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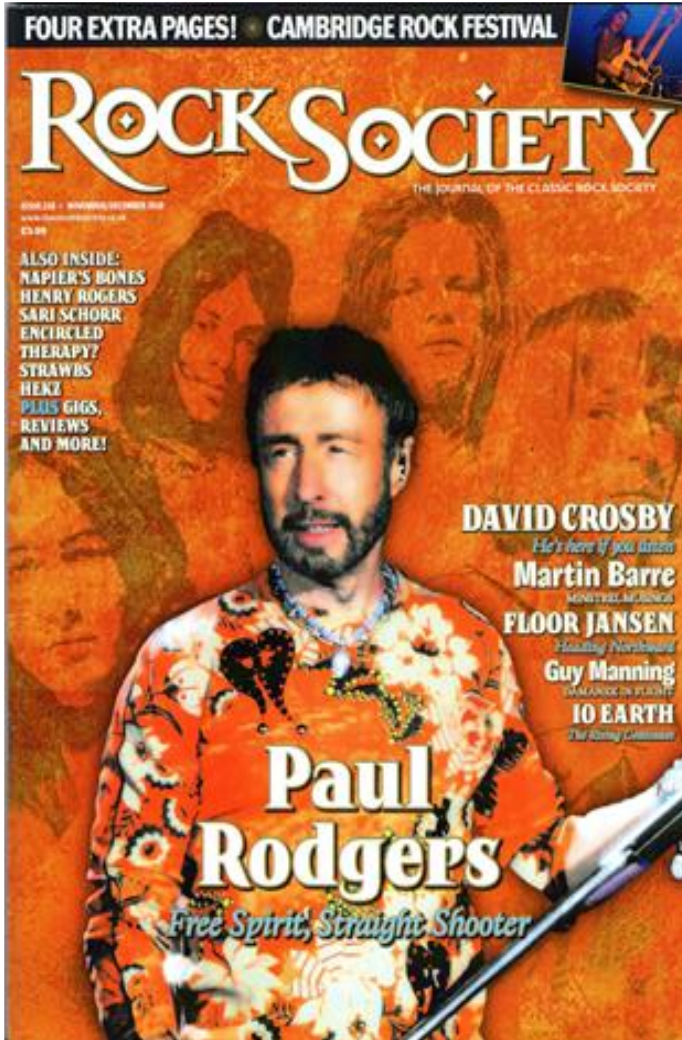
Champion in a suit

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**GUY
MANNING**

*'Relax - just turn to
Page 6 now, chaps'*



Guy taking in flight literally - 'the exits are located here and here...'

Guy Manning

Still in Flight...

One of the perennial and most distinctive figures of the UK prog scene, **Guy Manning** has plied his trade in several projects, including his own solo work of course. His current outfit is the highly-rated Damanek, and *RS* spoke to Guy to find out how things are with the band ahead of their first live tour

WORDS: LAURENCE TODD PHOTOS: HOWARD RANKIN

Guy Manning is a singer and multi-instrumentalist who's been there or thereabouts on the prog scene for some considerable time, always seemingly operating just out of plain sight, but renowned for his work in bands like The Tangent and the United Progressive Fraternity, as well as with his own band Manning, who released an incredible fourteen albums between 1999-2014. His current musical venture is with Damanek, featuring Dan Mash on bass (Da), Guy, guitar and vocals (man) and Marek Arnold, sax and keys (ek). The line-up also includes Sean Timms, guitar and backing

vocals, who joined too late to have his name included!

The music of Damanek transcends easy categorisation. Their two albums contain elements of rock workouts, folk tinged ballads, pop, funk, jazz tinges and lapses into prog. Each album contains more than enough variation and left turns to keep the fan guessing, with the new album even featuring a gospel choir, which Guy's wanted to do for some while. Their music occupies the ground between intelligent pop and prog, although the lyrics to their songs wouldn't find an audience in the pop market. Damanek's lyrics are thought-provoking and deal with issues

and themes which, in Manning's view, need to be addressed. For example, on the band's first album, *On Track*, the song *Long Time Shadow Falls* deals with hunting animals out in the wild, and *The Big Parade* deals with militarism. I started by asking Guy the obvious first question... How would he describe Damanek's music?

"I suppose we're included in the progressive genre, but I don't think we're as dependent on our influences as others out there," he began. "We don't mind mixing a bit of pop, a bit of rock, some jazz and a bit of funk all together in what we do. It really depends on what I feel like writing at the time. As a quartet we choose

the songs we'd like to work on, and this usually leaves some over which won't get worked on, but it's difficult to say what we sound like because I'm not quite sure what we DO sound like! It depends on the song you're listening to because the songs are all very different. On our album *On Track*, each of the songs has its own identity and doesn't necessarily sound like its peers. I quite like the idea of having variety on an album, as much as you can when using the same players. Some tend to vary in atmosphere, feel and tempo and will be reflective of the songs narrative content, so they all sound different. It's difficult to describe what we do. I'd say Progressive Rock with a good melody and a decent lyric and, maybe if we get it right, a toe-tapping rhythm."

Could Damaneck be described as genre defying, then, I suggested. "Are we genre defying? I suppose it depends upon what track you're listening to because they're all very different. We tend to be put in with progressive pop, but I'm not even sure we belong there because I'm not sure I know what progressive is as the term covers a multitude of things, so I'm not sure where we sit in the progressive canon. Sometimes I think we sound like an elaborate version of Al Stewart! I'm a singer-songwriter so I tend to write songs and lyrics, and these arrangements are then elaborated upon. But they all start out as something which can be played on an acoustic guitar. I think of myself as being in the singer-songwriter camp, rather than a prog rock artist, but it's where people put us is the interesting thing. Like everyone else in the genre we get pigeonholed, but it's what people think we sound like is the more interesting thing to me."

Given the different nature of the songs on a Damaneck album, I wondered how he approaches songwriting? Is it lyrics first then putting a melody to them or vice versa? "It can happen in many different ways," he explained. "I mean, just playing around with the drums, hearing different patterns might give me the idea for the feel of a piece, then I'll try and find a few chords on a guitar or keyboards to put over the top to see what it sounds like. Then I'll see where it takes me. With something like *Big Eastern*, on the new album, the intention at the beginning was not to write a 30 minute epic, it was to write a piece around the opening string motif, which had something of an oriental feel about it, and I put some drum machine beat behind it, and called it *Big Eastern* because it was eastern sounding. A week later, when I pulled it out and began working on it again, I had some ideas what the subject matter might be and it just went from there. I just kept extending things, and eventually it got to where it finished, nought to thirty minutes in three parts!"

In 2014, Manning had put his eponymously named band into abeyance and was invited to join the United Progressive Fraternity (UPF), featuring several ex-members of Unitopia, which he did, bringing Dan Mash and Marek Arnold with him. After the release of UPF's debut album, *Fall In Love With The World*, Guy began writing songs for their next album but, while doing so, the band

folded. So he decided to start a new band, using the songs he'd been writing for UPF's next album, and he again invited Dan and Marek to become involved with his new venture. This they did and Damaneck played its first, and so far only, gig at 2016's Summers End festival, with able assistance from Henry Rogers, drums and guitarist Luke Machin.

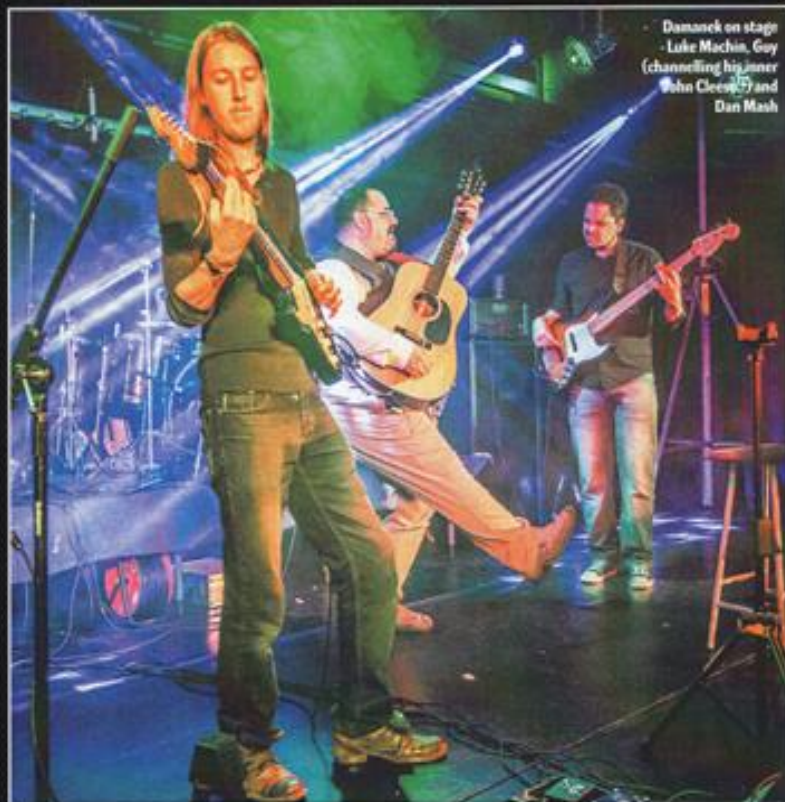
Their debut album, *On Track*, was released to very favourable reviews in May 2017 on the GEP label. It was described as being a collection of genre-defying songs combining sophistication and impressive technical proficiency, with some very catchy hooks. Another reviewer said he thought *On Track* sounded like UPF and Unitopia, but then realised this was because it was the same people!

SEPTEMBER 2018 SAW DAMANECK'S second album, *In Flight*, released. The album, once again, defies all attempts to categorise because the music transcends easy listening, and it offers enough variation to satisfy fans who prefer something challenging to listen to. The new album came out alongside the news that Damaneck are, finally, to play some 'live' dates, including five in England, in November 2018 on a double bill featuring Southern Empire. Guy said, "Since we played that memorable set at Summers End 2016, I've constantly been asked when we're gonna play 'live' again, and I'd always say, 'as soon as we can,' but now I can say 'soon.' The new album will be ready for the tour, and there's some fantastic new pieces on it which we're keen to perform 'live,' along with some faves from *On Track*. It should be one hell of a show."

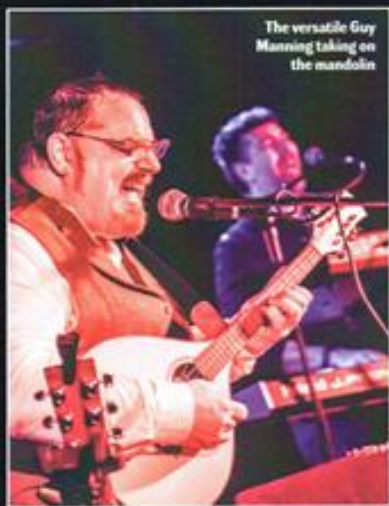
"I'm excited to be playing 'live' again, most definitely. I'm excited to be playing on the same bill as Southern Empire, though I'm slightly worried they might blow us off stage because they're so good," he laughed. "I'm not so excited at loading a van at two o'clock in the morning, though, 'cos I'm getting on in years, but I'm excited at appearing on stage and meeting people. I'm hoping to meet a lot of people as we go around, people who've bought our albums, because it's always nice to meet people who've taken the time and trouble to come to the concert, which is important, and who like the music, which is also important, so yes, excited is probably the best way to put it."

One of the immediately apparent things about Damaneck, apart from the music, is the lyrical content of the songs. The words usually contain a degree of intelligence not always found in the prog genre. There are no Moon in June sentiments here! "Well, I wish I could write Moon in June, that would have been great," Guy laughed. "I write narrative verse songs. I write in the third person and I write stories and narrative tales, probably because I've got something I want to take the listener through, and put them in the passenger seat while they listen to the driver going through the tale, and I place them in certain situations so I can put my point of view across. With *On Track*, I was quite sociologically and ecologically based as there were a lot of things I wanted to put across about the state of the planet, and the things we were going through, but with *In Flight* I don't want to be preachy; I'm more interested in the human condition,

CONTINUES OVER ➤



Damaneck on stage - Luke Machin, Guy (channeling his inner John Cleese) and Dan Mash



The versatile Guy Manning taking on the mandolin

without wishing to be pretentious, more about 'people stories', so the stories are about journeys of some sort, either a migratory one or an emotional one. But, it's really my idea to put the listener in the voyeur situation, and if you can empathise with the character in the story, you'll probably get the point of view I'm trying to put across. But of course some people just don't listen to lyrics. I get people saying to me, 'great song but what's it about?' I'd ask, 'have you listened to the lyrics?' and they say, 'no, I never read the lyrics.' I think that's a shame. When I was doing my solo albums, on *Number Ten*, there's a track called *Valentine's Night*, and I got a letter from someone telling me it's a lovely song, beautiful melody, fantastic atmosphere and the two lovers meeting on *Valentine Night* is a lovely story. I wrote back telling them the song was about Vampires! People will interpret songs as they see fit. I write songs, and I see these stories quite visually in my mind and I paint them on a canvas to make them more colourful, and it makes it more interesting, as the other players on the album can paint along with me and put their own colours into it."

Given the lyrics he writes, I wondered would it be fair to say Guy is a 'concerned man,' rather than an 'angry man'? "I can be angry", he replied. "Sometimes anger's good – being direct in a lyric, using expletives, can capture someone's attention. To me, though, I don't feel comfortable doing that. I don't think it's wrong, I just think it's not for me. I try to consider all sides of the story putting something across which I believe in my heart is true to me."

The perception of prog lyrics, from the outside, is they're full of allusions to dungeons, dragons and mythical kingdoms, however unfair this might be. Is there an argument that prog bands should be a little more serious with their lyrics? Guy is not convinced. "It does have this image, doesn't it, but it's an urban myth. It wasn't helped by wearing capes, but at the time, wearing codpieces and capes was what made it interesting because it'd never been done before. People doing it now, it would

be a little trite. But as a songwriter you've got a certain responsibility to say what you think, and to think deeply about whatever it is you're attempting to put across. I don't write fantasy, I try to create characters inside a narrative storyline, imbued with some kind of point of view or emotive content. You don't have to be serious about your lyrics. I am, though plenty of people aren't, and even if you aren't, there's no guarantee people are actually listening to what you're saying. I wouldn't presume to tell other people what to do."

Referring to Damanek as a creative entity, is it more Guy's band, or is it an equal partnership between the four members, I asked. "At the moment it's difficult to say because so far I've written everything, and the other guys can select what it is we do. Maybe at some point they'll come along with songs to consider but the first two albums have largely consisted of my writing, and therefore the only other thing I need helping with from the other guys is helping to arrange it and selecting the songs they'd like to work on, because I tend to write a lot more than we need. But we're not really a dictatorship and it isn't really my band, because I totally rely on people like Sean (Timms), because the album wouldn't sound as good as it does without Sean's input on it, which is absolutely crucial. His production skill is paramount to the success of the album, and Marek's arrangement skills are fantastic and Dan's got a really innate sense of rhythm so, between us, when we're looking at things, we all put a spin on it and take things up a notch from my original demo. I tend to write simplistically and let them go to town on it. Sometimes we have to compromise but more times than not, we fully agree on what should go into something and we agree with the output. So far, no arguments or disputes, though I do take a large responsibility for it."

HOW HARD IS IT TO KEEP COMING UP with new songs I wondered, given that Guy has been around the block a few times down the years! "I've done a lot of writing over the years. I don't find it very difficult, I just keep going, though I'm bound to run out of ideas at some point and might start repeating myself. But, so far, it hasn't been a problem and I just get on with it. I just write something and hope it's good. The hardest thing with writing songs is finding something to write about. Writing tunes and words is easy, but if you've got nothing you want to say, this makes it harder. I have to come up with something I find particularly interesting, and sometimes it'll take a while. I just play around with tunes and

"It'd be lovely if we all lived like the Beatles in their film *Help*, a house with four doors..."

lyrics and rhythms until something naturally or organically appears, and hopefully it's good. I just explore ideas and see where it takes me, really."

Who would he say were particularly good at songwriting, then? After a brief pause for thought... "There're so many good songwriters. Paul Simon's a brilliant songwriter, as is Elton John, with Bernie Taupin, obviously. Billy Joel, great songwriter. John Martyn wrote some brilliant songs, as did Joni Mitchell. There are bands who can write brilliant songs as well. Genesis were a great songwriting team. Ian Anderson has written some marvellous songs for Jethro Tull".

It is well known that Guy has long been a big admirer of Ian Anderson. Given that fact, would he say he's been an influence on how he puts songs together I wondered, confessing that I am probably not the first person to say they sound similar! "Do I sound like Ian Anderson? I've been listening to Jethro Tull since 1972 and, yes, they were a big influence on me, but I listen to Ian singing a song, and I listen to me, and I don't see the similarity. Yes, we're both baritone singers and we've both got peculiar English accents and inflexions, but it's where you draw the line. I don't go all out to sound like Ian Anderson. If I sang with a falsetto, people would say I sang like Jon Anderson. So, it's because of the register I sing in people make this assumption. It's more of a perception thing people thinking I sound like Ian."

Finally, logistics are a major factor for Damanek of course, given the members of the band are all geographically scattered. "We're very geographically challenged," Guy laughed. "When I want to talk to Sean about a song, I have to do it at five in the morning, as he lives in Australia, and this gives us certain problems. When we come to tour, as we're about to do, this gives us other problems to think about as getting everyone together isn't easy. Hence we don't have many press photos as the only time we've ever played together is *Summers End*, 2016, and only for one gig. We didn't have the sense to capture the event in a press photo. It'd be lovely if we all lived like the Beatles in their film *Help*, a house with four doors, and we could spend all day jamming and writing together, but this isn't how this project is. It starts with me living in the UK, and it ends in Australia so, yes, we do have some challenges!"

Damanek are a band overcoming considerable challenges of time and place to put together their music, but as *In Flight* would suggest, their approach is beginning to pay dividends. So, what kind of band are Damanek? With a new album and a late autumn tour in the offing, the opportunity for the fans to decide for themselves is now at hand... ☺



THE LATEST DAMANEK ALBUM **IN FLIGHT** IS AVAILABLE NOW VIA GEP. THE BAND PLAY AT SWINDON, SOUTH HAMPTON, BILSTON, LONDON AND MALTBY (CR5 5H 10W) BETWEEN 27 NOV AND 1 DECEMBER 2018.