

Manning: Charlestown

The beautiful Dean-esque cover art, reminiscent of Yes's "Fragile", should leave you under no illusions: you are sailing to the land of Progressive Rock!

Sailing, in the context of this brilliant new album from Manning, is a very appropriate word, as the 35-minute title track tells the tale of a perilous cargo journey along the English coast during the 18th century.



Emboldened by the success of his band at RosFest, Guy Manning has produced one of the bravest and most stunning pieces of music that has graced the rock world for some time. Progressive rock it may be, but it is a genre-busting composition courtesy of the lightness and symphonic complexity that Manning has built into the piece. Eschewing the trend of his peers, which is tending to heavier music in the (elusive?) search for larger audiences, he has produced a timeless, classic piece in the greatest traditions of English maritime music-making. Don't get me wrong – this is a progressive rock piece for sure, and it does "rock out" *when the story-telling dictates it*. There are also folk and classical elements: Manning's band includes a violinist, cellist, saxophonist and flautist and these textures, as well as modern keyboards, bring great beauty, depth and subtlety to the composition. The orchestration is superb. There are wonderful moments of melodic beauty. This sea-faring adventure is recounted just as well through the music – indeed, some sections are purely instrumental – as through the lyrics.

The composition is constructed in several seamless sections, as the stages of its journey develop: the ship meets both wreckers – who attempt to run the ship aground and steal the cargo – and storms before, having suffered significant loss of life, it finally arrives at its destination. One of the strengths of the composition is how the instrumental textures are able to evoke various images of the sea and the journey; in this way *Charlestown* continues a great tradition in English music-making through the ages. Of course, such an English sea-faring theme treated at such length demands that there will be elements of folk music within the composition and they are there, well integrated. Throughout, Manning's ear for melody is sharp and he delivers some great ones, none more so than the beautiful melody at the denouement of the story, releasing the tension in classic fashion. It makes your hairs stand on end, it is so beautiful.

"Charlestown", on its own, is worth the price of this CD several times over.

In order to create such beautiful music, Manning are not a small band: there are seven band members and three guests appearing on *Charlestown*. Composer Guy Manning plays acoustic, 12-string and classical guitars, keyboards, electric guitars, mandolin, bouzouki, bass and percussion, as well as being the lead vocalist and adding harmonies. Busy man! Joining him in the band are: Kris Hudson-Lee (bass), Kevin Currie (electric guitars and backing vocals), David Albone (drums, percussion), Chris Cattling (electric guitars and backing vocals), Julie King (backing vocals) and Stephen Dundon (flutes). Adding those additional musical textures are: Ian "Walter" Fairbairn (violin), Kathy Hampson (cello) and Alison Diamond (soprano and tenor saxes).

But back to the album....

Of course, following up such a composition on the album is difficult, given its brilliance and the emotional investment the listener has made in the piece; virtually anything that follows is likely to break that spell. However, Manning do succeed remarkably well in doing this: "Caliban and Ariel" has the requisite lightness and grace, as well as instrumental textures to make it an excellent choice as the follow-up piece. Its catchy chorus keeps the listener in Manning's web.

"The Man in the Mirror" keeps a similar feel going and again delivers a very catchy chorus, as well as a folky, Fairport Convention-like break towards the end. The Hammond playing on this is delightful. It's the catchiest song on the album, in days gone by it an edited version may well have been a hit single. "Clocks", with its beautiful flute, maintains the musical cohesion and, once more, Manning delivers a very catchy melody for the chorus.

These three tracks follow "Charlestown" about as perfectly as one could wish for, maintaining a satisfactory musical synergy. However, the last two tracks, whilst very good in themselves, depart from that cohesive album "feel" that has been established. "T.I.C" is rockier and is infused with a gentle waft of blues. The instrumental final track, "Finale", despite its thematic links back to "Charlestown" motifs, has a jazzy vibe that departs from the musical feel of the opener. What happens as you listen to these final two numbers is that the magic bubble of "Charlestown" is popped and you re-enter the real world; the realisation dawning that you have experienced something rather special.

The issue of album dynamics is insufficient to dock any rating points from what is surely one of the albums, if not *the* album of the year. Time will tell.

Track Listing:-

- 1) Charlestown (35:10)
- 2) Caliban and Ariel (2:58)
- 3) The Man in the Mirror (6:26)
- 4) Clocks (4:28)
- 5) T.I.C. (5:14)
- 6) Finale (7:17)

Added: November 6th 2010

Reviewer: Alex Torres

Score: ★★★★★