

## Damanek - On Track (May 2017)



### Track List:

*Nanabohzo and the Rainbow (7:48), Long Time Shadow Falls (7:47), The Cosmic Score (5:56), Believer-Redeemer (5:48), Oil Over Arabia (5:33), Big Parade (4:15), Madison Blue (3:12), Dark Sun (13:43)*

Guy Manning has brought together a number of talented musicians to create a new band to realise his latest collection of tunes. Whilst Manning is the principal composer of Damanek's debut album, and his stylistic stamp is to be found in the incisive lyrics and sweet melodies that abound, *On Track* is an album that is very much a collaborative and a co-operative affair.

The quality of the performances by the guest participants and group members, ensures that this is an album that often delights and rarely disappoints. With no disrespect meant to the players that have accompanied Manning in his various solo projects over the years; the talents of Marek Arnold on saxes and clarinet, Dan Marsh on the bass and Sean Timms on the keyboard make up the core members of Damanek and have been able to raise and interpret Manning's creative muse to another level.

Stephen Dundon of **Molly Bloom** provides some flute parts on *Madison Blue*. His subtle contribution adds an extra elegance to this stunningly beautiful tune. Dundon has been a frequent contributor to Manning's live band and has also contributed to his recorded output over the years.

The longest piece on the album, *Dark Sun*, features Ulf Reinhardt on drums and Phideaux adds some vocal parts to good effect. Other guest players also leave their mark upon the album, including Brody Green (drums), Tim Irrgang (percussion), Antonio Vittozzi and Luke Machin (guitars) and Nick Magus on keyboards.

Marek Arnold's contribution stands out, and is one of the album's most attractive features. His ensemble playing embellishes proceedings and his distinctive solo parts leave a rich and highly polished sheen. Arnold furnishes *On Track* with a unique and identifiable instrumental voice; one that complements Guy Manning's earnest vocal style. His expressive reed work is a pivotal part of many of the compositions.

The contribution of Luke Machin is as equally rewarding. On the occasions, where his idiosyncratic and eloquent guitar style breaks through and comes fully to the fore, the album takes on a distinctly more muscular tone.

*On Track* is an album that should appeal to those who appreciate melodic songs that have a recognisable structure. There are numerous opportunities within the carefully constructed framework, provided by Manning's hook-laden tunes, for instrumental parts to emerge. The lyrical content of the album is successfully offset by a colourful palette of sounds. The instrumentalists of the band provide a consistent backdrop that complements and on occasions accentuates the high quality of Manning's song writing. This creates an inviting musical embrace that is hard to shun. The tunes provide ample warmth to relax, sit back and bask in. Conversely, there are times when the players, combined with Manning's thoughtful crooning, are able to create a warning-mood that emits a cold, slate-grey shadow that is difficult to ignore.

The contrast and ultimately successful resolution between Manning's song-based approach and a range of impressive instrumental passages is probably the most significant component, of what makes this rewarding release ultimately so interesting and enjoyable.

*On Track* contains eight heartfelt tunes which relate to a range of issues that are unflinchingly relevant to the 21st century. Pithy lyrics and wry observations about the state of the planet, convey a variety of emotions, including, despair, frustration and hope.

Damanek's fine album is sure to please a varied audience. Sweeping keyboard parts, rhythmic interludes and moving guitar solos are incorporated into many of the compositions. Many prog fans are likely to be enthralled by the musical package that is on offer. The other constituent parts that make up this release, including recording quality, art work and sleeve notes, are all excellent and play their part in making this an attractive album.

The cleverly-crafted tunes incorporate numerous changes of mood and shifts in tempo, whilst retaining a recognisable structure that is easy on the ear, and memorable for the mind. This is without question, a major achievement, and one that is rarely done so successfully. For many this will be *On Track*'s most important selling point.

I thoroughly enjoyed the majority of the tunes on offer, but on a personal level, I felt that the repetitive nature of a number of the choruses meant that they had a potential to outstay their welcome. Luckily, the sheer beauty and attractive nature of those melodies meant that this potential was rarely realised. It is somewhat ironic that one of the album's most appealing qualities, is arguably an aspect that some could perceive as a weakness.

If you are irritated by repetition, then there is a possibility that the choral elements of tunes such as *Nanabohzo and the Rainbow*, *Long Time Shadow Falls*, *Believer-Redeemer*, and *The Big Parade* may grate and scrape upon your bones before they conclude or fade to nothing.

Nevertheless, tunes such as, *Long Time Shadow Falls*, *Believer-Redeemer* and *Oil over Arabia* work well in other ways. The instrumental sections in *Long Time Shadow Falls* and *Oil over Arabia* are genuinely captivating.

*Believer-Redeemer* and *Oil Over Arabia* improbably and suavely wear a vocal approach reminiscent of the crooning, smooth, sweet-ear candy style of **George Benson** in the 80s. Manning has rarely sung as well, and his vocal performance throughout the album, and particularly in the delightful *Madison Blue*, is wonderfully effective.

The highlight of the album is probably *Dark Sun*, and it concludes this brooding and totally absorbing album in a fitting way. It is a pensive and reflective piece that excels lyrically. The complex arrangement is superbly executed by the whole band. The evocative chorus that lies at the heart of the piece, has a menacing power that is accentuated by the excellent ensemble playing, chunky guitar parts and raft of solos that accompany it. In this tune, the chorus acts as a focal point and works extremely well. On this occasion, it is more than able to hold its own, and is a perfect tool for maintaining tension and interest. It offers an discernible structure and a jumping off point for a variety of musical ideas to be explored.

As the piece evolves, the vivid imagery of the chorus has the impact and long-lasting power to remain embedded in the mind. It lingers like the memory of a fragrant bouquet, as a series of instrumental interludes make their presence felt, to transport the piece to an even higher level. Manning's crisp and personable delivery is able to convey his worldly observations in a manner which invites the listener to respond. The refrain at the mid-point of the tune- which signposts a change of mood when Guy plaintively warbles "someone else's sadness someone else's pain", is simply magnificent. This poignant interlude is both profound and touching, and rates alongside *In My Life* as the most emotionally engaging and compelling music that Manning has ever composed.

Overall, *On Track* is a highly satisfying album that has a number of outstanding qualities. It will doubtless be reassuring for some readers, that *On Track* does not contain impenetrable experimentation and unpredictable improvisation. On the contrary, it unpretentiously contains a number of finely crafted tunes that are accessible, yet are able to hold and maintain a listener's attention. These are sung with genuine passion and played with much skill and panache. I am confident that it will appeal to many DPRP readers. I therefore, have no hesitation in recommending this very enjoyable release.

**Conclusions:**

**Owen Davies: 9 out of 10**

