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Prog Reviewer

★★★★★ I only just got to know about Damanek and Guy Manning a couple of months ago. I was checking out bands that Marek Arnold (keyboards and saxophone) played in because he's been in a lot, including Seven Steps to the Green Door, Toxic Smile, Flaming Row, and Cyril to name but a few. I was excited to discover that Damanek also included Sean Timms (keyboards) whom I knew of from Southern Empire and also the defunct Unitopia. Who was Guy Manning (vocals, keyboards, bouzouki, mandolin, acoustic guitars, etc.)? As it turned out, he has quite the curriculum vitae himself, having recorded a dozen or so solo albums under the name Manning and as well having been in The Tangent and 90 degrees or Parallel. I didn't know anything about bassist Dan Mash, but if this band isn't as good as a supergroup by members, then it most certainly is by musical quality.

After falling totally in love with the debut "On Track" (and picking up a couple of Manning albums as well), I was excited to hear that a second album was due out by early autumn. I had no doubt that it would be a first class piece of work as the same line-up was to appear once more.

"In Flight" does everything to live up to the musical prowess of the debut. These four extremely talented and well-experienced men concoct a type of progressive music that does not come across as contrived or forced ("We're a prog band so we're going to astound you with our speedy playing in odd time signatures and frequently change tempo and rhythm!"). Each track feels created for the purpose of the song with the music complementing the lyrics and vocals. But this is not just mature and intelligent pop music. You can still expect the unexpected!

Take for example the almost gospel sway and groove in "Skyboat" or the how the suspenseful "The Crawler" abruptly becomes one of the year's most catchy, melodic tunes with the chorus. This track also showcases the talents of all the musicians with organ, saxophone, and guitar solos done in a very relaxed and almost lounge style. Marek Arnold plays in swing and lounge jazz bands, so his sax chops smoothly fit in with the music here.

There's a fair bit of easy listening prog on this album but by no means light-weight prog. "Moon Catcher" makes a terrific lullaby, and parts of the three-part "Big Eastern" can also soothe and relax. But there are enough upbeat moments to keep you from drifting away in your armchair. "The Crossing" is as close to a rocker as these lads will take you without straying into any typical rock and roll. And the song has its own surprise with a laid back blues guitar-like solo and violin and sax solos to follow. There's a complement of guests with some electric guitar players to deliver a bit of bite and crunch for effect when needed as well as some sweet solos and accents.

The final three tracks which comprise the epic piece "Big Eastern" are indeed a cornucopia of fabulous music and yet more unexpected delights. There is a strong Oriental theme that often crops up at times, and I absolutely adore hearing the Chinese-sounding music because I enjoy a lot of the music from the first three albums of China's international sensation, The Twelve Girls Band, who play traditional and modern compositions on traditional Chinese instruments. Oh, man, that part around 4:00 in part 1 "Cruel Skies" is just so sweet to hear! That surely must be Sean Timms influence in places when a world music theme takes over for a spell. A spell to captivate and delight! The "So get on your knees" part near the end of part two will have up want to get up on your feet and dance! When it was clear that the final part was reaching its finale, I felt disappointed because this beautiful, incredible, and marvelous album had come to an end. Just one more track, please!

I could go on about how much I love Damanek and their two albums and how great this one is. It's funny because as of late I'm really into extreme metal and yet this album just totally sweeps me off my feet. How could I give it anything less than a perfect score?!