

Strolling down Ammonia Avenue: A Review

Author: Lisa A. Koosis Uncharted Territory

Synthesized castanets! Say what? And that song, is that a ballad or a marching song? Whoah. Hold everything. This is uncharted territory, here.

Actually, it's just the Alan Parsons Project.

Quirky and melodic, Ammonia Avenue runs neck and neck with Vulture Culture, another Parsons' album, in the race for my favorite album of all time. What I like about Ammonia Avenue and about the Project in general, is that they always manage to surprise and entertain me. If you want music that hasn't been done before, then it's waiting for you in Ammonia Avenue.

There are only so many stories to tell in literature and in music. Once they've been done once, then all that's left are endless retellings, variations on a theme. Love, death, heartbreak. Timeless themes, all, but I've heard them a million times.

The Alan Parsons Project always manages to put such a spin on their retelling of themes that I'd swear I never heard this story told before. Sometimes, I'm not even quite sure what they're trying to say.

Don't get me wrong. That's the biggest form of compliment I can pay, because that's the main reason the album stands the test of time. I can replay this album endlessly, and always take away something different from it.

I can't count the number of times I've listened to the songs and come away thinking, Aha! Now I get it. Then the next time I play the album, I realize just how wrong I was, and it makes me love the album even more.

Cosmic is my favorite way to describe the Project's music. The lyrics always seem to have a larger than life meaning -- something just out of reach of your interpretation -- just like that movement that you can see only out of the corner of your eye. When you look directly at it, it's gone.

Take the title track, Ammonia Avenue for example. Inspirational, and sweet, Ammonia Avenue is utterly compelling, as the music rises and falls.

Is there no sign of light as we stand in the darkness/watching the sun arise? Is there no sign of life as we gaze at the waters into the strangers eyes? And who are we to criticize or scorn the things that they do? For we shall seek and we shall find Ammonia Avenue

What does it mean, exactly? What is Ammonia Avenue? I haven't the foggiest notion, but I know it's about reaching high, and about finding truths, and I always feel inspired after listening -- like I could change the world. What more could I ask for a song?

But don't they do ballads?

The Alan Parson Project does ballads better than anyone. Easy on the ears, and often heartbreaking in their melody alone, I'm a sucker for songs such as <i>Since the Last Goodbye&/i>. In my pre-Project days, I would have laughed if someone told me that a group could do an effective ballad with predominantly synthesized music, but the Alan Parsons Project does synthesized so well that you completely forget it's synthesized.

It's easy to lose yourself in the lyrics, in the outstanding vocals.

 Okay, so what else?

Variety is the key to the Alan Parsons Project. Each song stands solidly on its own. Where some artist's albums have a single sound, the Alan Parsons Project has a multitude of sounds. Prime Time might well sound like it should belong on a totally different album than Don't answer me, and in my opinion, this is the album's forte.

Perhaps it's the fact that there are several vocalists with a range of styles from ultraviolet to infrared. Perhaps it's the fact the Project doesn't do the traditional love-loss-love songs. Perhaps it's their vague, blast-off-into-outer-space lyrics that are so open to interpretation.

Even their instrumentals are evocative and compelling, telling story after story with no words at all.

Perhaps it's just that this is a world-class album. Can an album be touched and touching at the same time?

Give this one a listen.

Just remember to fasten your seatbelts. You're about to head into uncharted territory, with synthesized castanets for your listening pleasure.

About the Author

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