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The **Manning** music machine released this seemingly on the heels of their previous release, *Songs From The Bilston House*. However, in this case it actually ends the longest gap between releases since ... well, since ever. If you look at the original release dates of Manning's prior 9 releases, you'll find that all of them came out in October of their release year*. And, while not to the day, exactly a year apart. So comes **Number 10**, his/their tenth release – and thus aptly named -- a full 14 months after *Songs...* I point this out only because the pattern establishes really how prolific a songwriter Guy Manning is. It's not that he's released 10 singles in 10 years – its 10 *albums*. And, oh yes, it's been 10 years since that first release, *Tall Stories For Small Children* -- although not quite the full 10; 9 years and 4 months, to split hairs. And let's not mention that October would have completed the pattern of 10, it being the tenth month (at least since it was bumped from its eighth spot more than 2500 years ago when January and February were added to the Roman calendar). I guess I should note that not everything comes in 10s, as there are "only" 8 tracks here. Actually, I think that might have been pushing it if the tracks were mere filler from some ... cleverness points.

And, not to labour the point, word comes just this month that Manning is *already* working on the next album; it's in the writing stage.

In any case, here we have the tenth release from Manning. With a few exceptions, it is a high energy release, Manning and company seemingly in a hurry – not that the music seems hurried, just that the quickened pace is hurried. This becomes evident from the get-go with the frenetic "Ships," which is the liveliest of the lot. Spirited I mean, there's life and buoyancy to all the tracks. While I'm trying to avoid saying such things... my thought is that the main bass/guitar rhythm here reminds me of something by Marillion**. While it goes without saying, as always Fowler's sax provides many highlights here, there, and everywhere. That isn't to say there are no mellow bits as for a moment we get a more dreamy feel.

The tracks where the high energy is tempered begin with the balladic "An Ordinary Day," which begins with warm solo piano (keys), and Manning's soft vocals. It builds to gently sweeping orchestral statements, picking up the steady, even throb of drums along the way. During a bridge can be heard the flutter of flute, almost like a laugh.

As I was gathering my thoughts about this CD, a particular one found me even while I was not, at that time, listening to the CD. In many ways, "An

Ordinary Day" is an ordinary song. I mean there's nothing musically clever about it, no neat guitar or keyboard hook or anything – that is not coming across as I intend, but ... There are no blips, bleeps or other sound effects. But that's what's clever about it, you see. If it were "extra-ordinary" it would undercut what I think is the underlying message – or a least my "take away" from it -- that maybe we think we are too ordinary and can't make a difference. On the larger scale. There are some bits of lyric that are pointed reference something that is tragically sad. For example, let's quote just the first lines:

It's just another early morning, chasing crisp bags on the breeze
the North wind rocks the chimney pots, blowing leaves from off the trees
frosting pavement, cracks puddles, stings the air
etched within its memories is the fur of a Polar bear

Now, the highlighted bit is that to which I was referring... "memories... of a Polar bear." They're dying, you know; the melting ice of their habitat is retreating and they have a harder time finding food and surviving. And we go on with our lives.... Yes, even sitting in our dens reviewing CDs ... That's not the only "take away" (a term I've come to loath, by the way, yet I've used it twice in this review), but it's the one I'll comment on.

It's a gentle, lilting piece... carrying one along as if on the very breeze it evokes. It's a marvelous song. (Note to Yanks like me: the Brit's crisps are our chips {typically potato, but now not always}).

"The Final Chapter" is initially a very sunny piece, full of bright flute from Steve Dundon and parpy keys. But within short order downshifts into bluesy mode – slinky guitars, silky vocals from Guy, transitions that end on the uptick, filled with pointed bleets of sax. And here and there you'll hear some hints of ELP -- some throaty organ especially.

"Bloody Holiday!" is a jumping jazzy number, a toe tapper with the sassy brass of horns and dirty grind of organ; hear too some tinkly keys (Tillison, I think; but could be Manning) in a solo interlude. An all too cheery piece about apprehensions about an uncomfortable flight.

"Valentine's Night" is another lighter, mellower piece; this one far dreamier than we've heard thus far; lacy and delicate. It has an old world feel to it. And it marks Manning's first duet with Julie King, long time collaborator (and if I've this right, partner). It's a different sound for Manning, especially how the two voices mesh together. It also manages to be slightly dark in tone; one of those tracks where you feel there's just something about it.

Like the winding road of the title, "A Road Less Travelled" winds along a sinuous, evolving route, the topography changing both subtly and dramatically – giving us peaks and valleys, wide open spaces, narrow canyons... The Celtic feel that can be heard on occasion in Manning's music returns her. It begins as another gentle piece, lilting. It's the fiddle, you know. That and the trilling flute. Like other pieces here, instruments are layered in, making their presence felt subtly. One moment there are no keys, and then suddenly they're there, breathing softly at one moment, chirping mutedly at another, and trumpeting almost at another. And then mandolin enters the mix for a time... And while this happens, the tempo picks up... the

hazy keyboard backdrop drawing in a hint of classic King Crimson ("Court..." comes to mind).

If I referenced Marillion in the opening track, I find I need to reference – in passing – solo Fish here in "Another Lazy Sunday." There is a vibe to this song that Fish channeled for the *Internal Exile* album. Oh, once past that first brush when this piece begins – and here the whole Celtic reel feel is more realized than in "A Road..." – that fishy-ness has passed. And truly, it's just one of those coincidences... then again, that bent and stretched guitar phrase from David Million does remind me of Frank Usher. But more importantly, this is a bouncy piece, with some tart bass, and a catchy sing-song aspect to the delivery. It's anything but lazy.

The album ends with the epic length "The House On The Hill" – a multipart suite that includes all that we love about Manning. A hint of Jethro Tull comes with the "shouted" flute that transitions us into the lively "Part Two (Travel Plans)," which is joyous and hopeful in tone, uplifting. This segues into the instrumental section "Tangible Expression" – a hint at Manning's association with Tillison in The Tangent. Both solo, and are joined by another fab sax solo and a jazzy, crisp guitar solo. We transition into "Part Three (The Other Shoreline)" with an acidic yet gossamer fiddle or violin solo, it drags us into the darker realms of this portion; baritone sax can be heard in the mix, as we explore what lies on the other side of the river Styx. As we learn in the first part, the protagonist is gazing at photo of a loved one and, with a force of will, seeks her by journeying from the land of the living, to the land of the dead... you can interpret the final part "Part Four (Into The Light)" in two ways... sort of. That the journey is real and he's joined her in death as they are together again, or that he never traveled at all, but has found her again in spirit.

One thing that struck me, listening to this album, is that the jazz aspect aside, Manning has crafted a more proggy album than his usual prog. That is, there are elements that seems drawn from the so-called "neo-prog" palette. It highlights the fact that no two Manning album sounds alike, except that which ties them together is some lyrical concepts ("night" being one) and the tenor, tone of Manning's voice (and yes, he does still sound like Ian Anderson; as he sings in "Bloody Holiday!", "there's nothing you can do, but enjoy the ride!")

I won't compare/contrast this Manning album with previous works – mainly because each is different. But, even as it might seem that Manning is just "churning them out," they are all highly creative and highly enjoyable albums; some to a greater degree than others. This falls in that "greater degree" category. There are enough varying moods to keep it interesting; it's not all once pace, one texture, one colour. Like the burst of rainbow colours on the cover, the prism that Manning puts his music through results in the same wide spectrum. I will naturally have to reacquaint myself with his past catalog, as – at last – Manning is scheduled to come to US shores for RoSFest 2010. With a set that has to encompass what might be 11 eleven albums by then, it will a) be a tough set to put together (if it doesn't focus on the recent past). Nevertheless, what will be the selling point phrase on this album: "there's nothing you can do but enjoy the ride!"

Random thoughts: there's a lyric in "Bloody Holiday!" that struck me, only because it mirrors a similar thought I've had. Well, actually there were two bits of lyric, but this one is comparing the plane to a pencil. Now, the comparison is obvious, I suppose, but there are those commuter jets... M80s perhaps... that are long and narrow... and I've often referred to them as pencils. The second lyric has to do with seating and yes, if one is "extra roomy" (as Guy puts it), an extra roomy seat is needed (as I cannot always fly first class just for that reason ... I scrimp and save to make that possible...). And I will be thinking of this song – perhaps playing this song – as I fly out for RoSFest 2010

**Some of those early release were available via mail order before they were available retail.*

***egads! I should know without having to do a reference check (I've been away from the band too long); but I'm going to offer up "Incommunicado" and then addendum when I get it right.*

Track listing:

Ships (5:34) / The Final Chapter (7:44) / An Ordinary Day (6:03) / Bloody Holiday! (5:51) / Valentines Night (6:17) / A Road Less Travelled (10:34) / Another Lazy Sunday (5:25) / The House On The Hill (15:52)

Musicians:

Guy Manning - vocals, keyboards, acoustic 6 & 12 string, classical, electric guitars, bouzouki, mandolin, bass and percussion
Laura Fowles - alto sax and vocals
David Million - electric lead guitar
Kris Hudson-Lee - bass
Julie King - vocals (duet 5)
Ian "Walter" Fairbairn - fiddle
Phil Wilkes - keyboards
Danny Rhodes - additional drums
Kev Currie - vocals
Hannah Hudson-Lee - backing vocals

Guests:

Andy Tillison - keyboards and drums
Steve Dundon - flute and tenor sax
Pav Chana - percussion
Ed Neidhardt - soprano sax and bass clarinet

Genre: Progressive Rock

Origin UK

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Reviewer: [Stephanie Sollow](#)

Score: ★★★★★

Artist website: www.guymanning.com

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