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No plain sailing:
Guy Manning and [inset]
the stormy artwork for
Making Shore.



“It’s been a labour of love, and I think the front cover sums it up neatly,” Damanek leader Guy Manning says, referring to the stormy seas that adorn the artwork for *Making Shore*. “We’re the lifeboat and we’re trying to get this damn thing to shore.”

Thankfully the band did make it to land, but it wasn’t without plenty of pushback. There’s a sense of relief that the group, whose members are spread across the globe, even managed to get their third album finished: Covid, illness, logistics and schedules all created roadblocks.

“It was over two years ago when I had all the songs pretty much in place,” multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Manning says. “We had a whole raft of problems from one thing after another. Just getting it finished has been stop-start, stop-start all the way along. It’s been quite painful on that side of it.”

But no pain no gain, as the saying goes, and the end result finds the prog rockers accruing significant acclaim. It marks the follow-up to the spirited two-album spurt Damanek enjoyed in 2017 and 2018 with debut *On Track* and the subsequent *In Flight*. The group, whose core membership is completed by Sean Timms of Unitopia and Southern Empire (on keys, backing vocals and programming) and saxophonist Marek Arnold, have gently honed their expressive, adventurous melodic prog rock aura since their debut.

“I think we’ve got more confident in what we can do,” Manning, also a founder member of The Tangent, reflects. “So the albums have been an evolution. I wouldn’t say there are better songs on here than there were on *In Flight* or *On Track*, it’s just that we’re getting more confidence in our abilities to be able to sift, arrange and present material in a better way. The next album – if there is one – will be even better, I’m hoping.”

Speaking on Zoom from his home in Leeds shortly after their album release, Manning is a bit wary of the prog tag – “I think I’ve probably got more in common with Thomas Dolby than I have with Genesis” – but the 30-minute *Oculus* suite, which closes the new album, aren’t fooling anyone. Divided into a nine-minute overture and four acts, it’s set around a story inspired by the works of Lewis Carroll and HG Wells, as well as *The Portrait Of Dorian Gray*. Prog fans should certainly get their fill – and then some.

“It’s a mash-up of all sorts of literary ideas and things,” Manning explains. “The story of *Oculus* started with an idea of him noticing in a mirror things weren’t quite right. And then it all came from there, that he stepped in the mirror and went to different places. I wrote this thing, and thought, ‘I can’t get that into a four-minute pop song.’”



Land Ahoy!

After a five-year wait, **Damanek** are back with their third album, *Making Shore*. Founding member Guy Manning talks to *Prog* about the obstacles they overcame to get the record finished, writing a 30-minute epic and the drawbacks of being a multinational band.

Words: Chris Cope
Portrait: David Albone

The rest of the album sees Manning cover the gamut of songwriting topics: there are warnings about climate change and overpopulation, ruminations about dementia, Mount Everest and even his youngest son overcoming the odds while on holiday in Greece. Musically it's a mixed palette. *A Mountain Of Sky*, for instance, juggles flecks of jazz with 70s prog keyboard licks before going on a reggae detour; *Back2Back* wouldn't sound out of place on an 80s pop compilation; and *In Deep Blue* (*Sea Songs Pt 1*) washes over with waves of melody and harmony. Propped up by plenty of guest cameos, this is a band doing what they please, while always keeping the song as their beating heart.

"I tend to write about world issues and the human condition," Manning says. "What I tend to do is to try and put a character in the centre of it, like the farmer in *Americana* who is battling to keep his farm alive against climate change in Missouri. So it's all his song – he's singing it, so you can empathise with his point of view. I feel strongly about quite a lot of things, that's why people say I'm a bit preachy. I can't paint, so it's all I've



Sean Timms has played on, mixed and mastered Damanek's new album.

DAMEN STEELE SCOTT

Germany. It means ideas are floated around cyberspace, eventually landing down under in Adelaide for Timms – who runs a commercial studio making jingles for big brands and happened to land a lucrative contract for a "well-known streaming company" in the middle of the album process – to mix and master.

"When people say, 'Are you playing live?' Hmm, let me think about that," Manning adds. "We have one German, one Australian and one Yorkshireman. It's not that easy to get us all together."

With budgets remaining modest, is there a frustration then that Damanek can't yet go out and promote their new album on tour?

"It's all very well this beautiful image of the band being on the road: a lovely tour coach with the roadies going on ahead and setting up all the screens and lighting – not for us, I'm afraid," Manning says with an edged humour. "We're a small, independent band in an increasingly growing market of other bands all competing against each other to try and get our five minutes in the spotlight before we become yesterday's fish and chip paper."

"We had a whole raft of problems from one thing after another. Just getting the album finished has been stop-start, stop-start all the way along."

got. That's the way I express myself. I'd like to write a book one day, but I don't think that's really me. Music is probably my medium for getting the message across."

He's credited as writing Damanek's new album, and he's a chap whose musical DNA touches various corners of the spectrum. When it comes to musical inspiration, Manning name-checks Jethro Tull, Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan and Weather Report, as well as world music.

"I think what I write is like a big bucket with a stick. There's influences poured into it, and songs just turn out the way they turn out, because that's just the way the magic happens," he says. "I just let it evolve and hope it sounds good at the end, and hope other people think it sounds okay too."

Manning works up ideas in his home studio, conjuring up demos with programmed drums and music – "far too many instruments if you ask Sean, because I put everything and the kitchen sink into it". It's not a case of jamming out riffs as a band in a sweaty rehearsal room, energising off human connection, though. Damanek is truly an international affair – Manning lives in Yorkshire, Timms is over in Australia and Arnold is based in



(Wood)wind beneath his wings: multi-instrumentalist Marek Arnold.

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But the hope is to play live some day, if the stars, and schedules, align.

"This year is a sort of a hiatus for us, but Sean is busy," Manning adds. "In terms of where you could take the album, I'm not sure there's much more we can do other than to have produced the best thing we could possibly have done within our capability. I think the people who like us like us, and the people who don't like us don't like us. I think we've probably picked up some fans with this new album, because it's gone down remarkably well. The other two went down really well as well. The trouble is to go down critically well is wonderful and as an artist and the guys in the band, we love to hear that people like us. But does that transfer into sales? Probably not. A lot of people like it, but they'll be running off to some sort of site in Russia to get their copy."

"People are saying they think it's the best yet, which is lovely to hear. But we're not going to be able to suddenly go, 'Wow this is the album, we're all going to retire and live off the proceeds and buy ourselves a tour bus and do a world tour on the back of it.'" 📞

Making Shore is out now via GEP. See www.damanek.com for more information.