

We Travel the Spaceways

Olias of Sunhallow, Jon Anderson [Remastered & Expanded 2CD edition, Cherry Red]

Back in 1975, after years of touring and huge sales of their three studio albums *Close to the Edge*, *Tales from Topographic Oceans* and *Relayer*, not to mention the live triple album *Yessongs*, the band members of Yes decided to take a break. But being the musicians they were, they all decided to make solo albums. Most of these were as expected: a virtuosic guitar-led album by Steve Howe, bass-heavy art-rock from Chris Squire on *Fish Out of Water*, and a prog/jazz-rock extravaganza, *I*, by Patrick Moraz, the keyboardist from *Relayer* and replacement for Rick Wakeman who continued to make numerous solo albums.

More surprising was Alan White's *Ramshackled*, which did indeed feel slightly ramshackle. His band felt like a bunch of mates getting it together and having fun. It was a bit of a shock to Yes fans like me at the time, but it's endured the years better than a lot of stuff from around the same time. (It also introduced me to the poetry of Tom Pickard, whose poem 'Valentine' is printed on the back cover.)

The biggest shock, and the last of the solo albums to be released, was Jon Anderson's. It came in a deluxe gatefold sleeve with a LP-size book in, heavily illustrated in the expected (Roger Dean meets Patrick Woodroffe) progrock style by David Roe and is a concept album about... well goodness knows what it's about to be honest, even the new Jon Anderson interview and sleevenotes from the likes of Malcolm Dome can't actually clarify this! Suffice it to say there are various races living on a dying planet, a spaceship, and travel to a new world involved, as well as a made-up language or two.

That doesn't mean the album can be written off. It has a certain naive, D.I.Y. quality to it that is the result of Jon Anderson playing absolutely everything on this album, even when he appears to have not been able to play a particular instrument. So layer after layer of often simplistic tunes and textures are piled high to give these songs a trebly, percussion-filled ambience. Songs become chants become paeans and hymns to other worlds and the glories of space travel and universal love, indeed mystical union.

It's hard to know why Anderson in the pre-digital age couldn't play along to click tracks or keep time with his previously-recorded self, but in his new sleevenotes he talks about struggling with some of the technicalities required and the joy of finding out that things had worked. And joy is an appropriate word: cod-mysticism and mumbo-jumbo lyrics aside, this is an uplifting, dense and unusual album that can still hold its head up alongside the best Yes albums.

Anderson always uses language as texture and sound, and if he goes overboard occasionally, the invented sounds and language contrast with the successfully poetic and mystical elsewhere:

Sound out the galleon to travel to cross
close the space between pastures
(*'Sound Out the Galleon'*)

Hold come a day
Ask a flower to kneel
When you pray
(*'To the Runner'*)

or

Olias awoke from a dream and drank his soul
into the ocean
That sailed past the brink of his window that
long summer
(*'Olias'*)

Anderson's distinct, pure voice articulates his songs, soaring above strums and drones and percussion, with occasional synthesizer washes, that are a million miles from the complicated, ambitious and dense music Yes were producing at the time.

It's a kind of folk-art really, a naive album made by somebody who really didn't know what he was doing, but had it all mapped out in his head: all he had to do was recreate it for himself in sound and music. And bless him, he did, and was enough of an artist and editor to not go overboard: this album is subtle, with a capital S, offering the open-minded listener an original and intriguing sonic palette.

There's no extra music here on the deluxe edition, instead we get new sleevenotes and interview, as well as a second DVD disc offering a 24-bit stereo mix and a 5.1 Surround Sound version. The whole album has been remastered from the original tapes and the sound really is pristine and crystal clear, although this highlights the trebly nature of the arrangements and the occasional moments where Anderson doesn't quite get it right. But that's part of it's charm.

This may be a product of the tail-end of hippydom as it drifted into new age mysticism and ersatz muzak, leaving punk and postpunk to clean the sonic palette and embrace politics and social critique, but it's a period jewel, musically rich and glowing, even more than 40 years later. Neither Yes nor Anderson would ever produce anything as memorable, new or innovative again. Long live Olias of Sunhollow!

Rupert Loydell

(800 words)