

## **Damanek - On Track** **By Imperial (Progressive Ears) 16/05/2017**

One of my personal highlights of last year's Summer's End Festival in Chepstow was the debut live performance of Guy Manning's new band, [Damanek](#). They played a set of new songs which was possibly a bit of a gamble – fresh songs to fresh ears. No need for concern as the set was received both warmly and enthusiastically by one and all. Now we have the debut album from this particularly stellar outfit of Guy Manning as vocalist as multi-instrumentalist, Dan Mash on bass, Marek Arnold playing saxes, clarinet, keyboards and Sean Timms playing keyboards and a bit of banjo! The band are joined by some special guests – in particular Brody Green, of Southern Empire, who makes a massive contribution with his drumming all but two of the songs on the album and Luke Machin, of Maschine, The Tangent and Kiama, playing guitars, surely one of the most respected players around at the moment. Other contributions come from long-time and much respected musical companions of Manning.

Guy Manning has, for some time, covered the themes of ecology and man's part in the shaping of the planet both through his solo work and more recently the United Progressive Fraternity project. This [Damanek](#) album, *On Track*, brings together eight songs that cover Manning's continuing concern for the Earth and the delicate and increasingly fragile relationship mankind has with it.

The album kicks off with *Nanabohzo* and the *Rainbow* landing us in Native American mythology and the tale of how *Nanabohzo* created the *Rainbow* with his creative paint palette. The rhythm that flows continuously through this piece sets the location and scenery with Marek Arnold's sax and clarinet work providing much of the colouring in. The song culminates with piano and guitar dancing toward that rainbow's end.

Next we're off to the vast plains and deserts of Africa as Manning takes the point of view of the animal species at risk of extinction due to poaching, war and man's expansionist greed. *Long Time*, *Shadow Falls* sets its tone with a lilting keyboard (SeaBoard) refrain that first put me in mind of that sumptuous beginning to Heart's *These Dreams*. A lovely heat-dappled African style backing perfectly underpins Manning's reflective and slightly melancholy lyric. One thing that has always impressed me with Guy Manning is his use of descriptive words to convey his song-stories. "Burundi echoes with empty river and the hint of a passing ivory ghost. Come away shadow. Come away with me..." And just when it couldn't get any better, Luke Machin puts in one of those fluid, Holdsworth-style guitar runs. Magical!

The *Cosmic Score* has Manning relaxing in a dark-night forest, far away from any artificial light and sound. Looking up, he ponders whether the constellations above him are a musical score set against a black manuscript. All is harmonious and timeless. How many of us, through our lives, have reflected on the feeling of oneness that music gifts us when we need comfort from all the daily rubbish we have to deal with? "Heaven's Song sustains us in our lives, tuned and moved with comfort of astral night lights." The later verse, of course, imagines how that cosmic score is being distorted by modern progress and how nature is constantly being bombarded by the ceaseless advance of mankind's need for more of everything. There is a sense of grandeur in this song, illustrating the vastness of both the planet and the problems mankind is asking it to cope with and adapt to. The band develops a shuffle that carries this tune along to accentuate the relentless nature of change. Special guest on this track is Nick Magnus who delivers some suitably grand keyboard work including a great little synthesizer solo.

The mood changes to a soul-funk groove on *Believer – Redeemer*. Meaty brass contributions light this track up as well as Dan Mash's funky bass and some George Benson-style guitar lines. Manning asks why there is so much destruction forming our daily back-drop of news when, essentially, we are all the same, if we could only

appreciate our diversity as a species. "Celebrate all the wonders of the Earth. Unique and amazing – can't you see what it's worth...live and let live, is the only way to be." The flow of this album is one of its defining features and to have this change of style at this stage provides a perfect starting point as the first of a sequence of songs that provide a lighter touch that builds toward the final, I'd suggest, set-piece of the album.

Oil Over Arabia, provides Marek Arnold the opportunity to display his considerable ability as a sax and clarinet player. I've hear his playing via other Manning contributions, UPF and his own Seven Steps to the Green Door band – also stunningly good at last year's Summer's End. He has a soprano sax style that often suggests a hint of the great Tom Scott (pick up his first LA Express album or soundtrack work – The Streets of San Francisco, Starsky and Hutch). Who can forget all that footage of burning oil fields during the Iraq war? Manning writes of the effects of all this on the wildlife in this destroyed ecosystem. Marek Arnold provides the sounds of Arabia as we imagine the ancient history of this land as a counterpoint to the havoc being played out in recent times.

Anyone who saw Damarek at the Summer's End performance last year will remember the lasting impression left by the band's imagining of Manning's song about the ridiculous nature of greed, jealousy and conflict – Big Parade. This tune, with its military style march, is carried by a different approach to a lyric than Guy's usually more serious story telling. "One little soldier takes out his gun, another little soldier joins in all the fun, a leader hits the button and a war's begun, missiles away!" This is a fun tune to illustrate serious message. I'm reminded of Country Joe McDonalds, I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixing-To-Die-Rag when I play this one. Protest songs take many styles and here Manning chooses satire to illustrate the pointlessness of war.

Sometimes, amidst all the complicated stuff of both life and music there's a need to do something different, something simpler – make a change. Madison Blue is a straightforward, simple ballad that has Guy Manning and little more than a piano telling the tale of a girl who chooses to turn away from all she knows with all its stresses and responsibilities and disappear into a different life with all its new experiences. The message is one of acceptance, "take some time, once in a while to look around you and see what's going on, and pass it along. Sign your note "Madison...thinking of you! Madison's...thinking of you!" To my ears, this is one of the best ballads that Guy Manning has ever written. It's simple, melodic and poignant.

And so to Dark Sun. Throughout this album of "protest" songs, Guy Manning has chosen to present his stories and observations in a reflective, rather wistful manner, allowing his playing and that of the other musicians on show here to provide the emotion and impact to the compliment the lyrical content. Not so with Dark Sun, where Manning provides a more brooding and sinister delivery of his words that describe a more hopeless situation for the planet, "The warming Earth takes centre stage, counting down time. And in our daily lives, we're not reading the signs, we stand at the crossroads of pollution and energy, the fuels that we burn, compress our space, welcome to the 21st Century!" The image of a "dark sun hanging in a dark sky" is brought to stark reality by a soundtrack of moody guitar and saxophone phrases backed by a wash of keys above a steady, threatening bass and drum rhythm. Such is the intense mood set by this music it often feels like the listener is struggling to breath in anything other than thick, polluted, acid air. A more up-tempo, instrumental, middle section provides a little relief before the sound of the organ leads us back into a world where we're looking for restitution, "Somewhere there's a home and we're no longer alone. Crying in the night, for second sight." until, sadly, we're thrown back into the shade of our dark sun. The closing section of the song includes a brilliantly played blue style guitar solo by Luke Machin as we slide towards our fate

Every passing year, just lately, seems to be a great year for new music of the kind I've loved for well over forty years and 2017 is shaping up to be possibly even more

memorable. Big Big Train have released their best album since *The Underfall Yard*, there's soon to be more Steven Wilson and *Cosmograf*, we've had marvellous new music from *Magenta*, *White Willow* and *The Barock Project* to name but a few and my real favourites, *The Tangent*, have a new one out in July - I've heard it, it's as good as they get! In a packed field it would be easy to miss out on the winners but I have a feeling that *Damanek's On Track* will be pushing up on the outside and may very well be near the front on the run in to the finishing line. Don't miss out - this is a special album and it's a proper full-on band album. I'd put a pound or two on it!