

Album Review: Rivermaya's Bagong Liwanag

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Our man in Cagayan de Oro, Jasper Lloyd Tan, reviews the new Rivermaya EP, "Bagong Liwanag" - their first ever release without Mr. Blanco. The verdict? Tuloy Ang Ligaya!

First and foremost, I have to make this statement. The reason why I continued to follow the career of Rivermaya even when Bamboo left the band years back, was because of Rico Blanco. I always considered him as the heart and soul of the band. And it was because of his impressive songwriting skills was what made me choose to believe and support the band during Blanco's era.

With that said, let's proceed to the Album Review.

I personally couldn't wait to grab a copy of the Bagong Liwanag album (good thing Rivermaya's long time drummer Mark Escueta provided me a copy of the EP, thanks again Bro!). When the band released their first single Sayang (the last track in the EP), a statement to the public in song form about the recent departure of their erstwhile front man, I had my serious doubts if the band still had it. Written by bassist Japs Sergio, Sayang is a stripped down song with only an acoustic guitar to accompany the vocal work. While the lyrics were very moving, I was looking for that particular oomph that Rivermaya songs were generally know for. Sayang couldn't give me that, but then again Imbecillesque, a song that was originally released as part of the FREE album, wasn't a soaring song either.

Mark would later share in the band's mailing list that the intention of Sayang was really that. No fireworks, no musical acrobatics, but a stripped down, sincerely heart tugging song that aimed to reach and touch the hearts of those who have supported the band through it's fourteen years of existence. If for that reason alone, I could say that Sayang was a huge success, and it undoubtedly touched the hearts of the listeners.

VIDEO: Behind the Scenes at the Rivermaya Auditions (excerpts from the Bagong Liwanag TV special, Sept 16 @ Studio 23)

Without a pure vocalist in their current lineup, the band made an arrangement that says whoever wrote the song, he will be the one to do the vocal chores. The vocal chores were divided into two songs each for Mark Escueta and Japs Sergio, and one song for guitarist Mike Elgar. Written during the turbulent months, the band managed to finish 5 songs to come up with this EP album. In less than two months, the band came up with these songs as a tribute and collective statement for their friends, fans, as well as to the music public. Sayang was their opening salvo, but the first track of the EP was an even bolder statement. Carrying the moniker Banda ng Bayan these past few years, Japs launched the welcoming track by naming the song Banda ng Bayan. This is one of my favorite tracks in the album. Listening to this song reminded me a lot about previous Rivermaya hits such as Liwanag sa Dilim, Kisapmata, and Ulan. And I personally like the particular line "Pag pugay, kami ay nagbibigay pugay sa aming mga kasama, nakasama, tuloy ang ligaya." Could this mean that they have finally put the bitterness of their unjust fate behind and just focus on the new future ahead? And the declaration of "Tayo po ang Banda ng Bayan" certainly showed that the band is still here alive, kicking and riding the waves of their fans, peers, and the whole music community's tremendous love and support.

The second song, Sumigaw, is an even more surprising song. Penned by Mark Escueta, Sumigaw continued to set the tone of the album that showed the band's resurgence and resiliency amidst the tragedy. ABS-CBN TV channel Studio 23 even personally handpicked the song as their new station I.D. Mark, who was always been relegated the least spotlight during the band's 14 year career is now the de facto voice of the group. Mark was also the least contributor in the band's songwriting chores during their existence, deferring to Blanco and former bassist Nathan Azarcon (and later on to Japs, Mike, and Kakoi). But he did wrote the hit song Nerbyoso from the It's not easy being green album with the help of Blanco. Sumigaw is a very good vindication for him that proves to us that he does have the songwriting skills. Sumigaw is a very good uplifting song, a battle cry, an assurance that Rivermaya isn't going anywhere but up. The state that they are in is just temporary, and they are here to stay.

While the first two tracks proved to be happy and joyful songs, the third track Nawawala had the angst. Mike Elgar wrote this song on the very same day Blanco revealed his intentions of leaving the group. We can objectively say that this song was his personal response to appease that turmoil that was building up inside him during that time. Writing songs is also not that new for Mike. He has been a consistent contributor to the band's track lists ever since he joined the band.

But, while the song Nawawala was angst ridden, the fourth track Olats, took an opposite direction. It somehow poked fun at the band's current misfortune. That instead of dwelling on the sad and unfortunate things, the band instead chose to laugh at their current situation. Again, Mark Escueta proved that he has a lot of songwriting prowess in store.

Music wise, the trio still has it. They still have the musical tightness. Vocal wise, I don't see anything different.

Blanco was never a pure vocalist in the first place. The three of them are no different. They have satisfactorily handled their respective vocal chores in their respective songs. And we are no longer stranger to the trio's vocal chops. They have previously done their vocal works on past albums. The EP also contains instrumental versions of the five songs. Since they lost a vocalist, these instrumental tracks are an open invitation for us to sing along with the band. And it might even come in handy for those who would be joining the auditions as the band's new vocalist.

The five songs in the EP is a going back to the roots offering from the band. They have stated in their press statements that the EP is a tribute to the 90's pinoy rock, the great era of the band explosion that brought us such bands as the Eraserheads, Parokya ni Edgar, and of course, the first incarnation of Rivermaya. If we look at the band's previous full length LP *Between the Stars and Waves*, the band seemed to have gone on an experimental mode. And that LP took them away from the type of music that they are famously known for.

If I were to describe the *Bagong Liwanag* EP, this album definitely harkens back to the band's earlier days. The EP proves to all of us that they still have it. Although Blanco's songwriting capabilities are incomparable and second to none, the remaining guys draw their songwriting strength straight from their heart. There might no longer be the soaring poetic lyric that is accompanied by the soaring melodies of Blanco's musical genius, but the sincerity of the songwriting process and the story behind every song has clearly imparted a message that Mark, Mike, and Japs can hold their own. Again, I am a big fan of Rico Blanco, but it has been clearly established by the *Bagong Liwanag* EP that Rivermaya is bigger than him.

I can't wait to hear the rest of the new songs that would be released for the new full length album due before the year ends. The EP gave us glimpses of those songs. And yeah, there are more brilliant and sincere songs coming our way. Calling *Bagong Liwanag* as an EP is actually deceiving. Because it is far more than what we know of what EPs are. Tons of bonus tracks (check out the preview of the new songs for the full length album, I like Mark's composition *Closer*, had an 80's new wave brit feel on it), a high speed audio message from the band, instrumental tracks good for those who want to sing along. *Bagong Liwanag* is a fresh start to rejuvenate Rivermaya.

My Verdict? Tuloy Ang Ligaya! Now on to the auditions and let's get a real vocalist.