

Hawaii by The High Llamas

I didn't think anyone could make an album this good again. Released in 1996, The High Llamas' Hawaii was decades past when I believed a great album was possible.

Sean O'Hagan, lead singer, songwriter and creative force behind The High Llamas, conjured up an epic blend of pop, orchestral, vocal, surf, acid, electronic, jazz and whatever else you want to call it for this collection of more than 20 pieces, most of which drift from one to the next in subtle, dream-inducing themes.



I'm taken to a place I've wanted to go back to ever since the first listen to some of my favorite music as a child. 'This is different, something I've always wanted,' I thought to myself the first time I heard Hawaii, not long after its release.

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It's all about beautiful music to me. As for the Hawaii album, I don't even know what the lyrics are about. From the first note of the opening track, "Cuckoo Casino," I'm struck by melodies harkening back to the 60's with wonderful swells of strings, horns, vox organ, vibraphone, banjo and other goodies, electronic and acoustic.

The album continues with "Sparkly Up" then into "Literature is Fluff" with what sounds like the Jupiter 2 (spaceship from 60s TV show Lost in Space) coming in for a landing. Then it's into "Nomads," a banjo/vocal masterpiece showcasing the best of everything on this record including more strings and the best Beach Boys they can muster.

It's mostly O'Hagan on vocals throughout the album and his falsetto is the perfect, quirky voice to guide us through. The sound of Nomads, as well as the others, has a vintage timbre with an ever-present vibrato on just about everything. It just sounds old.

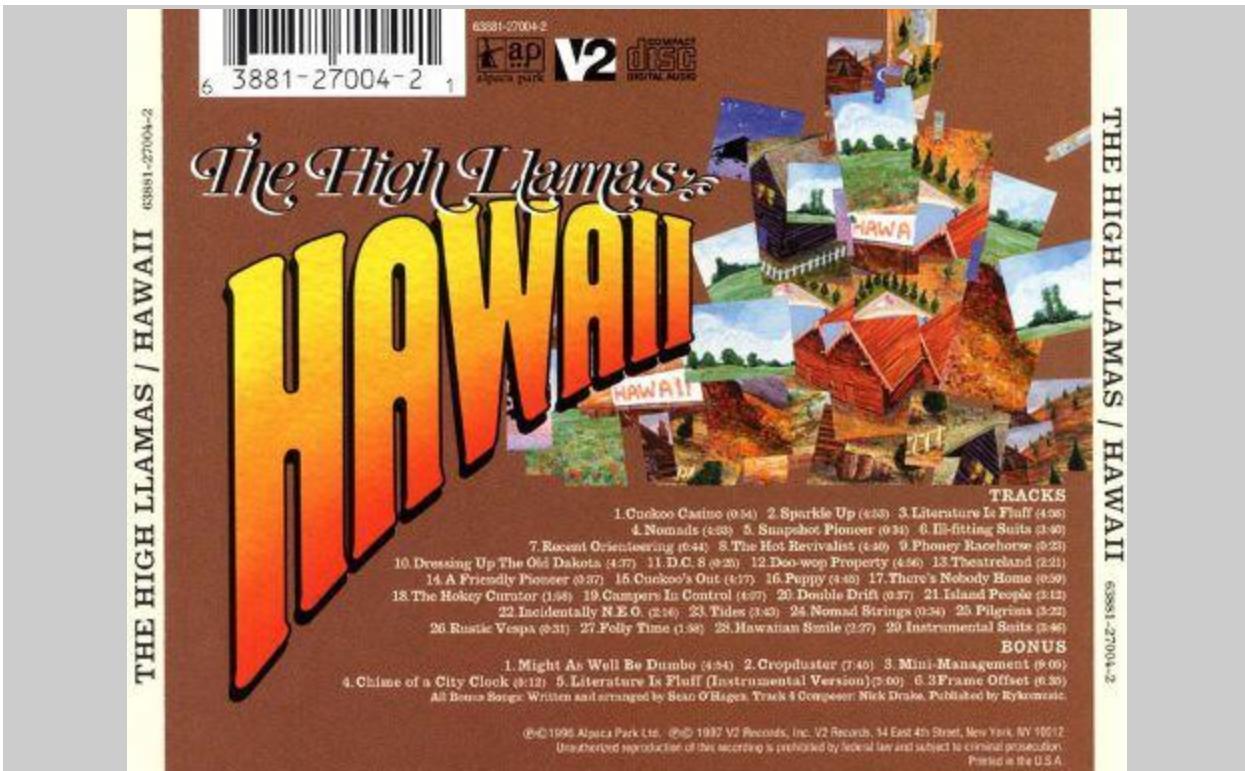
There's a lot of piano and vibes throughout, almost always buttressed by strings and plenty of da, da da's from the guys.

Speaking of da da da's they are featured prominently (actually they're ba ba ba's) on "The Hot Revivalist," one of the sweetest songs I can remember. O'Hagan tiptoes through the piece with a delicate vocal backed by percussion, vibes, vox organ, strings, harpsichord and moog synth.

It quickly devolves into an almost never-ending vamp, as though the boys stepped out to get a pint before coming back to "Dressing Up the Old Dakota," an upbeat piano-driven romantic beach dirge circa early 60s. Again with the steady piano, organ, strings and effects with O'Hagan doing his best Brian Wilson.

What's that cymbal sound, is a beautiful moment as "Dakota" moves toward its end led by lumbering piano and guitar, tambourine and effects. It eventually climbs out of its cocoon and morphs into the "Doo-Wop Property," a change in feel with slide guitar interludes and no vocals.

This ends up as "Theatreland," which harkens back to Beach Boys, à la Pet Sounds with its layered vocals, droning horns, and again the piano leading the march.



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To follow the sequence of titles all the way through as you listen is quite the challenge. Even after years of listening to this I still often refer to the time sequence to identify the song.

“Theatreland” turns into “Peppy,” fronted by banjo, steel guitar and strings with a simple vocal arrangement and emotional lift with a touch of sitar in this sweet, folksy melody.

After more emotional ebbs and flows the musical journey hatches into “Campers in Control,” pure Beach Boys with rich-layered vocals and a steady blues tempo on the drums in one of the few pieces on the album which stand alone as what would have been a single release back in the day. Pure pop. If this was 1964 the A&R department would have licked their chops and lined this up as the A side of a 45 with “Nomads” as the B.

As is common on the album the songs don’t end, they just decide to go somewhere else, like they were going to bed then suddenly changed into something completely different and went back out to party.

This is certainly the case with “Campers” as it drifts off into the distance then stumbles into “Double Drift,” “Island People” then “Incidentally N.E.O.,” each rather forgettable (I’m sorry Sean) then into “Tides,” which is like landing on a pillow, with a pumping organ (no joke intended) and vibraphone leading the way. Two minutes in it drifts into pure heaven as it refits the melody to finish the song.

You just have to be there.

From there it’s “Pilgrims,” a sort of New Orleans funeral march driven once again by a steady piano leading the band down the street. Nice touch and yet another mood and style to chalk up for Sean and the band.

At this point the Jupiter Two comes in for a final landing to unload “Folly Time,” which may have been found in Burt Bacharach’s private tape library.

This is gorgeous.

Piano, vox, vibes, banjo, flute, guitar, sax and some other subtle touches lead up to a goosebump inducing trumpet passage playing against the vibes, giving us about all that is left of emotions to be gotten from this album. It is pure bliss and I’m left lying at the foot of the speakers, pleasantly exhausted having taken that musical journey with the High Llamas.

From there “Nomads” is revisited along with “Campers” and “Hot Revivalist,” each as instrumentals but it’s unnecessary. The perfect ending to the album would have been the final note of “Folly Time.” I would have been forced to get off the floor and find my way back to my feet and the real world.

When I listen to the album that’s precisely what I do, and I’m the better man for it and certainly better for having spent an hour listening to this masterpiece.

The album was originally released as two disks, featuring six other tracks on the second. The first two, “Might As Well Be Dumbo” and “Cropduster” are great and the rest is mostly rehashes of the melodies from the album. “Cropduster,” however, is another tour de force, pulling out all the instruments and emotions one more time and featuring a very clever banjo-driven country encore to close it out.

I’m usually so wrapped up in the album that I listen to “Dumbo” and “Cropduster” at separate times on their own as sort of an appetizer to the main dish. Another tip of the hat to O’Hagan for giving the gift that keeps on giving.

Hawaii was handed off to me by a friend who suggested I give it a listen and it made up for all of the other awful albums I’ve ever been handed, which is almost all of them.

I don't know what inspired Sean O'Hagan to compose these tunes but whatever it was I thank you, Sean, from the bottom of my heart. If no one else in the world has ever heard this album you've changed the life of the one person who has, for the better.

Cheers to you Sean O'Hagan.