



[Mother Lode: Alpha](#)

Album rundown (Click titles for audio)

[Alpha](#) sucks in listeners with “[Pavlov’s Dogs](#),” a chugging ‘60s-style singalong about the perils of instant gratification and “[Skeleton Twins](#),” a twee acoustic pop song about meeting the right girl at the wrong time, and it builds like a tsunami from there.

“[The Dharamsala Blues](#),” a song written for and about the Dalai Lama after Gowing met the celebrated Tibetan monk at his own residence-in-exile in northern India (a landscape which immediately reappears in the wistful 6/8 travelogue “[From a Train](#)”) is one highlight. Another is “[Home](#),” a haunting, ever-descending ballad about his trip back to Dallas to visit his mother in the hospital immediately following her prognosis of six months to live.

But the album’s centerpiece, literally and figuratively, is “[Joshua’s Mistake](#),” an unforgettable song Gowing wrote about returning home from the 2001-02 winter holidays to find his roommate—crushed by the one-two punch of a romantic breakup and a serious motorcycle accident—lying dead in his bedroom.

“In his right hand was the gun he used to take his own life. In the other was my cordless phone, which would have been ringing only seconds after he pulled the trigger—at Midnight on New Year’s Eve, I’m sure—because I called after the countdown ended to tell him I would be coming home soon and that everything was going to be okay. The chorus of ‘Just a Mistake?’ is the conversation I would have instigated if that phone had reached into the next world and he had been able to pick up.”

Make no mistake, *Alpha* is an album of dissatisfaction and loss. Beyond the Sergeant Chili-Pepper platoon-funk of “[The Day I Take That Hill](#)” and the ska-tinged garage pop kiss-off, “[The Homie Hop](#)”—barnstorming guitar solos on both—the album gets dark again with “[Nowhere to Go](#),” a horn-heavy whisper/belter about abandoning one’s dreams, “[Misery Loves Company](#),” a Zombies-esque breakup song where the music and the story seem to go wrong in tandem, and “[Goodbye](#),” a traditional country song about another sad farewell.

But right at its darkest, there’s a new dawn—the jazz-infused closer “[Resurrection](#),” a track about moving onward featuring a tremendous conjoined-twin solo, showing off Gowing’s chops on both guitar and electric piano and as a writer-arranger with a key change that appears to go up but, in fact, goes down a half-step.

“It’s like the aural equivalent of an M.C. Escher drawing,” says Gowing, “Reaching up only to fall down—kinda like my life at the time.”



[Mother Lode: Omega](#)

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[Omega](#) is even more diverse. Crackling to life with “[Watch Out Now](#),” the kind of indie-pop attack song Elliott Smith might have written if he’d lived long enough to witness Donald Trump’s presidency, it continues with “[She’s Solo](#),” a power-pop number inspired by early Squeeze’s musical novellas with an assist from Shel Silverstein’s irony-soaked poem “Nobody.” Then there’s “[Free](#),” a monumental ballad-rocker-ballad-rocker about freedom won at the cost of love lost, followed by “[Echo Park](#)” a bass-heavy indie-rock/New-Wave track revisiting Gowing’s favorite SoCal zip code. Next up is “[Beautiful](#),” an R&B-soaked love song one can almost imagine Joe Cocker performing, followed by “[Give It Up Bonnie](#),” a saucy, sonic valentine with whiffs of Motown and Muscle Shoals.

The album takes a tom-thumping left turn with the snake-charming psychedelic rock of “[Life Under the Gun](#)” then dives into watercolors with the symphonic-bridged ballad, “[Size 16](#),” a work of fiction instigated by yet one more memory of Gowing’s mother, who cut up her charge card after the local department store had nothing in her size. Next is “[Sour Milk C](#),” a falsetto-voiced piano boogie that tweaks an obscure George Harrison title—to reflect Gowing’s resentment at having to put lemon in his tea during a chronic illness—but sounds more like “Lady Madonna” in clown makeup. On that note, there’s “[The Other Me](#)” a nimbly shuffling, pop gem that changes keys just as it pole-vaults the psychic divide between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Bruce Banner and the Hulk.

For any listeners clamoring for a peek at what it was like for a blue-eyed Westerner to live in China—in an incredible time during the elevation of Xi Jinping to the status of Chairman Mao, a trade war with the USA, the outbreak of a global pandemic and Shanghai’s deadly spring 2022 lockdown—there’s the penultimate track “[Spacecraft](#),” which puts a cosmic twist on the classic fish-out-of-water immigrant’s tale complete with appropriately Floydian organ and guitar work. Finally, there’s “[Rock and Role](#),” an experimental track that starts with a bare-bones demo and ends with an orchestra, slowly combining two very different songs into a single piece while answering the whole project’s underlying existential question: “If a tree falls when no one’s around, can it even make a *pound*?”

“Nowadays, when digital singles rule the music business and the album is practically an anachronism,” says Gowing, “I know it’s ridiculous to release a double album, particularly one so wrapped up in faded memories and yesteryear genres.

“But in my English classes, I had the privilege of teaching *The Great Gatsby*, and every time I think of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s final words, ‘And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,’ I know I’m not alone.”