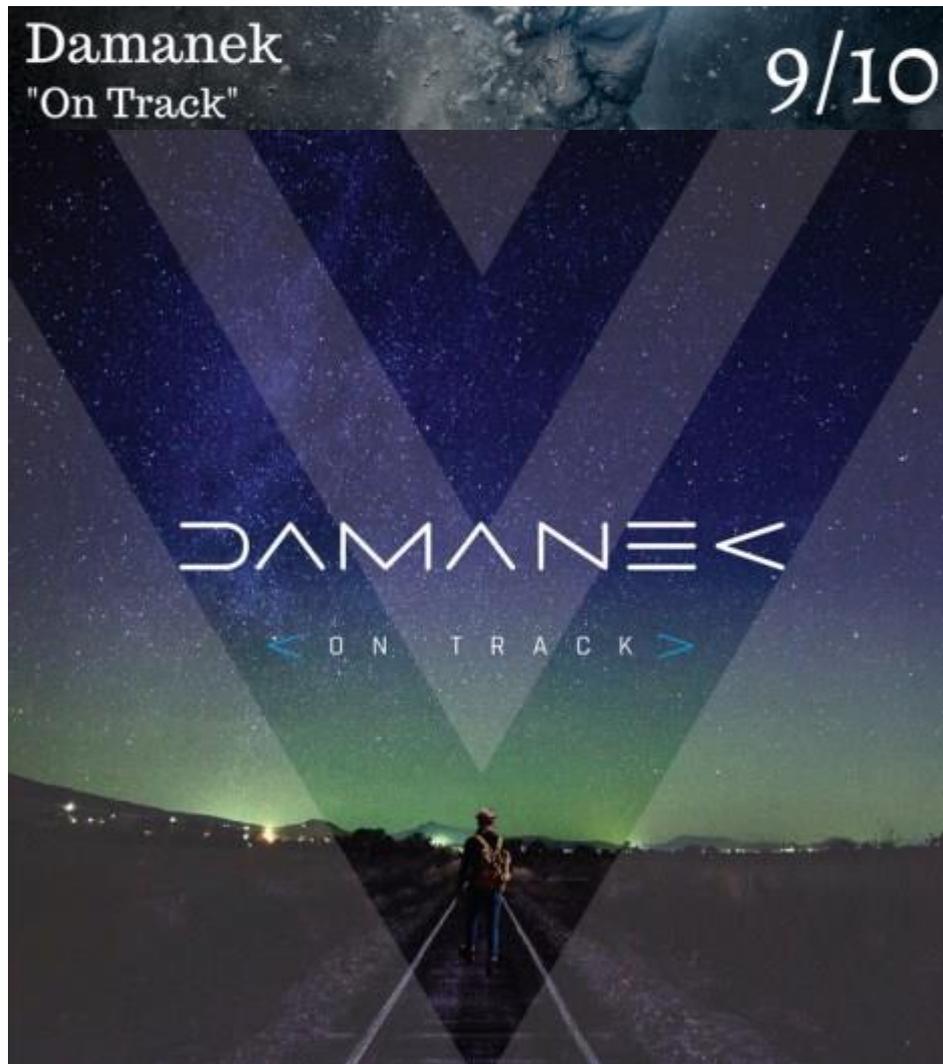


DAMANЕК – “ON TRACK”

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I've mentioned my appreciation for keyboardist/saxophonist Marek Arnold in the past. His work with Toxic Smile, Cyril, and Seven Steps to the Green Door is absolutely mesmerizing. Somehow, though, I missed this debut from Damanek, which features his skills in a more prominent way than even some of his normal bands. Even more so, Marek is only one part of the amazing package that you will find on Damanek's debut album, "On Track".

Damanek is like a meeting of the minds. When I saw the line up, I was absolutely floored. The band consists of Guy Manning on keys and vocals; Dan Mash on bass; Marek Arnold on keys, sax, and clarinet; and Sean Timms on keys and banjo. The guests on this album include the likes of Brody Thomas on drums, Antonio Vittozzi on electric guitar, Nick Magnus on keys, Phideaux and Julie King on vocals, Luke Machin on guitar, and several others. If you follow the prog scene at all, you will know at least a few of those names.

Now, knowing these performers, you can probably guess the style of music here. This is progressive rock with lots of jazz influence, straight and true. The music features excellently emotive guitar work with several

memorable solos, gorgeous keys and piano, and lots of tenor sax or clarinet in more than just support roles. This music is as classy and sophisticated as you will probably hear this year.

Right off the bat, the album gives us a strong track called “Nanabohzo and the Rainbow”. This song is eclectic and jazzy, with very clean melodies and a great chorus. The album, though, never really lets down the audio assault. Most of the songs are explicitly jazzy, though. So, we get songs like “Long Time Shadow Falls”, which has this great climactic portion at the end that really does feel immense, but the build up to it is spacey and beautiful. Another jazzy track would be “Believer – Redeemer”, a funky track with lots of personality. Some of the tracks have a world music vibe, too, such as “Oil Over Arabia, which features a rather Middle Eastern vibe played on sax, which is something you don’t hear often. Marek really shines with a stunning sax solo.



Some of the album has this distinctly playful and satirical tone. The lyrics are definitely a social commentary that ridicules the powers-that-be and other injustices about this world of ours. In relation to that, some of the songs match this frisky vibe. “The Cosmic Score” is a lively song that fits this bill, and it features a fantastic synth solo. “Big Parade” is a very playful, circus-like track that is quite a departure from the rest of the album. At first, I was a little taken aback, but the song really wins you over eventually, especially because it is so catchy. It takes the social commentary to the max, but makes it bouncy and spirited somehow. Guy Manning’s writing skills are obviously inspired and varied.

Speaking of lyrics, if I had to level a criticism at the album, I would have to say that the lyrics are at times not written very well. Nothing too awful, mind you, but I do feel like little words and phrases are added in to make the lyrics fit the music, even if the results are awkward and unnatural to the ear. I do applaud the restraint shown in the lyrics, though, as the most of it rather subdued and not annoyingly political.

I think the final track, “Dark Sun”, is my favorite. It is very shadowy and darkly jazzy, and there is this badass bass groove to the whole thing that gets my head bobbing. On top of that, it has some ethereal guitar work that makes it feel even more haunting, too.

Overall, Damanek’s debut is a complete success. “On Track” is a refined trip down satire lane that I’ve really come to appreciate. The list of performers is definitely impressive, but it is Guy’s writing skills that shine the most. This is one debut that prog rock fans will love to devour.