

Review: Streetlight Manifesto – “Somewhere in the Between”

A little background on this piece: I wrote this many years ago, when I was an amateur reviewer for a music aggregate website. This album is arguably one of my favorites in my vast collection, but at the time I challenged myself to take a contrary viewpoint. So, I penned this, a veritable whipping of what I otherwise consider Streetlight Manifesto's magnum opus. To this day, digging down and planting myself in the shoes of a contrarian I'd otherwise spit vitriol at was one of the most difficult writing exercises I've experienced.

Album artwork tends to be a rather enigmatic point for me. It can serve as an extension of what the album itself holds in terms of music. Now, before you write this off as a uselessly shallow point, I'm not saying it's the definitive example of whatever wonders or lack thereof lie within (The Mars Volta's "Amputecture" comes to mind.) Beyond that, the cover design tends to be a visual outlet of whatever feeling the artist extracted from their music, or what they hope to convey to the listener. **Somewhere in the Between** sports a dull, contrite plastering of what appears to be a slipshod wallpaper job. Unfortunately, this is one of those moments where the packaging and its extension have quite an accurate bead on the product. Streetlight Manifesto's, and ska juggernaut Tomas Kalnoky's, second original LP seems to have the makings of an *Everything Goes Numb, Part Two-Point-Five*. Despite the welcome ambition and ideas presented, nearly every song ends up being a rehash of a past effort, not exactly triumphs in their own right.

The first thing that's (rather painfully) obvious is Kalnoky's predictable song structure. Every single track follows a Streetlight-by-Numbers template, which, while entertaining at first, becomes tepid and tiresome. Take *Down, Down, Down, to Mephisto's Cafe* or *Forty Days*, for example. The former plays nearly the same way its older twin brother *Point/Counterpoint* does: verse, anthemic chorus, verse, slow minimalistic breakdown, chorus repeated over and over. The latter is even worse in that respect, completely sounding like a stretch of *Here's to Life's* chorus. Surely a formula for success in the genre, but this goes beyond being built on a loose pattern. It comes right down to lazy songwriting on Tom's part. A few of the tracks, mainly *The Receiving End of it All*, *Watch it Crash*, and *What a Wicked Gang are We*, seem to run together like feeble watercolors. This particular trio are rather indistinguishable at passing glance, only becoming "individuals" under a glaringly attentive scope. Perhaps the wind section's lack of versatility is to blame; many tracks resound with said staple ensemble and its ill mood towards change. By commanding each song firmly, they lend to the parity the trio possesses. That's not to say, though, that the horns and woodwinds aren't admirable on the album. Improvement abounds in these sections, more tightly knit and, if it can be said for instruments, eloquent than in the past. Musicianship itself has always been a strong point of the troupe, proven in solo showcases across the board. Sadly, when combined as one and given the commanding lead, Streetlight's winds turn out to be less-than-desirable in the originality department, infecting the entirety of the album.

Not every song follows this pattern, however. *One Foot On The Gas*, *One Foot In The Grave* is a refreshing break from the norm, its intro taking the pace down a notch and surprisingly keeping that slightly subdued feeling into the main verse and bridge. Horns are undercut by the other instruments, but support the song very well, with the trumpet belting a jazzy line at the forefront. In fact, another gripe on the album is how criminally low the bass and drums have been subjugated. Constantly excellent in their own respects, the two cuts of the rhythm section again impress throughout *SitB*. Picking one particular shining moment for them is impossible, for they refuse to so much as teeter on their pedestal, let alone fall from it (and probably reluctant to share it with the lyrics.) The bass in particular is akin to velvet lightning, smoothly darting from note to note, crafting a powerful foundation that the drums cement. Tom's guitar, unlike any other instrument, does its job, no more and no less. Doling out enjoyable, supportive surf licks and basic chords, but never straying into more ambitious territory, the guitar work on the album is pretty much what can be expected of any third-wave band. An aspect which wouldn't

necessarily be a problem, if the rest of the album hadn't emulated its lack of aspiration.

As said, along with the bass and drums, one other element sits atop the peak of quality on this album: the lyrics. Kalnoky never fails to disappoint with his provocative diatribes about a myriad of topics, many of those concerning religion and the virtues surrounding it. Risky and not particularly entertaining fodder for music, surely, but Kalnoky's unmistakable charm oozes from his storybook-esque lyrics, making tackling such issues a cakewalk. A prime example of the Eastern-Orthodox-attacking direction he was quoted as wanting to take with the album would be *Forty Days*, with a folk-sounding horn line that seems to stray a bit from the monotony of the album as well, and its rather blunt yet amicable lyrics:

*And it's been forty days,
I've tried forty ways,
You will never quite leave your sins behind.
They'll haunt you, taunt you until the day you die.*

Despite the darkness behind the idea of sin pursuing one through his or her life, Tom somehow has that inexplicable ability to make it an appealing enough thought that one could contemplate. That talent pushes SitB to ascend, and is undoubtedly an envy of the musical world.

Somewhere in the Between is an enjoyable foray into the third wave. Streetlight manage to capture the same energy and catchiness their former release(s, if you can call *Keasbey* an actual release) sport, but somehow manage to move forwards while staying in the same place. Kalnoky's lyrical prowess and the rhythmists' illustrious skill light up the journey across it, while the band moulds some ear-pleasing melodies that are replicated a few times over and served as new. Recycling, a nasty habit of ska and punk music in general, has finally caught up to the cavalcade of musicians, leaving a dry taste in some listeners' mouths.