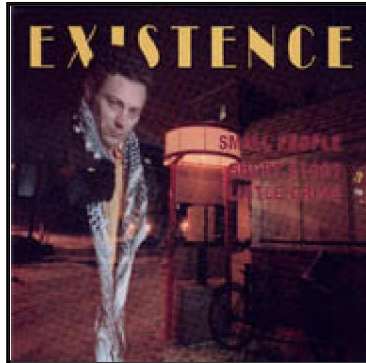




Existence - *Small People, Short Story, Little Crime*



Released: **2000**
 Label: **Black Pearl Productions**
 Cat. No.: **BP003CD**
 Total Time: **61:46**

Reviewed by: [Stephanie Sollow](#)

Concept albums are quite pervasive in progressive music, perhaps more so in progressive metal with their fantastic and epic tales of heroism, stories lifted if not directly from Tolkien and other well-known works of fantasy, then, at the very least, influenced by them. Usually these are illustrated with fantastic, if not sometimes gory or sexist, artwork, with lavish attention spent on the accompanying booklet. The lyrics are laid out in some medieval font, the hero's story told out in a text prelude and/or postlude, and another piece of artwork representing the scope of the story. Progressive rock and other forms are no stranger to the concept album, or even, deluxe packaging. But Québec-based *Existence*, a group of independent musicians spearheaded by Alan Charles (piano, keyboards, rhythm guitar, and bass), have gone far beyond anything I've encountered with *Small People, Short Story, Little Crime*. The CD is packaged in cardstock slipcase which serves as the album's inner and outer sleeves, the booklet is oversized in that it is "just" too big to slip inside the jewel case (which, with the slipcase, is perfectly acceptable) Okay, pretty standard stuff nowadays, I suppose. However, instead of the usual booklet with lyrics, credits, maybe some backstory for the concept, the booklet is presented like a magazine - this is the September 1999 issue. How detailed? The cover includes teasers to the articles inside, a barcode, and the cover price for four countries or regions (US, CAN, EUROPE and AUSTRALIA). No, never mind that. How detailed? There are ads inside, just like a magazine would have, such as one for the company who did the design, one for the band Mystery and its label Unicorn Records (a Québec-based label), and one Belle Gueule pilsner. Here's the next fine detail - the lyrics are worked into the text of the articles that, but for a few spelling errors, flow as if the stories came first and the lyrics were plucked from them. Of course, this "magazine" also has a letters page and a music and film review section. The lyrics/articles are published both in English and French - not surprising, that.

The challenge becomes this: does the album hold together without the extensive narrative for each song, or does seem disjointed, like random sentences strewn together? In other words, if the text flows with the lyrics, do the lyrics flow without the text? Excepting the two instrumental tracks that bookend the album - "The Therapy, Part I" a 53 second drum solo from Gérard Lévêque and "The Therapy, Part II," a two second spoken piece - I'm going to go

song by song here, and somewhat stream of consciousness (though I'm no James Joyce).

"Beauty Teen" is a rocking blues number that sounds both contemporary and very heavy 70's rock influenced - ZZ Top, Robin Trower, and Thin Lizzy came to mind, though I couldn't pin down to any one specific thing. Throw in some sharp, searing violin (Francois Beaugard) and guitar leads and it goes off in another direction. Later we get some slide guitar, over half-sung, half-spoken vocals from lead guitarist Gaston Gagnon. "No Hero" is muscular, meaty, and dark in both tone and subject - a man witnessing a murder, helpless to intercede, only to get caught up in crime in defending himself against the attacker. The low, almost growly guitars, including bass (Richard Lanthier), and violin set up most of the mood. Rumbling percussion sets up the back drop for more searing, biting guitar and violin leads - it sometimes hard to tell which instrument is making the great sounds as they are often in concert. "The Journey" is all instrumental, and as moody as hell. Deep, grinding bass brings on feelings of doom, something evil is awaiting on this journey. The discordant violin notes only underscore this "horror" feeling. Choral voices ah-ah-ahing, just add another gloomy element - suddenly the tall buildings are looming out of proportion. (I picture grotesque gargoyles as well, though there's nothing here to suggest them).

The centerpiece of the album - that is to say, the longest track on the album - is the "In The Kingdom Of Madness" suite, which consists of six parts. It is here that Alan Charles' keyboards are clearly heard. Light, lyrical piano notes dance with a sinewy violin, while percussion sets the pace for this tango ("Dripping Cloud"). But don't think the bass and guitar are absent, as they seem to be dancing around the couple (piano and violin), looking for their chance to join the dance proper. In the end, the piano wins out, and gets a solo spotlight. A minute or so in, a sad, sweet violin takes over the lead, then the full band comes in - the violin, guitar, and piano enjoying a sensual, almost seductive dance - without the tension of "Dripping"; this dance is harmonious. Beautiful, rapturous. very, very warm, and yet, very, very sad. It is called "No Sun Can Shine." Fans of classical music, of the best Italian progressive, and simply fans of beautiful music will drink this one up. The next movement, if you will, is "Darkness." Sparse piano, tentative violin, depressing in its beauty, as here the character of the song is singing, "The show is done, the words are gone. The act is finished and it's all foolish [...] Alone in my darkness, I can hear the silence roar." Not the words of a happy poet - oh, yes, this song is about the maddening depression of a poet who in the end...well, we'll get there. In the tradition of the prog rock bands we love - well, the Italian and French bands at any rate, there are some more guitar leads as the track momentarily moves into a rock motif, but never above mid-tempo. "Darkness" leads into the chaotic, discordant "Delirium" - Charles bangs a little on the keys, like the final death note, but no, not quite yet. The piano and violin play off each other, but not together - a hint that things are getting worse. The poet goes online, to a chat room he frequents, and bares his soul to his "friends" in the room, poetically telling them of his intent to commit suicide. For the first and almost only time, I thought of Marillion, as the violin tone here sounds like it was taken right out of *Brave*. But for that one moment (well, about 4 of them), Existence are more classically influenced than influenced by other prog bands. I suppose the opening guitar notes of "Whispers (The Theme, part IV)" does bare some similarity to Steve Rothery's style, but I also hear a bit of Steve Hackett in there, too. The notes don't exactly shimmer, as there is a slight choppiness to them, but this is far from being a complaint.

Funky bass opens "Business As Usual," a tale about an otherwise upstanding youth and his life heading up a drug dealing gang. We're back to the bluesy groove of the first part of the album, which now sounds harsh and hard in contrast to the melancholy of the middle section. Again we get to hear some great violin work.

The fuzzy sound of ZZ Top by way Led Zeppelin and Elvis comes in "Flowers Won't Do." Elvis swagger with a Robert Plant delivery and ZZ Top providing the groove - until we get to the Franco-Italian interlude with more violin, which segues its way into a Clapton-esque bluesy guitar playing sexy leads. "Another Fine Day Of.." made me think of Tempest, a hard rock and Celtic hybrid. In other words harsh and heavy churning guitars over biting, yet sweet, violin. They're all dancing together like whirling dervishes. There is a guitar passage at three minutes in, this time from Éric Pilon, that made me think of Marillion's "Grendel" that also shimmers a bit like John Petrucci in his slower, more lyrical moments. Of course, crying over all of this is the violin of Beaugard.

Talking Heads is what I think of with "Overtime" - specifically of "Burning Down The House"

as there is a similar groove to it, excepting the instrumental middle section, which when the song comes out of it, back transforms the main rhythm.

Gagnon has a pleasant singing voice, which is where it seems many bands are weakest. It's hard to find a flaw here, but perhaps I'm so enamoured of the album, that I'm overlooking them. Even if the packaging were crap, this would be a title well worth seeking out. The packaging only enhances the music, provides a fuller context, but it isn't essential to enjoying the music. But how rare to not have to guess what the concepts are about, and how unique. Bravo!

More about Small People, Short Story, Little Crime:

Track Listing: The Therapy, part I (0:53) / Beauty Teen (5:28) / No Hero (4:18) / The Journey (4:03) / In The Kingdom of Madness: Dripping Cloud (3:07) - No Sun Can Shine (5:49) - Darkness (3:48) - Delirium (2:13) - Open Letter To My Friends (4:37) - Farewell From The Lone Poet (3:04) / Whispers (The Theme Part IV) (2:25) / Business As Usual (5:08) / Flowers Won't Do (5:21) / Another Fine Day Of... (7:29) / Overtime (4:48) / The Therapy, part II (0:02)

Musicians:

G rard L v que - drums

Richard Lanthier - bass, Moog Taurus

Francois Beaugard - violin

Gaston Gagnon - lead guitar, voice

 ric Pilon - lead guitar (13,14,15)

Alan Charles - piano, keyboards, rhythm guitar, voice; bass (13,14,15)

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Note: will open new browser window

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Discography

- **Fragile Whisperings of Innocence (1994)**
- **Another Fine Day Of... (1998)** (discontinued EP, trks on *Small Crime...*)