

Anton Roolaart

The Plight Of Lady Oona



When I reviewed Anton Roolaart's 2007 *Dreamer*, I quickly understood that this was no middle of the road commercial artist following tried and true formulas for corporate success. Steeped in the imagery of the Middle Ages, Anton mixed the visionary storytelling styles of original Renaissance writers Keith Relf and Jim McCarty with the tone and texture of bands such as Gentle Giant. Roolaart brandishes said craft as he would a broad sword against dark and unfathomable forces, battling his nemesis in tales of tragedy and triumph to build overall stories of action and victory. This experimental fortitude continues on his latest record called *The Plight Of Lady Oona*.

The Plight Of Lady Oona is an EP that comes in just under 46 minutes and includes six songs of varying texture, tone, length and feel. Roolaart is his own tough taskmaster. Organizing a crack group of musicians, he holds close the responsibilities of creative evolution, listening and guiding his protégés throughout this unique project. He has an amazing ear (and eye) for detail and with the exception of co-producer Rave Tesar (Renaissance) and a handful of top area musicians, he performed all of the music, as well as creating the impressive album artwork that adorns the disc booklet. It's interesting to note that Roolaart's passion for creative artwork has much in common with another artist that appears on *The Plight Of Lady Oona*.

Special guest vocalist Annie Haslam (Renaissance)

is a personality and painter who makes perfect sense on *The Plight Of Lady Oona*. Haslam's work with Renaissance is well known, especially during their golden period between 1972 and 1979. I still own, and listen to, several Renaissance records. Haslam has also released eight or nine solo projects on her White Dove label, including *Annie In Wonderland* (produced by multi-instrumentalist Roy Wood) and is well known for her work with Yes guitarist Steve Howe. It's interesting to note that she has also worked with Rave Tesar (co-producer here) both as a bandmate and as a producer on several of her White Dove projects. Her addition to this record's title-track immediately captured my attention as far as artistic depth and creative credibility that she brings to this pristine collection of Roolaart-penned songs.

One of the more interesting thoughts that come to mind about Roolaart is his belief in his own less celebrated path. So many are swayed by popular opinion or the pressures of bending to an industry intent on profits and void of soul, and Anton steadfastly demonstrates refusal of conformity through recorded action. The feel of this new disc is both arabesque and progressive, heralding themes of Celtic bravado and medieval heroes and heroines that trek down long-forgotten pathways, searching for love and mysterious life. Roolaart's characters scan darkened skies over wide courtyards and hidden codes that open passages into the rabbit hole of the listener's mind.

The disc opens with the

minor key daydream of "Gravity." Icicle spikes of clean guitar pluck into the introduction, setting this piece on a journey through the center of our minds. Roolaart mixes smooth, mid-tone vocals with guitar octaves, limitless layers of piano and synth that rides on top of stark, rhythmic communications. Drums boom single hit thunder on the four count as bass resonates ominously underneath before joining the backbeat. Vocally, Roolaart reminds me of Dennis DeYoung during his heyday with Styx.

"Stars Fall Down" waltzes in on organ and piano intros before drums pop into the current. Roolaart's faith in the salvation of love rises up through this searing and contemporary mix of medieval melancholy. Guitars tremolo through bold lead breaks, taking the reins as all else fades into dynamic silence as pseudo violins shimmer into evolutionary synthesizer pads. Sound effects and a plethora of joyous choral noise resonate throughout. This is the logical mating of radio and progressive rock.

The disc namesake, "The Plight Of Lady Oona," saunters onto the spectrum laying cautious flourishes of acoustic guitar as keyboard effects sizzle, whirl and bubble underneath. Downward modulating chords descend into pulsating tempos and heart pumping bass. The middle eight uses a keyboard round robin to usher in Roolaart's myriad of lead breaks. Annie Haslam enters the fray and lends her trademark Wonderland maiden vocal fame, tying the song direction to her five-

octave capabilities and reminding the listener why she is still an amazing and gifted musical star. With lush undertones of Yes and ELP, "The Plight Of Lady Oona" can only be one of immaculate reception.

The intro on "Standing In The Rain" has all the attitude of an expansive and expensive movie soundtrack. Roolaart enters dramatically, turning this soundtrack into a veritable orchestration piece. Drums rumble with stormy consistency and fretless bass (courtesy of Vinnie Puryear) rips up and down necks to meet raucous bar chord power at relayed song sections throughout the composition. Roolaart utilizes his wealth of guitar knowledge quite well, mixing traditional guitar wizardry with atmospheric and spatial, six-string "painting."

"Memoires" is a disc favorite that truly showcases Roolaart's classical dexterity and training. Melding classical block chord patterns with open-voiced extensions, single-line notes and hammer-ons, Anton demonstrates his love of classical craft quite well. Meditative in nature, "Memoires" uses ethereal passages and grand compositional exaltations to cross supreme bridges of recollection. Roolaart has created brilliant, instrumental-themed pieces of music in more than a few past compositions, but he surpasses all on "Memoires."

"The Revealing Light" closes out this complex and expressive disc with otherworldly and mysterious Yardbirds meets Robin Trower feel. Isabella Vitale's spoken word intro reminds me of Pink Floyd's gorgeous "Goodbye Blue Sky." The sound

emulations of bright sunny skies chirp from synthesizer libraries as Roolaart and crew wind up and throw everything into the verse of the mix. Utilizing a staccato approach complete with megaphone vocal effects, Roolaart switches gears quite frequently here, especially around 3:59 into the song, where guitars grind to the left under walls of keyboard magic and heavy bass and drums before Roolaart hauls his theme back around and into the next big movement. Wah wah guitars scream and phase with tube-burning brilliance in this movement and the recollections of the greats come flooding back. Roolaart never shows off, but if I were to think of one of the area's most underrated guitar players, his name would appear near the top in that list. The vocal outro by Rave Tesar is both introspective and trance-like psychedelic and lends an overall intimate bonding of music and voice for this exceptional piece.

Once again, Roolaart has excelled at both his choices of composition, and the picking of the right team. If you're a fan of Coldplay or Nickelback you probably won't understand this, but if you're looking for intelligent, meticulously created progressive rock, you're going to love *The Plight Of Lady Oona*.

Anton Roolaart is an artist that is completely different from any other writer or player I know. The fact that he has invented this sound from influential mentors, dreams, imaginative recollections or intuitions are the reasons we all hail the fight and glory of original music in the first place, and *The Plight Of Lady Oona* does all of this and more.

