

Manning: Charlestown

Posted by **Steven Reid, SoT Staff Writer** on 2011-01-05 15:21:27

My Score: ★★★★★

Come with me on a voyage across stormy seas where the perils are many and the rewards great. That's what Guy Manning is asking you to do with his wonderful *Charlestown* album, which is bold enough to begin with a thirty five minute epic (from which the album takes its name), that is superbly paced, both in terms of having a genuinely interesting and involving concept and the instrumentation which is allowed to ebb and flow through the stormy waters in a manner that brings an unhurried and poised elegance to proceedings. The story covers tall ships sailing during 1700 and 1800's with goods and cargo around the perilous seas that surround the English coast. That may not sound exactly riveting, but the subject matter is perfect for the atmospheric, sometimes brash, often subtle, but never less than engrossing music that it is surrounded by.

There's no doubt that with such a weighty opener that we are deep into progressive territory, but to Manning's credit, the band use that lengthy time to bring an evolution to the song that has it altering and maturing through a variety of styles and vibes. The use of saxophones and cello, violin and flute broadens the pallet of colours on display in a track that evokes everyone from Yes to Fairport Convention, or Jethro Tull to ELP and a whole lot more besides. The whole song is built on a deeply set percussive groove that builds the roots from which all the instruments sprout and blossom through the folky, jazzy, progressive mix, over which the vocals of Guy himself dance lightly, without ever breaking the spell the music creates. The only word that really adequately describes all of this is stunning, simply stunning. This is progressive music as it should be, considered and skillfully planned, but loose and flowing in execution to the extent that if it wasn't obvious by how all the passages, moods and vibes knit together that this has been toiled over for a considerable time, you could believe that some of it was jammed in the studio.

So how do you follow an epic song that verges on being a masterpiece? Well the answer is not easily and so it ever so slightly proves. Now before I go on, let me say that if the five songs on this disc had made up an entirely separate album, I would be raving about it, however after the glorious sea faring tale they follow, none of the subsequent songs quite live up to their lengthier sibling. Don't be put off though, as the standard remains remarkably high through the short, piano and strings based "Caliban And Ariel" and the slowly building folk burst of "The Man In The Mirror". "Clocks" continues that vibe, with strings and flute taking the main melody lines in a wonderfully restrained song that resists the temptation to ever really up the tempo, before "T.I.C." brings another glorious groove into view, with flute and sax this time vying for supremacy. "Finale" sets our course back into the same vibe as the title track of the album and benefits from the same poise and pacing that makes "Charlestown" the stunning work that it is. It bookends the album very well, but I can't help but wonder if possibly having this track follow straight on from the opening song and maybe even having the other five songs on a second disc wouldn't have improved the flow of an already fantastic set. Either way, this is nit-picking and shouldn't in any way deter anyone who loves progressive rock from buying what is a wonderful album.