!"

Can we soon expect a live CD or DVD and what are your plans for the future?

"Yes, every year now I say we are overdue doing a live album! I think it's the prospect of actually having to lay out quite a hefty up front investment and get shows recorded and filmed that frightens me really. Plus the task of the post show editing and mixing that goes into making a DVD! Phew! I watched Andy do *Going Off On One* and saw just how much effort it took to do it! But I must bite the bullet at some point and 2012 may well be the year. We now have a great live band and lots and lots of songs from twelve critically well-received albums and a growing profile!"

Guy, thank you for answering my questions!

"No problem, thanks for asking!"