

★★★★☆ **Uplifting music not only for the ears, but also for the mind, heart and soul.**

Guy Manning's 'Margaret's Children' is a sequel to 'Anser's Tree' from 2006. The immediate reaction once the music starts is how innovative the music is, with incredible violin and a very pronounced flute from Steve Dundon that reminds one immediately of Ian Anderson's style. There is a genuine folk vibe with some odd time sigs and very melodic choruses.

The flute is fantastic on the opener 'FLEMING BARRAS (1645 - ????) [The Year Of Wonders]' and the acoustics of Manning along with his vocals are easy on the ears and transports one instantly to another time period. It feels very much like 70s Jethro Tull, King Crimson or Fairport Convention in places. In a similar way to how 'Charlestown' evoked a sense of sea faring adventure, this album tends to place the listener in a time capsule back to time's past. The titles of the tracks further augment this feeling of being whisked to various periods of time to revisit famous characters and events. The concept is clearly pointed out in the liner notes and website so it is worth discovering this for yourself as it is rather complex and well thought out. In short Barras is a contemporary of Sir Isaac Newton and has inherited his ancestor Margaret Montgomery's possessions, including her diary. The story follows on from that told in 'Anser's Tree'.

As far as the music is concerned on this album, this is one of the best examples of modern prog. Musicians of note include Chris Catling and Kev Currie on electric guitars, Kris Hudson- Lee on bass, Tim Leadbeater on piano, Ian 'Walter' Fairbairn and Mark Woodward on violins, Kathy Hampson on cello, Marek Arnold on clarinet and saxes, and some guest appearances from Tinyfish's Leon Camfield and even Phideaux himself.

'JORGEN BARRAS (1834 - 1900) [Revelation Road]' is a strong rhythmic track with some bluesy phrases and excellent musicianship, especially the violins and keyboards. It has an infectious melody and could almost fit in nicely on radio airplay. Jorgen is a travelling revivalist preacher who prays for the weather to ease up in order that farmers would have successful crops, but he leaves with the farmer's money. It makes a nice transition point before the epic to follow.

The 17 minute 'AMY QUARTERMAINE (1862 - 1916) [A Perfect Childhood]' is the centerpiece of the album. It begins with acoustics and Ian Anderson style storyteller vocals. Manning sounds great here, the story is easy to follow and it involves the true story of Nurse Edith Cavell during WWI Belgium who helped soldiers to escape execution at the hands of the Germans. The piece is broken into five distinct sections, in the style of 70s epics that used to swallow up whole sides of vinyl. The sections are a) Before the War, b) Abroad, c) Outbreak, d) Within the War, and e) After the War. The track builds with dreamy cello, violins and finger picking acoustics. A heavier guitar breaks through with some wonderful flute motifs. The pace gains cadence and it certainly has a solid beat driving it in the next section. The vocals are full of conviction; 'I'm going away to follow my heart' and there are some lovely harmonies. The instrumental section is very serene with sweeping violins, and some inspired woodwind passages. The flute and grinding organ take centre stage for a time, and the music becomes mesmerizing. Then there is a break and a fabulous brass section as the pace completely transforms into a fast tempo. The section is my favourite of the track, especially the organ sounds and ambient keys and violins. The melody has an ominous vibe due to the embellishments of ethereal flute and strings. There is a sensational lead break that follows, well executed and emotional. Manning continues to tell the story about 'the enemy and the fate' of the protagonists and how they were captured and 'were found guilty of acts of humanity'. Eventually they were led to trial, 'the cannons of doom' resound and the protagonists are 'taken to a prison awaiting a verdict that led them to their end'. The story continues revealing the fate of the captives and 'with tears in her eyes' she cries 'I'm not afraid to die for my country, my sanity, my love and my honour, I am an innocent in God's eyes'. The music settles into a beautiful resonating twin acoustic minimalist section. The vocals are softer as Manning recalls the tragic fate of the protagonist; 'She flew with all that is due, with all the things that she knew, in her perfect childhood'. Overall this is a stunning epic and one of the best Manning compositions.

'HARRIET HORDEN (1912 - 1955) [A Night At The Savoy, 1933]' is very unique sung nicely by vocalist Julie King. It has a jazzy nightclub feel complete with applause, introduction and cabaret style piano. It is based on Horden, a sultry jazz singer at the New York Savoy during the Great Depression circa 1933. The rich suits entered the jazz club to escape the depression of outside, where the real world was heaving in agony

under the throngs of extreme poverty. The contrast of social classes were of course striking back in the 1930s, and it is depicted beautifully in this song with melancholy sax, tinkling piano and sweet harmonies.

'JAMES FAIRFAX (1922 - 1945) [An Average Man]' is a moderate tempo complex track with a wall of sound made up of swathes of keyboards and some vibrant sax and guitar. Manning tells the story of James, a Mr. average who was called into WWII service and wanted to achieve something so endeavoured to trace his ancestry, discovering his home, Margaret's Cottage, and he plants a family tree. The music builds into very strong synth lines and an acoustic passage before it cuts off with a loud chop, representing the cutting of a tree perhaps.

'AMELIA FAIRFAX (1926 - 2010) [Black Silk Sheets Of Cairo]' has a very Oriental feel on Eastern instruments and strings with a flute to carry it along. The rhythm is hypnotic flute and bass, guitar and percussion. It is an incredible piece of introduction music. It breaks into the verses relating Amelia's story, who was a young Mata Hari agent working for the CIA forerunner, the OSS during WWII. The fact that the story is set in Cairo accounts for the Eastern feel of the music. It is a welcome change and makes this one of the more diverse albums of recent years, encompassing a myriad of styles and sub-genres. The Egyptian music becomes even stronger in the instrumental sections, floating flute lines, like snake charmer music, chimes, alto sax, and a divine electric piano solo. I loved the melodies on this, especially the dynamic ending section.

The album finishes with 'DAVID LOGAN (1967 - 2022) [The Southern Waves]' who is the father of Dr. Adam Login, a fisherman and a character found on 'Anser's Tree'. The track brings a modern theme focussing on the recent 2011 floods and tidal changes in the Southern Hemisphere. This struck a chord with me as my country of Australia experienced the deluge of floods that swept away so many homes and generated a National Emergency and call for assistance. The water heard at the opening is atmospheric and sets the melancholy tone of loss and starting again due to the cruel forces of nature. The music really takes on sadness with sax, flute, piano and strings. The piano almost sounds like raindrops and the flute flows like the streams that engulfed so many lives. There is a lovely saxophone that augments the sound with a transfixing beauty. Manning sings of the southern waves that 'reshape the land, reshape our world'. This is a literal retelling of the flood events that not only reshape the landscape with the torrents of water that crush the soil and cause sink holes, but they also metaphorically reshape and crush lives as people are forced out and have to start anew, after losing not only homes but loved ones in the process. The lead guitar that ends this track powerfully brings in the emotion of defeat but also the feeling of hope as it builds aggressively, like the human spirit that will not die. The thunder and streaming water at the end closes the album effectively.

At the end of the album one is left with a feeling they have experienced a series of events from the past and this has been exhibited by 7 very diverse tracks of quality, intelligently written and conceptualised, and juxtaposed together to capture the emotions of the listener. The music is captivating in every respect, and there is enough here to satiate the appetite of the listener who desires to immerse themselves into another world. The concept is actually genuinely educational but overriding this is the music that is engaging from start to finish. I believe this is an album worth pursuing for all the above reasons. I was pleasantly surprised that progressive musicians such as Manning continue to create uplifting music not only for the ears, but also for the mind, heart and soul.