

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*Alex Lloyd*

Heaven II

It is after ten thirty and the last show of Alex Lloyd's Distant Light tour. He ambles on with a Garrison guitar and a glass of red, and sizes up the crowd. Why aren't you all at Craig David? he quips uncertainly. It is possible some are - the room is not sold out, unlike Lloyd's previous visit. But it *is* Sunday and a week before the Year 12 and uni exams. And, besides, the singer has no need to be insecure. Just a fortnight earlier, Alex Lloyd picked up the Best Male Vocal award at the ARIAs, which, by Dave Graney's estimate, makes him the King of Pop. Added to that, his new album *Distant Light* is one of the recent bright spots in the fragmented, demoralised, pirated and misGuided world of Australian popular music.

Alex Lloyd is an unusual figure in the landscape. He hasn't come from a TV soap or modelling agency nor has any of the accoutrements of post-punk. In fact, a little on the chunky side, in his Johnny Cash gunfighter black shirt, he could pass for the roadie or the band's accountant. Lloyd is not a charismatic figure. He is private and self contained and, while he has considerable confidence, we do connect him to his songs the way we might with say, Tim Rogers or Tim Freedman.

But then, there are plenty of self-effacing singers about. Perhaps it is the Gen X riposte to the high profile exhibitionists of the recent past. Maybe the flickering signals from the personalities of David Gray, Coldplay's Chris Martin, the guys from Powderfinger and Badly Drawn Boy are telling us, as dance music culture already does, that ego *is* a dirty word.

In many ways Alex Lloyd is like Neil Finn. He is a music disciple, and his sacred text is the White Album. Those Fabs and their diminished chords are still the fountainhead for the Dear Prudence School of Harmonic Melancholy which includes not only Alex Lloyd but Crowded House, the missing-in-action Elliott Smith, REM and the quieter moments of the Britpop scene of the mid-nineties.

This is no bad thing, of course. Which is just as well, because it is fully evident the minute Lloyd's four piece band opens with *Hello The End*. That opening flourish is .. is ... *When My Guitar Gently Weeps*. And the lyric? - *this is the end my friend*. Is this sampling? Is it homage? Is it urban folk music? But something else takes over. The band is tight and the sound - for me, directly above the desk on the third stairway of Heaven - is nearly perfect. The song is extremely well-constructed. It has, to invoke that

useful but now overworked term - architecture. Alex Lloyd assembles his music with great care and his Brill Building is the Beatles.

The Heaven set strongly favours the new CD. The title track, *Distant Light* follows, with Felix Bloxsom's choppy drum intro curving into those close vocal harmonies - *it won't be long*, a Lennon McCartney mantra with evocations of Neil Finn in sweetest voice. This is assured melodic pop. As is *Green*, one of several impeccable singles from Lloyd's previous album *Watching Angels Mend*.

The new songs prevail - the memorable *Chasing the Sun*, *Far Away* and *1000 Miles*. The band - Shane Nicholson on guitar, Barbara Griffin on keyboard, bassist Mike Mills and Bloxsom on drums - is in great form. The arrangements are straightforward, nothing fiddly, attesting to Lloyd's confidence in his material and its lyric strength. For *This is a Call* the band plays loud and clear, Lloyd's vocals climbing above the thud while Shane Nicholson garnishes the sound with some of those long and winding George bits. Everyone stretches out for *MoMo* from *Black the Sun*. Lloyd introduces the band and thanks the crew and swings straight into *Amazing*, unofficial anthem for Year 12 assemblies and eighteenth birthday parties. And, in these arid times, a likely classic.

Much of Alex Lloyd's work has this enduring - and endearing - quality. He is a modest fellow who likes to let his material speak for him - and it speaks truly. Closing with *Coming Home*, his dedicated band again doing him proud, Alex Lloyd pays tribute to his influences as well as, as he puts it, searching for a place to call his own. This excellent young musician, our reigning and unlikely King of Pop, has found it, with grace and quiet assurance.