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All aboard! Shot exclusively for Prog at Electric Heritage Railway, Manning starts making tracks.

Station To Station

Guy Manning is a busy man. Not only has he made contributions to The Tangent's impressive oeuvre, he's produced one critically acclaimed album per year for the past 14 under the **Manning** banner. As he releases the latest, he takes us on a tour of *The Root*, *The Leaf & The Bone*...

Words: Rachel Mann **Images:** Stuart Wood

"**T**his is album number 14, which I suppose is a milestone in its own right. Most of the bands I grew up listening to quit after five, sensible fellows that they were." After such an output, he might be forgiven for becoming complacent, but he's determined to carry on pushing the boundaries, suggesting: "Well there are a number of differences between this one and the back catalogue, but there again I say that about every album. It's a conscious decision to try not, wherever possible, to repeat myself. Though I'm not trying to make *In The Wake of Poseidon* on the back of *In The Court Of The Crimson King*! What I'm trying to do is look at a different way of arranging, a different balance of instruments" 

each time. There's far more of what I call larger brass arrangements (courtesy of saxophonist Marek Arnold) on this album."

Manning is also unafraid of large concepts, having told fictional family stories on albums like *Anser's Tree* and *Margaret's Children*. He explains how conceptually *The Root* differs from them: "To me there are two types of concept albums. There's the linear narrative conception like *Tommy* and then there's the container album like *Dark Side* or, in my case, *Anser's Tree* where each song is the person in a family. On this one, I had a concept

a sound. I don't have to write to a formula. Hence I'm able to put a folk ballad next to a reggae number next to some really pompous, overblown thing with mellotron popping out everywhere. It depends for me on what the song deserves. The opening track, *The Root, The Leaf & The Bone*, is probably the most proggy on the album because it's the longest. But I don't write to length. When I wrote *Charlestown*, it ended up at 35 minutes and that's not because I sat down and went: "You know what? It's simply not long enough!" I just wrote it and it ended up at 35 minutes. With *The Root*,

Mysterious seventh member eyes his latest victim, erm, customer...



about a village that had faded away. It had been built over until there was nothing left. I started writing songs with that in mind. While writing, I thought this is very interesting, but it's not a very strong concept. There were songs on the album that didn't fit comfortably into the old hidden village. It became obvious that it was less to do with the village and more to do with change — the way that progress makes us question the past and anticipate the future. I don't say change is bad — nobody wants typhoid, and if I send a message I'd rather do it by email than by pony express — but when you go through change you lose something."

As ever Manning is unafraid to adopt a variety of styles, from bombastic prog to intimate folk, and even brassy pop. "There's everything on *The Root* from your standard rock line-ups to saxophones, bassoon, flute, fiddle, violas and all sorts, depending on the song. For me the song is the most important thing. Each song is an individual vignette. It comes with

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Guy Manning

it ended up at about 12. It's about geophysics — about digging below the surface, and as you travel down you pass the roots, leaves and bones, until you find whatever is waiting to be discovered underneath."

The impact and nature of change is a theme that runs through the new album. "There are songs that fit into what I call the 'village story' like *The Forge*, and songs like *Autumn Song* which is about change in terms of

natural seasons. It likens us to hedgerows where there are empty nests, and it uses an image of rural agriculture. In *The Forge* I talk about the loss of craftsmanship in terms of what we need in modernised commercial consumer society. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, to quote Spock! There's also a song called *Palace Of Delights* about one of those old shops where you go in the door and you look on the shelves and see Charles and Diana wedding mugs, Brillo pads, Ajax powder... an old James Bond Aston Martin DB5 still in its original Dinky box. Everybody has got their own palace of delights. It's a place where you invoke the past and you return to a simpler time."

The Root also features an interesting cast of special guests, including Chloe Herington from Knifeworld and John Young of Lifesigns fame.

"I think I scared them for life," suggests Manning with a chuckle. "I saw Chloe with Knifeworld at Summer's End and thought they were very original — a strange amalgam of Cardiacs-meets-Canterbury-meets-Henry Cow. I'd never heard anybody ask for more bassoon in the monitors before and I thought that was cool. I got a round of applause and I just had to ask to work with her. Chloe listened to the album and started sending me parts, and the *Autumn Song* bassoon really worked. It gave it a different sort of texture. Almost like tasting the wood."

"Working with John Young was very quick. The song *Old School* required an organ solo and I had several attempts at it with my fat fingers. I'm working on the dates for November with John and I said: 'I've got this bloody organ solo and it's terrible — you don't fancy having a go?' Within a couple of days he'd sent me back four variations on a solo all of which were better than mine. But there was one I particularly liked. He's the only one on the album for about sixteen bars, but it's a lovely solo."

"Then there's Ian Fairbairn on fiddle. He wants to play the guitar, but I won't let him because we've got plenty of guitarists. He's played for bands like Hedghog Pie and Lindisfame. He moans and groans every time he comes to the studio because I've always written in the wrong key for the fiddle. He comes in like Eeyore — but we always end up with stuff we can use. And it's great working with him. He's one of the old guard, and when we've finished I'll often ask him about Alan Hull and the old days."

Given that many artists struggle to produce decent albums even every couple of years, what is Manning's process and what drives him? "I actually like the writing process best. Everything else after that is boring.

I like writing and I like arranging. When I get to the point where I've got to produce it, that's when I start to despair and keep looking at my watch. I'm no George Martin or Trevor Horn. I'm not an objective producer who can look at something and stand back and hear the sound. But I self-produce because we've got no money. We're a small band with no finances. We've all got day jobs. So the natural process is for me to start getting bored around October and want to write songs again. I write songs up until about Christmas, have demos ready and then start to think about how the songs are going to go together on the album. Then I'll get anybody that's interested in helping out in the recording — the core being the live band — to have the first crack at it. I just write and fiddle endlessly in the studio with rhythms, guitar tracks, keyboards, whatever I can lay my hands on. Sometimes it's just a lyric, sometimes it's the title of the song. I'm like the artistic director so I put everything in and I start pulling things back out, and when I'm ready, starting building up from the bottom. Like building a house. From the drums and bass upwards."

Manning has been on the scene for a long time now, and might even be called a prog grandee. He's very clear about how tough it is to get an album out and grow an audience.

"We're not the Inside Out school. We're struggling artists who are underneath trying to get out. It's always difficult because our label Festival — supportive though it is — hasn't got the resources to give us the clout we need. Some of the songs are pretty good and deserve a bit more attention, and that would be down to promotion. We've got no money to go on big tours. The albums become newsworthy once a year when they're released and for five minutes you're in the spotlight. And you hope to make an impression, and then it's: "Thank you very much, who's behind door number two?" So you're always on that treadmill. But that's the world of the independent artist. Nowadays you can do what you like, but it's bloody hard to get anybody to listen. And who's got the time to listen to it anyway? A lot of kids have never bought an album in their life. I had to walk home without bus fare to get my Alice Cooper *School's Out*. I had to walk five miles to bring that album home so that I could love it. I sound like a grumpy old man! It's nice to be called a grandee of prog, but I don't think I am. I think I've been doing it a long time and I've got a certain amount of respect, but I don't have people breaking down doors to buy my next album. If you do 14, what happens is it becomes: "Oh it's November, it's time for another



Manning, bottom step to top — David Millon, Julie King, Aris Hudson-Cox, Martin Theobald, Guy Manning and Rick Henry.

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You Can Call Me Al
Guy tips his hat to Mr Al Stewart.



"I think everybody is the result of their influences," suggests Guy Manning. He acknowledges that Manning "got compared to a Jethro Tull tribute band," and there might be reasons for this ("I sing in the same timbre and register as Ian Anderson"). However, perhaps another figure is more influential on Manning's style: Scottish singer-songwriter Al Stewart. Manning notes: "I was equally interested in Stewart as I was in *Topographic Ocean*, *His Past*, *Present and Future* was a pivotal album because of its lyrical content. Here was a guy who was going away and doing research into characters, bringing them back, and because he'd done the research he didn't have to create this linear 'he said, she said, they did' song. He was able to just drop images in, and you pick up the sense of history on it."

While Stewart — whose most famous 70s album *Year Of The Cat* was produced by prog legend Alan Parsons — is often associated with soft pop rock, his work is rich in historical detail, including tales about Great War pilots and Soviet Russia. Manning notes: "His stories about Lord Fisher of the Admiralty and all the rest are based on solid research, and that was a lesson I took away from Al Stewart. His lyrical content is absolutely genius in places. As a melodic writer he's great. As an intricate arranger of songs you know he's not on the level of *Close To The Edge*. That's a completely different arena in terms of musicianship and arrangement skills. But to me there's no difference. They are different artists, but they're equally important to me." In the conception of work like *Margaret's Children* and the album based on rooms of a house, *Songs From The Bilston House*, Stewart's influence on Manning is writ large. **RM**

Manning album. I've often said I'd make more money as a tribute band playing my own material than I do as myself!"

Manning himself is unsure whether he's a progressive artist at all. "I think I have more in common with your Al Stewarts and Roy Harpers — I just happen to like writing elaborate arrangements. I think I'm more like *One Of Those Days In England* by Roy Harper — singer-based songs that are elaborately arranged. I don't see myself as competing with Spock's Beard or Magenta or even The Tangent, who are instrumentally far more complex than we are. I try and keep it simple wherever possible. And I work on trying to bring together textures of sound. When I do it right it's in the juxtaposition of different instruments and textures across a fairly decent melody, and something that lyrically I'm pleased with. I just think of myself as a songwriter. It would be nice to have a classic rock place for just 'songwriter'. That's probably where I'd be. In the old days I'd have probably gone and done the clubs like Paul Simon. But the opportunity came to write something on a larger scale, because the technology allowed it and I embraced it. I'm not displeased with what I've produced, but I'm not entirely comfortable with the progressive label."

As for the future of prog and his own place in it, Manning affirms: "There's a lot of bands out there, and the worst thing is there are a lot of good prog bands out there [laughs]. In the old days it was quite easy to see between the cream and the crap, but now bands are really good. Not a lot of them are wholly original — I think we're blending. I think the bands that did what they did in 1972 will not come again. I think that what you're getting now is absolutely beautiful blending under better technological circumstances."

"Is it as original? There are exceptions. Like your Knifeworlds. They produce something that makes you go: 'What on earth is that?' I don't think I'm wholly original. I sound like Al Stewart meets Genesis meets Tull. Sometimes I sound like John Martyn and sometimes I sound like fusion and sometimes I sound like Culture or Third World." ☺

Manning play Rotherham, 16 November and The Peel, Kingston on 17 November. *The Root, The Leaf & The Bone* is out now on Festival.