

A Review of Manning - The Root, The Leaf & The Bone by Imperial for (Progressive Ears) October 2013

"First of all, it was October, a rare month for boys", the opening line of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury. That line has lived with me through most of my life and it's one that's had particular relevance this year. Less than a fortnight ago I was listening to some great music in good company at the Summers End Festival in Lydney. Whilst there I was handed a copy of *The Tangent's, L'Etragere Du Travail*, by Andy Tillison himself and on my return home, through the mail, I received two new CDs – *North* by John Lee's Barclay James Harvest and *The Root, The Leaf & The Bone* by Manning. A rare month indeed and we're only half way through it!

Guy Manning has, over the last few years, become a particular favourite singer/songwriter of mine. He possesses a rare ability to tell musical stories in the most lyrical and expressive manner, one that breathes life into the subject matter of his songs. So, what of the new Manning release, *The Root, The Leaf & The Bone*? The album consists of nine songs that are loosely concerned with the concept of change – our place in history, our relationship with the natural world, memories of earlier times and the legacy we leave behind us. Each and every day we walk amongst our history, whether it's out in open view or buried beneath our feet. This album is Guy Manning's reflection on what that all means to us in an age where we rarely have chance to contemplate anything other than what we're doing at any given moment.

Helping Manning weave his tales on the album are, Kris Hudson-Lee on bass, David Million on guitars, Julie King on vocals and Rick Henry on percussion. There are several guest players, some long-term allies to Manning, who are often key to adding to the rich texture of the music on this album, particularly Steve Dundon on flute, Ian Fairbairn on fiddle, David Albone on drums, Marek Arnold on saxophones, Joss Allsopp on trumpet and Kathy Hampson on cello. Also, adding to Guy Manning and Kris Hudson-Lee's artwork and Kevin Brudenell-Maylin's photography is booklet art contributed by one Brian Watson – a lovely fellow, friend to many and a rapidly emerging artist!

To the music.....

The scene setter and also the longest track on the album is the title track, a wistful observation on the history that lies underground, beneath the root, the leaf and the bone, "hidden away, far below, impressions of the world we used to know, a veil now pulled over the surface in time, carved upon the stones and the water line". As one might expect from such a composition there's a mood of gentle reflection to the music through wispy flute and piano as we slowly lower ourselves, in *Alice in Wonderland* fashion, through memories of the past. It's not long, however, before we change gear and pick up the pace into a rockier section that drags us back to recent times and a perhaps less pleasant view of what we've replaced the past with in our modern world. A great opener, made all the better by a wonderfully evocative vocal performance by Manning.

Next up is *Decon(struction) Blues*, a more straightforward rock tune where Steve Dundon's flute kicks off a breezy protest song against our seemingly unavoidable need to clear the old out of the way to create the new. And that's our history gone! A storming full band number, showing off the contribution that Marek Arnold's saxophone playing (along with Joss Allsopp's trumpet), makes to this album. A lovely Million guitar break in this one, too.

Third track, *Autumn Song*, presents one of the key moments of the album, to my mind. Another more thoughtful piece, it deals with mortality and our relationship with nature. Manning sings of the apparent ease in which time passes but recognises that it's all part

of the natural flow for all living things, "We are all part of nature, we sing the same songs, rising in the morning, by evening we are gone, how easy for us to be born away." Before we start worrying that Manning might be giving up on any more albums, however, he points out, "so...is this all there is? Was that all I could be? No, don't get depressed too soon, we are all alive and in tune, remember this is just an Autumn Song." Chloe Herrington, of Knifeworld, provides a lovely bassoon accompaniment to Manning's vocals on this tune, later augmented by the rest of the band, again including some fine saxophone. The vocal arrangement here is sublime, with wonderfully effective but understated backing vocals. Autumn Song is a genuine centrepiece song.

The low, rumbling synthesizer at the beginning of The Forge had me thinking Rush and Tom Sawyer! It's not long, however, until the song settles into the rhythmic pattern of the blacksmith's hammer. This song deals with the change in manufacturing between the individually handcrafted goods created by the sweat of skilled men, here represented by our blacksmith, and the mass production within factories, "gone the single hammer blow, it's all measured performance." This song chugs along with its hypnotic rhythm, only broken for a short spell by a discordant link between sections – Guy's feelings on modern manufacturing, maybe?

Old School tells a tale of the days of harsh discipline and strict learning often found in schools from a few years back, "rules were meant to stick, but sticks were not meant to rule", it certainly took me back to the small village school I attended as a young boy. Electric piano over children's playful voices introduces Manning's vocal, delivered in a rather serious tone, before saxophone and then full band kick off a driving beat. The more one listens to this album the more one realises the importance of the saxophone parts in building and connecting many of the instrumental passages to be heard – Old School is a prime example. A short but punchy guitar solo followed by a similarly concise organ solo delivered by John Young (Lifesigns), adds to the atmosphere of the song as Manning introduces us to a young arsonist who provides his teachers with a moment of unease in their authority - not sure if this is based on fact at all?

Up next is a charming slice of Canterbury tinged goodness called Palace of Delights, recalling memories of those shops, now pretty much all gone, where a consumer could find just about anything they'd ever need under one roof. For me, as a child it was Woolworths with its shop full of rectangular islands of products, or the "travelling shop" that visited our little farm once a week. A light but hugely entertaining rock shuffle of a song, this is a great listen from start to finish. Guy Manning's evocative lyrics bring the memories to life, "Welcome to the Palace of delights, everything you wanted and more, Welcome to the Palace of Delights, the real world is stopped by the door." I can see it all again, right now!

We're in the realms of folk-rock for The Huntsman & The Poacher, as we dance along to Fairbairn's fiddle in a moral tale of poacher turned victim – one minute it's, "one on one, man and prey, bask in the silence of final moments" and then it's, "one on one, the law and the breaker, his justice is swift". I'll visit the butcher for my meat thanks - much safer! This tune fits really well alongside the penultimate track, Mists Of Morning Calling To The Day, this time a tale of the guilty secrets within a village passed down from generation to generation. This is another fine, stirring band performance and such is the enjoyment of this collection of songs it hardly seems any time at all since the first track began – and we're near the end already!

Amongst The Sleepers ends the album in meditative mood, as Manning goes "in search of Eleanor Rigby"; walking the lanes of his past. A captivatingly luxurious string arrangement by The Burnside Players (Manning, Kathy Hampson – cello, Jo Manning – violin and Martin Thiselton – viola) provide the sumptuous backdrop for Manning's gently moving vocal, "caught in deep contemplation of all the people I have known, here amongst the sleepers, vines and creepers, will join hands". Gone, yet still alive in

memories. This song, in many ways, dovetails wonderfully with the earlier Autumn Song both in mood and vision. Amongst The Sleepers, though, has more to say than a simple suggestion of memories – the softly delivered verses giving way to a majestically delivered outpouring of musical emotion; a positive celebration of those lives, complete with a passionate David Million guitar break. This is a truly uplifting end to the album.

I watched an interview recently where Sting was talking about his new album, The Last Ship, commenting on the fact that it was his first album of new, self-penned material in ten years. His simple explanation for the interval was, "I didn't have anything to say".

Guy Manning, by way of some contrast, is delivering his 14th album in about as many years in The Root, The Leaf & The Bone. One thing you'd expect from such a busy recording artist is that he'd now be adept in the art of constructing his songs and certainly all the songs on this album are presented with seemingly effortless skill and perception – Manning has an innate ability to choose the right sounds to accompany his fine compositions. The concern, of course, is whether one so prolific can sustain a consistently high level of creativity and originality over such an intense period of activity, especially as Manning is a wordsmith as well as a musician.

Sohas Manning still got plenty to say? The answer, I think, is there for all to see and hear in The Root, The Leaf & The Bone – finely crafted and consistently original songs, intelligent and meaningful lyrics and a keen ear for creating the right blend of instrumentation, mood and sound. Many will argue that his 14th album is Guy Manning's most pleasing and accomplished collection of songs yet – and I don't think you'll find me disagreeing too much with that view.