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Guy Manning –
Q & A Article and Damanek
“On Track” Review





GUY MANNING

After debuting at last year's Summer's End festival to great success, Damanek have now released their debut album *On Track*. Featuring members of Southern Empire and United Progressive Fraternity as well as various special guests, Damanek are an exciting progressive prospect. We speak to frontman Guy Manning to find out more...

Words: Dave Ling **Portrait:** Katja Ogrin

As a past member of Parallel Or 90 Degrees and The Tangent among others, and also leader of his own group Manning, singer/multi-instrumentalist Guy Manning sought something different with his new band Damanek, blending references to his co-conspirators – the letters 'DA' representing Maschine bassist Dan Mash, 'MA' signifying Manning and 'EK' for saxophonist Marek Arnold – into their name. It was

afterwards that Sean Timms, keyboardist of Southern Empire and Unitopia, joined the project and that Guy learned Damanek is a real place in Kosovo. Regardless, he kept it.

On Track is a thought-provoking set that features a phalanx of guest players, including Maschine's Luke Machin, Southern Empire's Brody Thomas Green and Soul Secret's Antonio Vitozzi.

With personnel arriving from Australia and Germany, Damanek could well have been under-prepared at Summer's End, but the reaction was great!

Luckily, the pedigree of the band – myself excluded – is remarkably good. Everybody turned up very well-prepared and two days of rehearsal got us through. I was apprehensive because at Summer's End two years earlier with United Progressive Fraternity we were unprepared, but last year went as well as it could have done.

Prog's review of the show likened Damanek to "the funkier, jazz-fusion side of Toto".

Well, that's okay. Toto are a remarkably good band. If people consider Damanek catchy that pleases me. We're not Henry Cow. We're not even really that proggy. It's more like the progressive side of Tears For Fears.

Quirky-jerky time changes are thin on the ground, certainly.

I put in a few just to keep the brain cells active but

they're not clever-clever. "Here's a signature in 7/8." The idea was to combine melodic songs with a decent set of lyrics.

Those words tackle a variety of ecological and society-based issues. *Long Time, Shadow Falls*, for instance, paints an evocative picture of a black-maned lion standing on a Kalahari dune. Was that from first-hand experience?

It's from imagination, though I always do lots of research. With enough of that, you don't have to drop your guts onto the page – you can use little pieces to tell the story.

With extinction of so many species a real possibility, what would you do hunters of elephants, rhinos and hippos?

If they had ivory on them I can think of a couple of suggestions, but I'm not a violent man and the only way to stop hunting is a massive policing presence, which is impossible. And of course people who are struggling to live will kill animals to eat. But in 20 years from now the only African elephants we'll see will be in zoos.

Was it perhaps incongruous to match observations upon civilisation's decay with a soulful, funky and cheerful backdrop in *Believer* – *Redeemer*?

That's my Marvin Gaye moment, isn't it? Guy Manning's *What's Going On*? On my TV, I'm bombarded with images of rioting and overturned cars. I'm a past-60-year-old gentleman and my days of protesting are past. But I can write a song that tries to get everyone to realise the clock is ticking. The human race is wiping itself out.

You predict a "tipping point" – how far away are we?

That's tough to answer. In Skye, there's a long way to go, but in Brixton or on the streets of America we're nearly there. There can be a fight over taking someone's carrier bag in Sainsbury's. Social media over-amplifies that, and I find it disturbing.

Trump's election has poured gasoline upon the fire of issues such as global warming, which he doesn't believe exists.

That's what epic album closer *Dark Sun* is about, right?

I've written about global warming for many years before Donald, but it's mainly about air pollution – a dystopian vision where the air is so thick with toxins that the sun is no longer visible. The song says that there is a solution, and it's time. It takes one first step, but having the solution doesn't mean that people will buy into it. The penny will drop but not until the problems are staring us in the face, by which time it will be too late.

There was some leftover material, and you're about to fly to Australia to write with Southern Empire's Sean Timms and Mark Trueack of United Progressive Fraternity. How soon could we hear a second Damanek album?

I wrote enough songs for three albums, but with everyone being so busy I expect to be sitting on [the remainder] for some time.

Will you encourage the others to contribute?

Yes, of course. Just because I have another eight pieces ready for Damanek II, there's no law that says I must write everything.

Damanek's site predicts a Southern Empire tour of the UK in the autumn. As Giant Electric Pea label-mates, could some co-headline dates be feasible?

It's a very interesting idea, but this year has mainly been put aside for Southern Empire, so I don't want to tread on anyone's toes. We'd like to tour but I know I've got to be patient.

Finally: please get some decent band photographs taken. You almost lost out on being featured in *Prog* for that very reason!

[Huffily] Oh, for goodness sake. When we played at Summer's End we didn't even have a record deal. Had I known the album would be out in May we'd have had some shots taken of us staring into the distance, but I'm afraid I don't own a crystal ball.

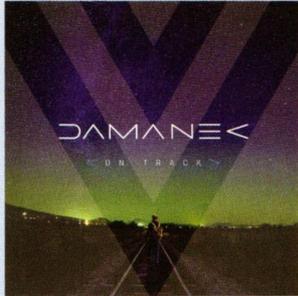
On Track is out now on GEP Records. See www.guymanning.com for more information.



DAMANEK

On Track GEP

Friends united for Guy Manning's new project.



Guy Manning has become something of a latter-day prog legend. As 'Manning' he managed to serve up an album every year for the best part of 15 years, including stand-outs like *Anser's Tree* and *Margaret's Children*. His early association with The Tangent earned him significant props during a period when prog was genuinely out-of-fashion. His combination of Al Stewart-influenced storytelling and complex arrangements has already ensured an honoured place in the pantheon. His new project Damanek deserves to push him into wider exposure.

What's outstanding is its combination of confidence and skill.

Damanek is, in many respects, the fruit of friendship. Its name derives from the band members who've worked on and off with each other over many years: Toxic Smile's Marek Arnold, Maschine's Dan Mash and Manning. Thus, Damanek: DAn, MAnning and MarEK. Sean Timms of Southern Empire completes the line-up.

The simplicity of concept ends there. *On Track* tackles bold themes, railing, by turns, about the state of the world, delving into mythologies, as well as crafting the occasional delicate piece of storytelling. Opener *Nanabohzo And The Rainbow* explores the story of a Native American trickster god and combines Manning's uncanny gift for both groove and catchy refrains. The sweeping keys of Arnold and Timms take it stratospheric. Songs like *Long Time Shadow Falls* deal with the impact of humanity on the environment, while *Big Parade* doesn't hold back in its critique of warmongering politicians. If *Madison Blue* is classic Manning territory – telling the story of a fictional girl in search of herself – *On Track* finishes with a 14-minute epic about pollution, *Dark Sun*.

This level of ambition might make *On Track* unfocused and overblown. However, Damanek are too skilled to let that happen. Certainly, *Big Parade* – with its oompah-march feel – is closer to silliness rather than satire, but what is outstanding about *On Track* is its combination of confidence and skill. Manning has never sounded more himself. On early albums, he occasionally channelled mid-era Ian Anderson. No more. The bolder production and the unifying presence of Mash, Arnold and Timms seems to have liberated him. Manning comes across as a man at peace with himself and his voice.

It helps, of course, when you have guest talents as extravagant as Luke Machin spraying pyro guitar over the tunage. However, without a presiding intelligence, individuals often add up to less than the sum of the parts. Manning supplies that and some. This album is rich, disciplined and damn catchy. Rather than being depressing, its handling of dark themes makes it a stirring call to arms.

RACHEL MANN