POP MUSIC

Pieces of his past, now fully imagined

Session musician for Beck, Morrissey and Green Day finally has his day in the sun with the orchestrally lush "The Land of Pure Imagination."

By Kevin Bronson, Times Staff Writer

As happens when households move and lives are packed and unpacked, Roger Manning unearthed some personal artifacts while boxing up his life to move into a new house a few years ago. They were songs — or, rather, ideas for songs, sketches, collections of chords and melodies.

They were pieces of his past, shelved as Manning made his way through a career that included stints with 1990s acts such as Jellyfish, Moog Cookbook and Imperial Drag — pieces that had long remained in the background as he toiled as a session player for the likes of Beck, Morrissey, Air, Green Day and Sheryl Crow.

"I resurrected these songs more as practice," Manning says. "There was no 'As I turn 40, I'm going to launch a solo career.' I thought maybe I could get them to the Japanese audience that has always been supportive of my work."

But now, under the name Roger Joseph Manning Jr. (adopted to avoid confusion with a New York-based artist named Roger Manning), he does have a solo album, "The Land of Pure Imagination," released digitally in July and due in stores in September.

"I'm a one-man band — truly a one-man project," Manning sang, played all the instruments and recorded it in his basement — "Pure Imagination" bursts with lush arrangements, whether channeled to driving anthems with soaring choruses, introspective chamber pop or croony numbers that belong in a "007" soundtrack.

"It's a throwback to the days when melody and harmony ruled, forming a confection so sweet the cynical might label it anachronistic."

"I hope with all the doom and gloom and geopolitical upheaval every day, this kind of music comes back," Manning says.

How the album came to be released, however, was decidedly modern. Many tracks were first available on the audio download and file-sharing website Weed (www.cordlessstreet.com).

Then, through a friend, the music was brought to Cordless Recordings, the fledgling digital label that's part of Warner Music Group. There, it caught the ear of Cordless founder and industry veteran Jac Holzman.

"I heard incredibly rich melodies with beautifully textured layers, and words that meant something," says Holzman, the man who signed the Doors to Elektra in 1966 and who worked with singer-songwriters such as Carly Simon, Judy Collins and Harry Chapin. "It has a life to it, a great vitality."

Holzman suggested Manning drop some tracks and add others, and the artist was floored by the attention.

"It was incredibly flattering to have Jac Holzman make constructive comments about my music," he says. "I thought, for the first time I'm actually listening to a record company guy."

With a full album ready to go, however, Manning didn't exactly fit Cordless' business profile. The label's strategy is to release music in three-song "clusters," using them to build interest in artists and gauge whether a physical album makes sense.

The first Manning cluster was released in the spring, but Holzman says that "when something like this lands in your lap, there's no question you release a physical product."

"We're trying to develop fine artists at a low cost," he says. "Roger is ideal because he is a superior writer, musician and producer; he is a self-acting entity."
Such praise is not lost on Manning, who has spent much of his recent career being a cog in other machines. Just over the last year or so, he has lent his talents to artists such as Angels & Airwaves, the Format, Patrick Park, Ima Robot and Luna Halo. That kind of work — which he couldn't turn down, "being the owner of a new mortgage," he says — made making the album slow going at times.

"A lot of the characters that crop up on the album are people who have been close to me at some time, you know, the kid I couldn't forget in high school," Manning says. "I admire songwriters who can take everyday events and touch people. For me, this is kind of a roller-coaster ride of emotions."

He initially intended to have friends come into the studio and contribute various parts, but eventually stuck with his own recordings, "even with all the mistakes and foul-ups," he says.

Manning has assembled some friends — drummer Eric Skodis (Imperial Drag), bassist Linus of Hollywood and guitarist Aaron Kaplan — to shape the songs into a live set for his appearance in the International Pop Overthrow festival on Tuesday night at Spaceland.

With its power pop-leaning following, the ninth annual L.A. festival figures to give Manning a warm welcome.

"My involvement in the 'scene' that supports me is very superficial — people introduce me all the time to bands they assume I already know," he says. "But I'm looking forward to this. I'm so used to being a man out of time."

Roger Manning
What: Roger Joseph Manning Jr., with Let's Go Sailing, Kristian Hoffman and others, as part of the International Pop Overthrow festival
Where: Spaceland, 1717 Silver Lake Blvd., L.A.
When: 8 p.m. Tuesday
Price: $8
Info: (323) 661-4380;

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.