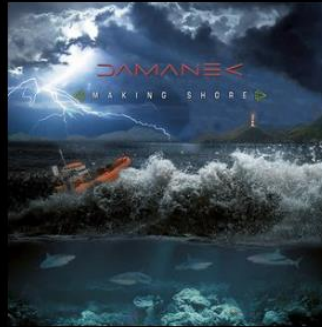


DAMANЕК “MAKING SHORE” REVIEW BY LAZLAND

Lazland

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It is the last day of the first month of the year as I write this review. This is rather early to be making bold statements about the finest albums of 2023, or at least it would be under normal circumstances. However, having listened to this album initially on iTunes, and then rushing off to click on the purchase button at my old friends at Caerlysi Music to get the CD, I can quite honestly state that if you, dear reader, buy only one album this year, then ensure that you purchase Making Shore by Damanek, the project of multi-instrumentalist Guy Manning, Southern Empire's Sean Timms (keyboards and programming) and Marek Arnold (Sax & seaboard/keyboards). This album really is that good.

The work is divided into two distinct parts, with Part One containing seven songs dealing with contemporary issues, and the whole of Part Two given over to Oculus, described by the band themselves as "an epic gothic and literary flight of fancy".

There is an array of guest musicians, including Timms's bandmates Brody Green on drums and Cam Blokland on electric guitars.

A Mountain of Sky introduces proceedings. The lyrics reference the Mahalangur section of The Himalayas. A flute and sound effects start before we are treated to a jazz wonderland, but including some very telling rock interludes, especially when the guitar riffs reference the category 5 hurricanes and freezing jet stream blast. The track perfectly exemplifies the isolation and wonder of a beautiful part of our world with vocal chants intertwined with swirling keyboards, a very complex thundering rhythm section and above all the sax which rises above the ground to that low oxygen height. Included in all of this is some pure reggae, and listening to this track persuaded me to click on buy before even sampling the rest, because its joy is in its eclecticism.

Back2Back follows. We live in strange and disturbing times, with the twin threats of war (a perennial aspect of the human condition) and the modern crisis of climate change brought about by the rape of our planet. Manning is right that it is not too late to make a choice and cause a change, but by God, the clock really is ticking. There is a delicious bassline simmering underneath the main song, a funk delight, and this is courtesy of Australian Nick Sinclair. Blokland provides us with a fresh and rhythmic guitar riff, and Arnold the lead on his sax. Given the subject matter, you might expect some kind of dark and dystopian piece, but it really is quite the opposite; vocally and musically it is light, fresh, and cheering, and I believe this is because of the core message that we can change, a case of glass half full, not half empty, if we can take it upon ourselves to wake up and mature. I love this track, a real highlight of recent listening.

Noon Day Candles is up next. A very simple message – stand together against inequality. Light a candle as one, and ask our leaders how, when we can put a man on the moon, we cannot ensure that every child is fed? Musically, the opening passage is full of eastern mystery, with the strings and hand drums. The candle in the noon chorus is delicate and feeling, and Manning's one-word vocals are so powerfully understated, they scream at the injustice without raising a threatening noise at all. The sax, vocals, and keyboards all combine to create a wonderful pastoral feel, showing the main protagonists in the finest light, and Jonathan Barrett adds to the feel with some impressive fretless bass work. Closing the track is a piano solo of the highest order, drawing emotion.

Americana tells us of a traditional Mid-West family struggling on their farm with poverty and violent weather. I think this track must have been influenced by Steinbeck's seminal work, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In its delivery, the track reminds me very strongly in places of Gabriel's Barry Williams Show (of all things). It is quirky and contains the same almost spoken narrative. Towards the end, the strong jazz sensibilities heard earlier in the album reassert themselves.

In Deep Blue is the first of two Sea Songs. The song is dedicated to Guy's youngest child, who has Aspergers Syndrome (as does my son) and relates to a decision to have a go at scuba diving. The ability of our children to surprise and delight us never fails to bring a smile to my face, and this track, above everything else, makes me happy listening to it, given that it is a story of a parent's love and is wonderfully descriptive in its telling of the dive itself. If I hear a better noise this year than the (short) sax solos and backing vocals in this track, it will be special indeed.

Reflections on Copper very cleverly captures the personal tragedy of dementia, with the still impeccable appearance of the subject melded with the loss of mental function. This is a modern blues song, and is very strongly performed, with the keyboards especially putting across that confusion, and Riley Nixon-Burns giving us a forlorn trumpet before this segues into a desperately sad Arnold solo. This is a vital commentary on a modern pandemic crying out for a scientific miracle.

Crown of Thorns, the second Sea Song, closes the first part of the album. Lyrically, the song reflects on coral-eating starfish and the devastation these inflict on reefs when the population grows too much. I love the keyboard work on this and fans of Tull, especially, will enjoy the track. The final couple of minutes provide for a rock out contrast to the quirkiness of the preceding passages.

I think it is fair to say that Part Two will appeal to "traditional" prog rock fans more than Part One.

Our hero looks into the mirror, and discovers parallel realities, with endless series of self trailing behind and stretching in front.

The Overture takes in over nine minutes of instrumental progressive rock heaven. Flute, piccolo, string effects, grandiose synths, urgent piano, swirling sax combine to create a symphonic pastiche that is so clearly influenced by the great and the good of yesteryear, but delivered in such a loving and modern fashion, you really cannot help but fall head over heels for this introduction to the flight of fancy.

Act I, Spot the Difference, introduces us to the metaphorical looking glass. There are a lot of words packed into the just over four minutes of music here. In between the words, there are some achingly beautiful notes from the sax, and the guitars, keys, and percussion bring back a strong pastoral sense to the album.

Act II is The Corridor, a more expansive piece with loud and proud bursts of chords on the keys and some percussive noises *a la* Wind & Wuthering. I do especially like the vocal harmonies on display in this section which is, at its core, an operatic story telling us of our hero's journey between worlds and dimensions.

Act III is Passive Ghost and the keys at the start are evocative and quite beautiful. Our hero is now impotent in his exile on the other side of the mirror. Vocally and musically, this section is a delight, delicate, thoughtful, and immersing the listener in this lost world.

We close with Act IV, A Welcoming Hand. There is initially a shock with the mirror turning black and the fear that he will be stuck on the other side forever, before the said hand reaches out and normality is restored, with a vow never to return. The track ends with some brass booming out and a sense of relief in the expressive guitar riffs and driving keys and rhythm section.

There is always a danger that such pieces of music, especially in the progressive rock world, can be overblown and, not to put too fine a point on it, disappearing up its own arse.

This is most definitely not the case with Oculus. I know not, and I would like to interview Guy to find out, but I think this fantasy is rooted in the real world, perhaps from a reflection on self, or from an event such as the pandemic and coming out the other side, vowing to do things differently in the future. Whatever the root meaning, Oculus has a depth and urgency which is thoroughly modern, whilst also putting us in mind of prog days of yore – this is a very difficult thing to do, because the danger is that you merely become derivative, and this trio most certainly avoid this with aplomb.

Making Shore is a wonderful album, a triumph, and really cannot be recommended highly enough.

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