

SHADOW CIRCUS - 'ON A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT' (10t Records)

In recent times it has become fashionable for progressive rock bands to create albums that run in parallel with a novel on which their lyrics are intrinsically linked. Roswell Six and Kevin J Anderson tied up to provide free-flowing prog linked to books giving a deeper insight into conceptual tales, while with more fanfare Rush brought the idea into the "prog-mainstream" earlier this year through their much celebrated 'Clockwork Angels'. Shadow Circus however are no bandwagon jumpers, having been linking their music to novels and even episodes of 'The Twilight Zone' for quite some time now. With 'On A Dark And Stormy Night', this band have gone the whole hog, basing the entire album on the award winning science fiction/fantasy classic 'A Wrinkle In Time' by Madeleine L'Engle which celebrates its 50th Anniversary this year. The book and therefore this album tell the tale of a young girl whose father disappears while working as a government scientist on the "Tesseract Project" and there's no denying it is a tale that lends itself eagerly to this kind of reinterpretation.

Attempting to re-express a book that will be loved by many is a tall order, however the fact it is endorsed by the L'Engle estate will leave you in no doubt that it's a task Shadow Circus are most definitely up to. In terms of the manner in which they tackle a weighty tale and bring it to life through a mixture of classic progressive rock values, modern prog themes and a very strong storytelling ability, this is a release that works magnificently. Cleverly, whether you want to immerse yourself fully in the conceptual side of things, or purely the excellently constructed music, the effect is never diminished.

'Overture' brings the album to life with an expertly crafted movie soundtrack feel not un-similar to that of Alan Silvestri (everything from 'Forrest Gump' to 'Chicken Run!'), followed by 'Daddy's Gone', which as an introductory pair, bravely sets the album's stall out as a classy clash of prog and original-movie-soundtrack. Amazingly for a concept album, ten minutes go by before the first vocal oozes from the speakers. However when the string arrangements, synth atmospheres and choral effects segue into a fret scorching howling keyboard pyrotechnic, you know you're in for a hell of a ride. From there things veer from full out Transatlantic-like prog workouts, to sumptuous cinematic restraint via Kansas and well everything from Genesis and Yes to Spock's Beard and Jadis via Marillion and The Flower Kings, allowing the wildly varying emotions of the book to fully come to the surface. Piano dominates one minute, guitar and drums the next, but never is this album anything less than poised and assured, even at its most fiery.

Some want their prog to nod to the past, others crave a dash for the future. Shadow Circus deliver both. On this evidence 'On A Dark And Stormy Night' is just about the most rewarding place you could hope to be!

Steven Reid