

Progarchy

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Damanek's Debut is Literally (and Metaphorically) On Track

ON OCTOBER 19, 2017 BY ERIK HETERIN PROGRESSIVE ROCK



One of the most satisfying things a music fan can do is make a new discovery. That happened to me lately as I was given a review copy of Damanek's debut album, *On Track*. Lucky me. *On Track* is one of the best releases I've heard in what has been a pretty good year for prog releases.

A little background here is in order – Damanek is the brainchild of Guy Manning, who among other things is a veteran of The Tangent. For this release, Manning is the chief composer and lyricist. Beyond that, there are numerous contributors to the album. Among them, Manning borrows from his former band to tap Luke Machin on the electric guitar, Marek Arnold contributes on a number instruments (his sax figuring prominently), and numerous other musicians play their part.

The first track, *Nanabohza and the Rainbow*, sets the tone for the album. Beginning with some native-sounding beats, the song evolves into a jazzy looseness (the latter being very pervasive throughout the album). The

aforementioned saxophone makes its first appearance toward the end of the song, along with some superb piano, with the song closing on some motifs that could be described as mid-Eastern. That's quite a palette, and it's only the first song.

Long Time, Shadow Falls follows next, and has a bit more of a new-agey feel to it, with some African rhythms to drive the point home. Lyrically, the song is a commentary on poaching and preservation (or more precisely, the lack of the latter), and the music is most effective in underscoring the message.

Track three, *The Cosmic Score*, is largely piano driven and is the most relaxing track on the album. Arnold's sax makes an appearance midway through, playing off the piano, followed by a synth solo that harkens back to first golden age of prog in the 1970's. Lyrically, *The Cosmic Score* is sung on a grand scale; musically, it invites you to kick back and relax as you contemplate.

The musical palette widens even further on the next track, *Believer – Redeemer*. If you have ever been looking for some funk/R&B influence in your prog, then this is the track for you. The Santucci Horns (as they are known in the album credits) provide some brass here with trumpet and trombone to further accentuate the dominant influence here.

The following track, *Oil over Arabia*, begins with some jazzy piano and guitar before the saxophone once again joins in the fun. Midway through, the pace picks up and the song begins to rock out a bit more, and eventually Arnold provides some excellent clarinet to the song as well. Lyrically sparse, this is almost an instrumental track, and a damn good one at that. As with all the songs, the playing is top notch, but this one really stood out to me.

The Big Parade has a somewhat Beatle-esque sound to it, and it's not hard to imagine John Lennon circa 1968 writing or singing a song like this. The fact that it is an anti-war song makes this all the more so. This song qualifies as the most quirky diversion on the album, and despite its protesting nature, it's a fun listen.

The melancholy *Madison Blue* is up next. This is a relatively simple track musically, primarily driven by the piano. Here, however, what sounds like a small string section and the flute beautifully underscore the mood of the piece, which lyrically concerns the loss of someone dear.

Saving the epic for last, the album closes with the 13 minute plus *Dark Sun*. The first five minutes or so feature a slow groove with Arnold's clarinet adding some nice color at various points. Midway through, the pace picks up dramatically, with excellent guitar work by Machin, some jazz-tinged electric piano and more of Arnold's clarinet (come to think of it, I can't think of many prog albums where the clarinet played such a prominent part). Some very proggy organ is also included before the song slows down and eventually returns to the same groove with which it began. It's a quite-satisfying musical journey.

In closing, *On Track* has some of the best musicianship of any album I've heard in quite some time, and that's saying quite a bit given the plethora of outstanding progressive rock releases we've seen this year and for several years running now. Overall, the music is a, well-balanced mix of styles, including classic and modern prog, jazz, and various world music styles, tastefully and seamlessly combined. As debut albums go, this one is a smashing success.