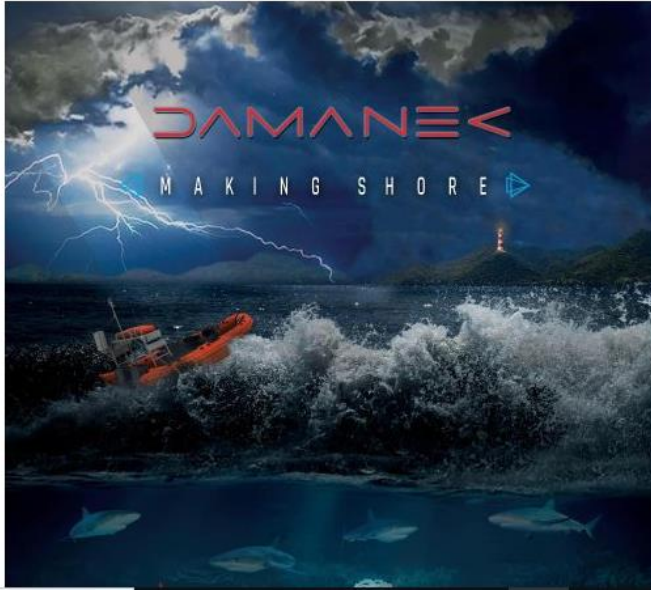


DAMANEK – MAKING SHORE (GEP)

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For those unaware of the origins of DamaneK, or indeed the odd-sounding name, the band came about as a partnership between vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Guy Manning, sax and keys man Marek Arnold, bassist Dan Mash and keyboardist Sean Timms, together with guitarist Luke Machin. The name being formed from a rough conglomeration of letters in their names, they recorded two very strong albums in the 'accessible prog' vein (*On Track* and *In Flight*), but with these appearing in 2017 and 2018 respectively, I – probably not alone in this misconception – had assumed that DamaneK were sadly a defunct entity. The appearance of this album (minus Mash and Machin, but aided by several guest musicians) is a welcome confirmation that such was not the case. Like the Monty Python parrot, they were merely 'resting' – and presumably pining not so much for the fjords as for the stage.

So what do we get with this release? Well, first of all it is important to stress that the album is very deliberately laid out in two distinct 'sections' – the first part being a number of generally unrelated songs concerned with various socio-political-economic themes, and the second being a much more fantasy-oriented suite entitled *Oculus*, covering thirty minutes or so in all. It is clear that individual tastes may lead many to favour one over the other, so let's have a look at them in turn. The first part begins in enormously strong fashion with the ode to the might of Everest and the sheer enormity of nature, *A Mountain Of Sky*. A seven-minute piece with a good claim to be the best on the album, it is a near perfect example of a song with just enough prog structure and instrumentation (and the odd little 'twiddly bit' when appropriate) to satisfy the hardcore prog crowd, while also possessing an accessibility, energy and sense of the grandiose to make it able to appeal to everyone across the whole rock spectrum. It's a fine opener indeed, though it is certainly the most overtly 'prog rock' piece in the first section of the album.

Elsewhere we move through such subjects as overpopulation, global famine, climate change, American midwest 'dustbowl' farmers, coastal erosion, dementia and even a very personal tribute to Guy's own son in the song In Deep Blue. The musical accompaniment in this first group of songs varies from jazzy material (powered by Marek's sax), windswept and rustic Americana, Steely Dan-esque cool and even a bit of unashamed neo-prog – with a good amount of laid-back rumination thrown in. This isn't an album to get your prog-metal jollies to, and nor is it any kind of symphonic, mellotron-drenched retro affair. It is, however, for the most part a very well constructed and played set of material, with thought-provoking lyrics.

The strongest pieces, musically, for me, are probably the hypnotic creeping of the famine-related Noon Day Candles, the aptly titled Americana and the lament for the Great Barrier Reef which is Crown Of Thorns (subtitled Sea Song Number 2, following from Number 1, which is In Deep Blue, detailing Guy's son overcoming his Aspergers condition to go scuba diving unaccompanied, to the obvious pride of the family). Americana possesses the appropriate musical accompaniment for its look at the plight of Mid-Western US farmers, with a real feel of the work put out by The Band on albums such as *Music From Big Pink* and their self-titled second album. This is cleverly mixed, however, with jazzy elements which conjure up parts of Frank Zappa's *Hot Rats* masterpiece, producing a Band/Zappa hybrid which I would never have imagined, and yet which works perfectly. Crown Of Thorns is partly low-key, and would suffer for that coming on the heels of two preceding pieces very much in that vein, but it pulls in effectively contrasting moments of drama to make it a very strong way to see out this first half of the album.



There are some lesser moments along the way to these ears, with a couple of tracks in particular failing to really engage. The neo-prog of Back2Back, with its overpopulation theme, is well played without ever really seeming to take real flight, and doesn't leave too much of a memory. Elsewhere, Reflections On Copper features a heartfelt and heartbreaking lyric about the lonely, silent curse of dementia, but really cries out for real emotional heft, while it is in fact a very reflective piece which aims for a thoughtful treatment but, to me at least, does not infuse the words with the gravitas they deserve. Still, that's a pretty good hit-rate up to now – and real lovers of sax will most likely get a lot more from Marek's excellent contributions than do casual jazz *dilettantes* such as myself!

With all of this earthbound socio-ecologically aware material coming to an end, those who love a good old fashioned sprawling and fantastical prog romp will see their cards well and truly stamped by the five-part, 30-minute *Oculus*. Opening with a nine-minute, instrumental Overture, and continuing through four 'acts', it weaves a tale involving time travel, and a man going backwards and forwards in his own life. The lyrics and the whole narrative explanation are easily available (they can all be found, helpfully, on the Damanek website itself), so I will not issue any spoilers, but it is an involving and at times emotional ride, with twists in the tail. The music is far more expansively 'prog', especially in the Overture, while elsewhere Guy allows his admitted big influence of Ian Anderson to roam the studio on Act I – Spot The Difference (which, were it a latter day Jethro Tull song, would be viewed as a major work), and the finale of Act IV – A Welcoming Hand sees things go out in a true, cathartic blaze of triumphant glory. Overall it is a very skilfully put together piece, which sees Guy himself taking his lyrics in an entirely different direction – exploring more metaphorical and allusive imagery in places, as opposed to the very literal, almost 'protest song' approach of the first half. Oh, and as someone who has had to have my own four-legged best friend put to sleep only this past week, the line 'I can walk my old dog again...' brought more than a single tear to my eye, I will gladly admit...

As stated earlier, some may have a clear preference for one or the other of the two 'halves' here (with A Mountain Of Sky probably straddling every camp), but both are equally valid in their own different artistic aims. If you liked the previous two Damanek albums, you won't find anything not to love about this one, while the breadth of styles attempted may just make this the most ambitious of the three. Dive in, and aim for shore...



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