

UNITED PROGRESSIVE FRATERNITY

Fall In Love With The World INSIDEOUT

Star-powered Australian collective benefit from singular vision.



A camel, as we know, is just a horse designed by committee. So perhaps it's just as well that for all their claims of equal creative input, few bands are genuine democracies. In fact, many are little short of a dictatorship. It was always thus, and most bands are all the better for it. So when you hear former Unitopia frontman Mark Trueack announce his vision for this new project as "a band for the people" with a revolving door of collaborators "who each have a chance to contribute", you take it with a pinch of salt.

This is a project with a strong musical and conceptual focus.

And sure enough, as good as it is, UPF's debut sounds less like a platform for instrumentalists to express themselves than a project with a strong musical and conceptual focus. Such robust songwriting is evident in the powerfully melodic opening salvos of *Choices* and *Intersection*, blessed with irresistible, Asia-esque AOR choruses, despite a couple of mid-track diversions into jazz-fusion territory.

There are said to be cameos here from such luminaries as Steve Hackett and Jon Anderson, and while it's difficult to detect the former Genesis man's guitar chops in the mix, Jon Anderson's upper register is more noticeable as the backing vocals on new single *The Water*. It's an instant winner, starting out laced with Eastern hookah smoke and minor chords, then bursting into a punchy, arena-straddling chorus.

If this album has a weakness, it's that the tunes are more striking and memorable than the lyrical concepts and philosophy accompanying them. The keynote track, *Choices*, offers the following scenario: "Each star is a mirror reflecting the truth, each word has a life and a purpose within, it shines like a beacon, a power to strengthen or weaken. The answers elude us, we search for a way. The choices we make, the questions we ask... What if it never happened?" It all sounds suitably profound, but we never quite find out what 'it' is.

Thankfully, the music more than makes up for any lyrical shortcomings. *Travelling Man's* 21-minute mystic journey is built around stirring flashes of Kashmir-style ethno-rock, regularly offset by touches of classical violin, pastoral folk passages, new age chants and soaring soft rock anthemics. This is the track that really asks the listener to lose themselves, but the skilful echoes of other melodic motifs from elsewhere on the album keep it rooted within the wider piece.

All told, UPF's debut isn't a huge departure from Unitopia, but it suggests those involved have been re-energised by a newfound creative freedom — whoever is in charge.

JOHNNY SHARP

THE SAMURAI OF PROG

The Imperial Hotel SEACREST OY

So they do make 'em like they used to...

With Italian bassist Marco Bernard, American Steve Unruh on guitar/vocals and Finnish drummer Kimmo Pörsti, this truly international project features many guests, including Ånglagård's Linus Kåse, Glass Hammer's Kamran Alan Shikoh, and (contributing fantastic piano throughout) The Musical Box's David Myers. Fans of vintage prog, their first two albums were comprised of cover versions, but *The Imperial Hotel* features self-penned, decidedly old school compositions. Opener *After The Echoes* is Yes as played by Brand X - high-register vocals, big harmonies,



majestic refrains and Pörsti's clattering Collins-meets-Bruford playing. *Into The Lake* is Gentle Giant meeting The Beach Boys, and the 28-minute title track is a cover of UK band England's officially unreleased 1975 epic.

Repeated listens reveal charm and inventiveness, but ultimately this lovingly reworked Gothic tale of a hotel without guests has a grasp that exceeds its reach, with not quite enough hooks and musical moments to carry the narrative. The songwriting may not always match the chops and vision, but this is still a joyous evocation of yesteryear's prog. **GMM**

THE SIXXIS

Hollow Shrine GLASSVILLE

Layered prog metal debut from experienced session guys.

The Sixxis have a mean collective CV, with qualifications coming out of their ears (they all have degrees in their respective instruments), competition wins secured, no exotic scale left unmastered. One of these guys even played with Mariah Carey once, but support slots with The Winery Dogs, Wishbone Ash and a place on Mike Portnoy's Progressive Nation At Sea will have done much more for their street cred. Pleasingly, for a record by such proficient players, *Hollow Shrine* is relatively free of fretboard fiddling. Enough of a technical edge comes through to give



them intrigue, but without dissolving into masturbo-metal. Atmospheric layers in *Dreamers* form a solid base for proggy anticipation, and deep, crunching riffs call to mind Tool (Dave Bottrill produced the album) and *Deadwing*-era Porcupine

Tree - dark and brooding, yet zesty. Vocalist Vladdy Iskhakov can sing, but too many melodies here are at the more wailing, less compelling end of the spectrum. For example, the heavy-handed vocal in *Out Alive* jars against the commanding instrumental work prevalent here. That said, a few more tunes and they're sure to flourish. **PG**

SKYHARBOR

Guiding Lights BASICK

Global prog metallers deliver a stunning second album.

Initially a solo project for guitarist Keshav Dhar, Skyharbor's debut *Blinding White Noise: Illusion & Chaos* was buoyed up by the presence of guests including Tesseract vocalist Dan Tompkins. On this crowd-funded second record, they've got a fixed line-up, and those collaborators are now a real band, with Tompkins front and centre. You might think that with a band-written album, some of Dhar's magic and single-mindedness might be lost, but from the rushing, syncopated riffs of opener *Allure*, it's clear that, if anything, *Guiding Lights* is a more focused record. There are still



expansive textures and luxuriant runtimes, as on the stunning title track, the anthemic *Halogen* and intense closer *The Constant*. Tompkins' vocals are brilliant throughout, the riffs are tight and the rhythms satisfying to headbang to. Djent may be

currently hitting some serious growing pains, but with *Guiding Lights*, the band mostly sidestep the most egregious genre clichés: there's little chugging for the sake of it, and no superfluous dives into obscure genre fusion. Prog metal thrives at the point between the familiar and the unexpected. Skyharbor hit that sweet spot just right. **AL**