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# Album Reviews



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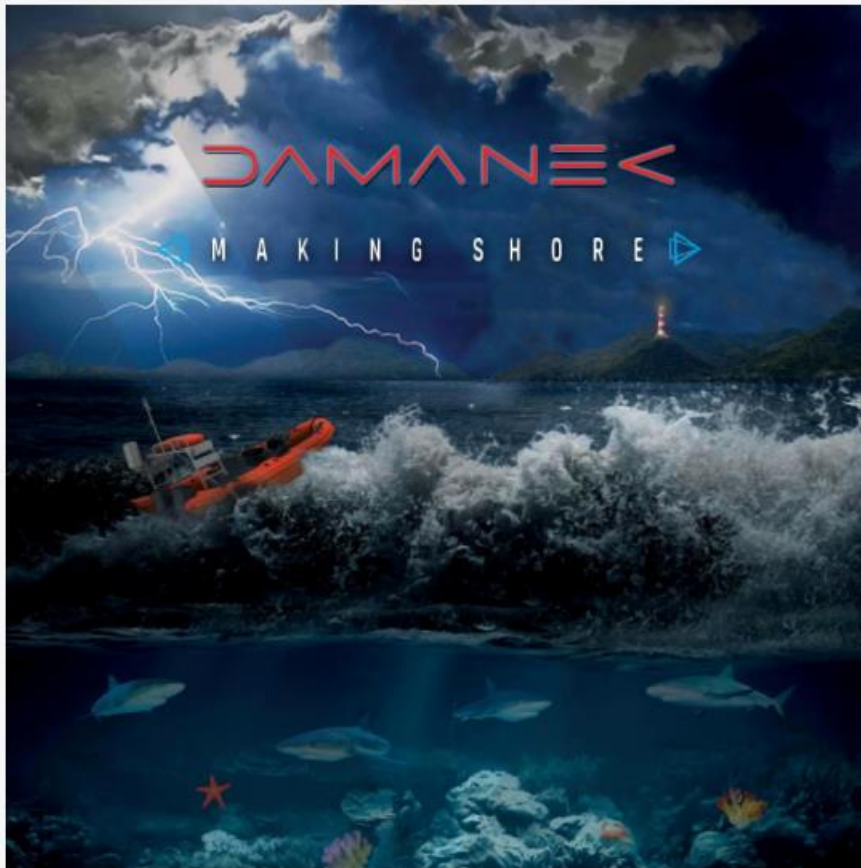
ROUND TABLE REVIEW

### Damanek — Making Shore

country: **UK**

year: **2023**

time: **71:58**





Formed in 2016, the international prog collective Damanek released the excellent *On Track* in 2017, followed by *In Flight* which, in my opinion, was the album highlight of 2018. For this long-awaited third album, three of the four core members return (namely Guy Manning, Marek Arnold and Sean Timms) but they are without bassist Dan Mash. For the uninitiated, the band's name is an abbreviated combination of Dan, Manning and Marek so in future, they may have to consider Semanek or Timanek as an alternative!

Manning is a multi-talented songwriter and musician whose career I have followed for the past 20 years. In addition to his numerous solo albums, he has been involved in several bands, and he was a founding member of **The Tangent**. He is responsible for the music and lyrics on *Making Shore* which is divided into two parts. On the Damanek website, Manning describes part one as "songs with socio/economic/political themes whilst putting a central character at the heart of the narrative" and part two (*Oculus*) as "an epic gothic and literary flight of fancy!" Surely that has to be a firm basis for a prog-rock album.

Sean Timm's CV includes **Southern Empire**. He was also keyboard player with one of Australia's finest exports, the sadly defunct **Unitopia**. Based in Germany, Marek Arnold's genre-hopping saxophone virtuosity has featured in several bands and graced numerous albums. The trio are supported by a host of guest musicians and backing singers. The Covid pandemic was partly responsible for the protracted period that separates *In Flight* and *Making Shore* but time has not blunted the band's flair for melody, inventive arrangements and superb musicianship.

*A Mountain of Sky* is a suitably upbeat opener, led by Arnold's lively sax-playing with keyboard embellishments. Manning's familiar but distinctive vocal is front and centre, and the sprightly rhythms border on ska and bossa-nova at times. Around the halfway mark, a lengthy instrumental sequence features noodling synth and sax exchanges and Southern Empire guitarist Cam Blokland cuts loose with a gritty solo.

*Back2Back* follows in a similar buoyant vein, providing a springboard for sax and guitar soloing, before easing down a gear for the atmospheric *Noon Day Candles*. Manning's vocal is suitably moody, and the lyrics typically forthright in this song about inequality and global child hunger.

Like many of the songs, *Americana* captures the mood of the subject with its funky rhythm, jazzy piano solo and a strong choral hook. Likewise, *In Deep Blue (Sea Songs Pt. 1)* boasts a memorable vocal melody reminiscent of **Neil Young's** *After the Gold Rush*. *Reflections on Copper* is one of the more quirky offerings with a bubbly synth solo that brings to mind **Keith Emerson's** solo on **ELP's** *From the Beginning*.

*Crown of Thorns (Sea Songs Pt. 2)* provides a lively finish to part one, with staccato power chords, organ, piano and a gutsy rhythm from Southern Empire drummer Brody Thomas Green and bassist Nick Sinclair. An instrumental break featuring a wurlitzer-like organ and sax is an unexpected respite before the powerful finale.

Manning is a fan of 1970s prog rock and in that golden era, the 32-minute *Oculus* would have almost filled an entire LP. He's no stranger to epic-length suites as his solo albums testify, and more specifically the impressive three-part *Big Eastern* that concluded the *In Flight* album. Although the five-part *Oculus* is ambitious in scope, it does lack a sense of continuity. The instrumental *Overture* features lively piano, synth and tuned percussion, punctuated by strident sax fanfares. It is perhaps a tad over-long however, reaching a majestic climax around the six-minute mark before an extended minor key coda.

The mid-tempo *Act I: Spot the Difference?* is slight on melody but strong on instrumentation and drama. *Act II: The Corridor* hits the ground running and doesn't ease up, with Manning's singing at its energetic best. The brass stabs, courtesy of Arnold and trumpet player Riley Nixon-Burns, are superb. It segues into *Act III: Passive Ghost*, a mellow offering with a thoughtful vocal backed by a tasteful arrangement of piano and keyboard strings. *Act IV: A Welcoming Hand* is introduced by an edgy instrumental build. The verses are atmospheric and the song really kicks up its heels with a grandstanding sax solo, before racing headlong to its frantic, guitar-led conclusion.

At times, *Making Shore* does sound like a Manning solo album which is not necessarily a bad thing. There's no denying the considerable input of Arnold and Timms, however. Saxophones feature prominently throughout, as do the rich keyboard textures and orchestrations, whilst the production and sonic clarity is exceptional.



As you carefully prize the lid open and explore the musical content of Damanek's latest release, the satisfying aroma of a variety of melodic fragrances fill the air and vibrantly emerge. A twisting jam jar of absorbing tales, pithy observations and heartfelt experiences waits for anyone who gently delves into *Making Shore*.

The album contains thoughtful lyrics and the songs deal with several contemporary issues. For example, listeners are left to ponder the effects of climate change in the excellent *Back2Back* and the problem of ocean pollution is highlighted in *Crown Of Thorns*. The effective use of a succession of single words creates a dramatic and long-lasting effect in the atmospheric *Noon Day Candles*. This is a piece that illuminates the issue of child starvation and hunger.

Over the years, Guy Manning has certainly developed as a songwriter. He has always had a penchant for creating tunes that are decorated by beautiful melodies and wry observations on the state of the world. If you're not familiar with Manning's output over the years, I urge you to check out tunes from his extensive discography such as *Flight 19*, *Blue Girl* and *Antares*. Or for something a bit more challenging, explore his extended piece *Ragged Curtains* with its beautiful refrain: "It's written in the Stars".

However, since his participation in Damanek, Manning has taken his undoubted compositional skills to a higher level. It appears that the instrumental prowess of Arnold and Timms and the outstanding contribution of several guest artists along the way, have provided Manning with some of the ingredients that were necessary to develop and hone his art. On the evidence of the overall excellence of *Making Shore*, Manning has grasped the opportunity with both hands.

*In Deep Blue* must be one of the most heartfelt tunes Manning has written since *In My Life* that featured on his debut *Tall Stories For Small Children* release in 1999.

*In Deep Blue* is a tune that Manning wrote about his son. His feeling of pride in his offspring's actions and achievements in overcoming difficulties is sincerely recounted and heartfelt in its expression. It's a song that has a glorious melody and offers a memorable chorus; one that resides in the senses long after the piece has subsided.

*Crown Of Thorns* is an interesting piece. It begins in an exciting and pulsating manner. Its initial up-tempo nature is extremely satisfying. Later the piece unexpectedly morphs to offer a poignant and slower interlude. At this point, Manning's voice takes on an emotive air as he declares 'Down here in the blue of blues'.

I don't normally compare Manning's songwriting to **Ian Anderson's** but the rhythmic structure and mood of *Crown Of Thorns* is somewhat reminiscent of the type of approach that Anderson frequently adopts. Just like Anderson at his most evocative, Manning at his best, mixes changes in pace and interesting rhythms into the core of a tune. He skilfully enables this mix to seamlessly coalesce with reflective passages, beautiful melodies, and meaningful words. Certainly aspects of the sing-along melody of the reflective interlude, and the unexpected transition from the upbeat to the tranquil, recalled several of the differing moods contained in the **Jethro Tull** track *Old Aces Die Hard*.

The instrumental beginning of *Oculus* is crammed with atmospheric keyboards. The overall energy, sound and approach in this introductory section found me reaching for comparisons with **Eddie Jobson's** dramatic piano and keyboard sound featured in Jethro Tull's A era.

*Oculus* is probably the album's peak. In this lengthy and imposing opus divided into five pieces, the full gamut of Manning's skill as a songwriter and composer are revealed. The piece includes some accessible interludes where tunefulness and melodic beauty are to the fore. The epic composition has rousing choruses and dramatic instrumental flourishes. The whole piece has a magnificent finale.

Much of *Oculus* is written in the first person and the way in which this is used to exhibit intense feelings and thoughts, is reminiscent of some of **Phideaux's** best lyrical work exhibited in his extended tunes such as *Chupacabras*, where Phideaux takes on the role of Chupacabras and declares to the world 'I will Live again'.

Whilst the subject of the two pieces is totally different, the use of the first person in each, offers an intense connection with the writer's observations and makes the experience more memorable because of that.

The production values of *Making Shore* are excellent and every instrument can be clearly defined. Marek Arnold's saxophone frequently gives the music a different voice and the resonance of the sax perfectly complements both Manning's voice and Sean Timms' wonderful keyboard work. Arnold's playing in the outstanding *Reflections On Copper* is delightful.



*Reflections On Copper* is probably one of my favourite pieces on the album. The synth intro snakes, twists and turns in a mesmerising manner, but the piece's crowning glory is undoubtedly the wonderful chorus and its enchantingly beautiful melody that lodges in the memory and touches the heart.

Cam Blokland plays electric guitar on most of the tunes and there are a few occasions when he lets his fingers fly. His solo in the funky *Back-to-Back* is great and offers a different complexion and a tint of abrasive colours to the canvass of the tune. His solo in the conclusion of the album during *A Welcoming Hand* is equally impressive.

The album is carefully packaged and the informative booklet has a full array of images to support the lyrical content of the release.

*Making Shore* is a release that will gain Damanek many admirers. It ticks many of the boxes for prog aficionados and it is undoubtedly their most satisfying release yet. If you like well-constructed tunes that are enhanced with impressive musicianship and embellished with some outstanding solo parts, then you may well find *Making Shore* very satisfying.

I certainly thoroughly enjoyed it!





I know the term super-group has been bandied around a little too often but when you consider the depth of experience, the quality of musicianship and the overall enjoyment one can have for a band's music, then surely the term must be re-evaluated to see if it is warranted. I think in its current formation and especially with their third album, the band Damanek can rightly claim that title along with their rivals from across the ditch and who go by the name of **Flying Colors**. Both bands have been credited recently with creating some stunningly addictive, yet highly accessible and memorable music which crosses the boundaries between progressive rock, pop and jazz along with rich, well-structured songwriting that retains its compelling allure throughout each album's duration.

The members of Damanek certainly have the runs on the board, but for those unfamiliar with the name, Guy Manning should be credited with getting the ball rolling as he began with his first major band, **Parallel Or 90 Degrees** along with Andy Tillison back in 1996, followed by his time with **The Tangent** (2002 - 2010) and **United Progressive Fraternity** (2013).

In addition to this, Guy has no less than 15 well-rated and reviewed solo albums along with other collaborations with a plethora of fellow minstrels. Sean Timms cut his teeth with a popular local Australian band called **Mondo Rock**. That band included Ross Wilson from **Daddy Cool** who were credited with the overplayed song called *Eagle Rock*. Outside the Antipodes, both bands probably never floated above the Plimsoll Line, as I don't believe much of their music was highly regarded overseas in the way that bands such as Icehouse, Midnight Oil, INXS, or Crowded House might have been.

Nevertheless, Sean soon found fame during his tenure with the brilliant but short-lived **Unitopia** which was, surprise, surprise also a very good Australian progressive band that sadly disbanded in 2014. He also contributed to another two well regarded albums by local Australian band, **Southern Empire**. Finally, Marek Arnold, making the third member of this triumvirate and who hails from Germany, has also been involved with many bands including, **Toxic Smile, Cyril, Flaming Row, Seven Steps To The Green Door, Stern Combo Meissen** and local band **U.P.F.**

With such a formidable line-up you would hope the quality of the album's contents matches the pedigree of the band's members. Thankfully, the material presented with their latest album is right up there with their best music and even surpasses the brilliance found on *In Flight*.

Guy Manning, who is credited with writing all the lyrics and compositions, has hit this one right out of the park. Some comments are floating about that suggest that Guy sounds a little like Ian Anderson (**Jethro Tull**) and while Ian's voice is sadly all but shot these days, I am sure Guy is happy to pick up where Ian left off. Yes, there are vague similarities but from my perspective not enough to sway you one way or the other. His voice has never sounded better, while the strength of his songwriting delves further into the ether with some challenging subject that includes the solitude and isolation of Mount Everest, the decline of the Great Barrier Reef, over-population, dementia, child hunger and climate change to name a few.

The album is quite long at over 92 minutes but the music flows and develops well without outstaying its welcome. The final song, *Oculus*, in five parts and clocking in at over 31 minutes is a real show-stopper, while the remainder of the album contains no filler or weak tracks at all.

Musically, the album is very punchy with plenty of diversity and a freshness that only comes from the pen of a mature and well-articulated songsmith. When one considers how highly rated most of Guy's solo albums have been, along with all the input these other members have created, it really begs the question, at what point will musicians of this talent finally be recognised for their brilliance? They have all collectively been at their craft for a very long time, but I believe this will be the album that helps to carve their names amongst prog rock's immortals.

It should also be noted that this is the first album whereby the band have sought some crowdfunding but when one considers the extraordinary costs involved in producing music these days, it stands to reason that more bands are calling upon this medium to get their music released and their messages heard on a wider stage.

I'm not going to belabour the point with a song by song description at this stage, but you can take it to the bank that this is one album that should not disappoint. Full of mature and well crafted songs including two fantastic epics, this should appeal to a large cross-section of progressive rock fans. If you have not yet tried this band, here is a great place to start, but be warned, once you are bitten by the bug, you will need very deep pockets to grab the other fantastic albums credited to these under-rated maestros. Great work guys!