In 1978, the legendary late science fiction writer Philip K. Dick gave a speech at Disneyland, entitled, “How To Build A Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later”. In it, he looked back on his life’s work and its quest for essential truths, while casting his mind towards a future where he believed the very fabric of reality would be called into question.

“Fake realities will create fake humans,” he imagined. “Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans.”

Forty-plus years later, it’s fair to say he was spot on in his grim assessment of humanity’s trajectory. A scan of any news outlet, or a swift doom-scroll through popular social networks will confirm any doubts about that. And it’s at the heart of those same concerns *Alias* strikes, finding its spiritual DNA. The brand new album from Grand Rapids metal five-piece Sleep Waker ponders many such uncomfortable truths, asking listeners to examine who we are, how we quantify our reality, and what it means to be alive.

The record’s 10 tracks represent an almighty leap forward for Sleep Waker – guitarists Jake Impellizzeri and Jason Caudill, vocalist Hunter Courtright, drummer Frankie Mish, and bassist Aaron Lutas – who have signed to UNFD for the release of their second full-length, due out on July 23. Although rooted in many of the same conceptual themes and ideas that gave the band their successful start in 2017, this time they’re diving even deeper. This time, it’s not just conceptual exploration. This time it’s personal.

“When I had the idea to start the band, I had insomnia and sleep paralysis,” explains Frankie. “It was a big thing in my life. I had the name Sleep Waker, I was playing around with logos and stuff like that. And then Hunter mentioned he had insomnia as a kid. So we bonded over that connection.

“Each release has had a theme built around experiences we’ve had in dreams, or concepts based around sleep,” he continues. “[2017 debut EP] *Lost In Dreams* established that, and [2018’s debut album] *Don’t Look At The Moon* was all about sleep paralysis. But we tagteamed the lyrics this time. I write from a lot of my personal experiences of nightmares and dreams. Overall, our overarching theme has always been the band name itself.”

“I’ve had hallucinations,” Hunter reveals. “I’ve had the feeling of someone sitting on my chest, and monolithic figures staring at me from the corner of my bedroom. That stuff’s definitely still interwoven throughout the album. But things really took a shift this time. On this record, my lyrics are quite literal and personal. Everything I wrote was either situational to my life, or about how a person can be changed by a life event or circumstance, thus creating an alias.”

After over a decade of friendship and making music together, the pair are grateful for the chastening experiences of those learning curve early ventures. Now backed by what they consider “the perfect team” to help build on their burgeoning success, *Alias* arrives in the right place at the right time, showcasing their growth, both as a band and as people. At the heart of these songs is a unifying through-line grasping at themes of identity, a search for the self and something tangible ­– something real.

“We personally, as individuals, aren't the most comfortable with the extreme social media side of life, or personal, selfie-cam updates. That doesn't feel genuine to us,” says Frankie. “So we were like, ‘What if we created something that could go in front of us?’ Essentially, some voice or thing that we can kind of put a mask on and perform through, rather than just trying to be ourselves. Alias is mostly about identity, but we’re trying to build something that’s more than just a literal representation of the story. We’ve talked about making Sleep Waker this living thing, like a ‘being’ almost, that lives in this parallel world.”

“It’s not a creature, *per se*,” Hunter qualifies. “We are the visual representation of Sleep Waker, but it is an entity. And we are not real, essentially.”

Confused? You don’t know the half of it.

Part of the problem in trying to tie the Sleep Waker story up in neat bows is that the band’s constituent parts are still in the middle of it, working on where it goes. *Alias* represents but one chapter, albeit a significant one. To stretch the metaphor, think instead, of the five-piece as lightly restful before, while this record sees them drop deep into the REM-phase of sleep. It’s fitting then, that its songs keep coming back to the questions of who we are, what we are, what is real and if we can even trust our own judgement to answer those conundrums. As sources of inspiration, in addition to the totemic genre works of Philip K. Dick, *Alias* draws from the impenetrable, dream-like surrealism of David Lynch’s Twin Peaks TV series, and Lana and Lily Wachowski’s iconic The Matrix movies. In a world of synthetic reality, AR, VR and simulation theory, questioning whether we’re really awake or just experiencing a construct of reality can no longer be dismissed as a crackpot notion. We don’t yet know enough about the wider universe to definitively answer many of life’s biggest questions. So as the lines between life, art and experience become ever more blurred, why shouldn’t Sleep Waker blend pop culture with their own personal realities?

“We can pretty much tie down a specific movie, piece of media or book to each song,” says Frankie. “The Matrix definitely comes up a lot. Especially when I was writing stuff. For the interlude-like track “Cold Moon”, I took all of the lyrics directly from The Matrix script, for instance. This *is* the new version of Sleep Waker, we've grown up, and we've matured, but we’ve still got Blade Runner references running throughout pretty much everything. There's a few Ghost In The Shell and Cowboy Bebop nods in there too.”

And yet, in amongst all of these otherworldly sci-fi settings and lofty ideas, you have incredibly heavy, very real and hard-hitting sentiments. Such as on the record’s crushing final song.

“’Distance’, I wrote about my grandfather passing away from dementia,” says Hunter. “But you can take the lyrics from that and apply it to losing a friend to drugs or anything. When it comes to sleep and dreams, it’s all open to interpretation. We've all had crazy, weird dreams, and we all create whole worlds in our sleep. What we do is very open-ended *because* sleeping and dreaming are very open ended.”

In thinking deeply about mortality, the essence of life itself, and examining the concepts that fuel their favourite sci-fi source material, Sleep Waker have started forging their own pathways to truth. As self-obsession pervades, banal social updates are the norm, the cult of personality is celebrated and me-me-me thinking sends us further off into the abyss of Philip K. Dick’s “fake realities”, bands like Sleep Waker offer a vital counterculture voice. *Alias* kicks back against the trends, and the noise of nothingness lulling us in for short-lived dopamine hits. They’re not your average beatdown band.

“Our goal is to be more interesting, and not just straight up heavy,” Hunter asserts. “We write about heavier things and shit that’s not happy, but in real life, I myself am a happy-go-lucky little dude.”

“We also don't want to seem pretentious,” Frankie summarises. “We want to convey enough to make people latch onto this, not just the concept. I want people to have an experience from when they start our songs to when they end them. I want people to be taken in, not just for this angry, over-the-top, violent kind of experience. This is much more expressive than that.”

In showing us the artifice, and holding up a mirror to the world’s facades, *Alias* forces us to question what it is to be real, to exist, and to be alive. It dares to dream, even if we are all but androids, conjuring electric sheep.