

## The Imaginary Musical: Minus Six, "Hidden Deep in the Green"

Written by

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The third record from the Quad Cities' Minus Six, *Hidden Deep in the Green*, has the vibe of a musical-theatre soundtrack. If the idea of a pop record that invokes Broadway makes you recoil in horror, then you're wise to avoid this. If you're intrigued, you're likely to be carried away by singer/songwriter Kevin Carton and his band.

To be clear, there's no discernible plot on the album, and the songs aren't obviously related.

But nearly every other facet of the CD contributes to the feeling that this is a cast-recording memento of some stage experience: the tuneful bounce; the keyboard-heavy instrumentation; the straightforward production that emphasizes melody and the vocals; and the expressive, well-articulated voice of Carton. About the only thing missing is a unifying chorus, or the inevitable reprise.

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This quirk is both a joy and a frustration.

On the one hand, the idea of songs divorced from an imaginary-narrative context and forced to work on their own is playful, alluring, and daring. The audience is invited to create its own story and its own staging, to figure out what happens between the songs.

On the other hand, there's no indication that this musical-theatre effect is intentional, and it seems unfair to cast the CD as part of a larger - if nonexistent - work.

For the most part, individual songs hold up well. Carton's voice is warm, his phrasing is smart and unpredictable but not showy or unnecessarily ornate, and he hits all his emotional marks. Matt Sivertsen's saxophone punctuates most songs with unexpected flourishes - an Egyptian theme on "Walk Away," for instance - and does the lifting typically reserved for a lead guitar. The smoky, *noir*-ishly romantic intro to "Secrets in Our Awakening" suggests a larger musical palette for the band and is a welcome break from the album's routines.

But there's a sameness that plagues the record. Consistent textures, steady dynamics, and a mix that puts the vocals at the forefront at the expense of the other instruments make *Hidden Deep in the Green* problematic as a pop album. The lack of musical and sonic variety creates a void, and in their places the listener is forced to imagine the connective tissue of a narrative, or visual interest created by staging.

Bassist Kameron Rummans and percussionist Rob Baner are game and energetic, and within the confines of the CD's sound they do all they can. But they're banished to the background too often.

Sivertsen's sax has more latitude, and he sometimes steals *Hidden Deep in the Green* from Carton. A blast of impassioned horn on "Nobody" breaks the soundtrack spell, and the climbing sax lead of the opening track, "Lost at Sea," suggests that the audience might be in for some Brave Combo-like polka madness.

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But when Carton's Billy Joel-like voice enters the picture, it's clear who the boss is. As is typical with soundtracks to musicals, every word is clear and understood. I mean it as a compliment when I say that Carton belongs on a stage - in the lead of *Rent*.

His voice often rescues his lyrics, which are idealistic and sunny and love-struck and resilient but lack consistent wit or insight. "Smell the daisies, smell the roses / We'll get pollen on our noses" is typically literal for Carton, but it's one of the few lines with wit or humor.

Like that couplet, *Hidden Deep in the Green* is a vivid record. It has loads of concrete images, a soulful sax, and heartfelt vocals.

What Minus Six is missing, though, is a healthy dose of imagination. The band should either make its songwriting more dynamic and varied, or get to work on the stage version of this album.

*Minus Six will play at a CD-release party on Friday, February 9, at RIBCO in the District of Rock Island. The show starts at 10 p.m.*

*For more information on the band, visit ( <http://www.minussix.com> ). The new CD is available for purchase on the Web site.*