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Alpha Rev  
 The Greatest Thing I've Ever Learned  
 Self-released

Readers of SOUNDCHECK will be familiar with Austin's Alpha Rev and their distinctive brand of melodic rock. Thanks to a lineup that includes violin and cello, in addition to the usual complement of guitar, bass, drums and keyboards, this band creates luscious orchestral textures. Their new album, *The Greatest Thing I've Ever Learned*, does this and more; it demonstrates lyrical harmonies and rich instrumental accompaniments.

The album begins majestically with "China Sunrise". Frontman Casey McPherson's warm melodic vocals display self-doubt and vulnerability: "the sun it runs straight in you". Candy Sanders does an exquisite job with the backing vocals. The next track, "Wedding Day", takes us upbeat with a surprising keyboard interlude at the end that sounds like Bach by way of Wendy Carlos. McPherson's melodic gift is further displayed in "Colder Months", a beautifully understated ballad with the evocative lyrics "These thoughts of pain/don't make a sound/keep us hidden in the lost and found". "Phoenix Burn" showcases Dorian Colbert on drums, with his off-beat rhythms reflecting the unsettled feeling of the lyrics, "I need a peace with understanding/trying to find a softer landing". The later track "When Did I Wake Up" has a similar groove, with a rock solid bass line by Alex Dunlap.

A real highlight of the album is "Stuck in a Crowd". A song full of contrast, it features adventurous keyboard electronics and muffled vocals in the verse, while the chorus combines fuzz guitar with McPherson's soaring vocals. "The Beauty of Falling Down", a massive power ballad with a lyrical guitar solo in the vein of Pink Floyd's "Comfortably Numb", is a showstopper, while the Beatles-esque harmonies and lush string arrangements on "Big Blow" would make George Martin proud. This and other songs show violinist Brian Batch and cellist Dave Wiley off to great advantage.

A sense of loss and being lost pervades the melancholy penultimate track, "Star of Wonder", which is followed by the hope and redemption of the final "Get Out". This track brings us a long way from the initial self-doubt of "China Sunrise". Instead of seeing the sun in the other person, McPherson sings with self-confidence that "the sunshine is a blanket/the blue sky is a statement". Fans of Radiohead, Keane, Travis, Jeff Buckley and Starsailor will find much to love about this album. Mention must also be made of Daniel Perlaky's beautiful album artwork, which is reminiscent of Nick Bantock's (Griffin and Sabine) collage style.

- E. Galand

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