

THE DOWLING POOLE

As a leading figure in bands such as The Grip, Honeycrack and Jackdaw4, as well as contributing music for numerous television shows, Willie Dowling has enjoyed a long career in music. The multi-talented artist recently teamed up with the equally versatile Jon Poole to create The Dowling Poole, a collaboration funded via the Pledge Music route. James Gaden talked to Willie to learn more...

I believe you met your writing partner Jon Poole while you were both working on Ginger Wildheart's '555%' album?

I believed it was and that's what I've been saying, but Jon, who I assume was slightly offended, although he'd never say anything to me, pointed out that we had played together in 2005 at one of Ginger's shows, which I'd completely forgotten about! (laughs) Technically that was the first time we'd met, but apart from rehearsing with him for a couple of hours, we didn't really speak much more than saying hello. I knew Jon could play, but it wasn't until I was actually in a studio with him that I saw how good he was. He has a complete change of personality – he's just a fireball of energy, jokes... it can be overwhelming at times, so on the road I was kind of cautious because he was just an animal. (laughs) Yet in the studio, this completely different personality takes over and unlike so many musicians who get in a studio and waste time, this guy is on it, he's just so professional! He wanders from instrument to instrument, I had no idea he was so versatile – he's extraordinary. That really was where the seed was planted, because I don't come across talent like that very often.

With you both being versatile, did you have any idea what kind of record or genre you would aim for, or did you just see what happened?

I was thinking we should see what happened naturally – I'd just come out of Jackdaw4 which was a bit like a messy divorce. There was very little shouting or screaming, but it was difficult to say goodbye to that unit after ten years. I knew I needed to do something else, and working with Jon seemed a good place to start. I didn't really know what it was going to be – he, on the other hand, did. That was apparent when he brought the first batch of songs, aiming for something

summery, psychedelic, British Pop, happy, upbeat stuff. When I heard the bits and pieces of songs I thought 'Fucking hell!' and knew exactly what he was aiming at. It was a unique experience for me because I'm usually the instigator in every band I've been in. I've looked for a kind of Lennon/McCartney relationship but I'm usually the one pulling the strings. With Jon, I was having to up my game to write stuff that could stand up to what he was doing.

How long was it before you knew you had an album taking shape?

I think it would be about three and a half months but it wasn't possible to do it in one block. The idea was I'd do a lot in Jon's absence, but it was the collaboration itself that really excited me. I mixed it alone but the advantage of the digital age is I can send a mix to him, he can listen and then we talk on the phone or on Skype about how it sounds, so even then there is a degree of collaboration.

There's just the two of you on the record, aside from a guest vocal appearance from Givvi Flynn on the last track. Did you take into consideration how it would be replicated live?

It was only really once we were six months into the album we even discussed what we were going to call it, we were simply interested in seeing how the music came out. We're doing some Pledge gigs performing acoustically, but we have been thinking it would be great to do it with a full band. We'd need a drummer, a bass player... Jon's a phenomenal bass

player but I'd rather have him on guitar and singing. Then we'd want keyboards... but it all costs money! That's where Pledge can really pay off and Ginger is the perfect model for that. He has sufficient number of supporters, and we're only talking about 5,000 people or so, so it's not a massive number, but when you deal with those people directly it's sufficient to fund his project. His costs are higher than mine because he doesn't have his own studio like I do, so I looked at his figures and I rationalised that if I could get sales for the Dowling Poole up to 2,500, essentially we could run a band, Jon and I could get a wage and we could pay musicians for a tour. That's our goal and it's not far away. We've got about 800 Pledgers so far, so it doesn't seem a long way off, but the market has dropped out completely in terms of record sales. My old band, The Grip, did far more than most bands are selling these days, and we were nothing! (laughs) It's very odd.

Are there are songs that were left scattered by the wayside?

I think we started with thirteen. I put the CD on to listen to it as objectively as I could, to force myself to think how I could improve it. The answer was instantaneous, and that was drop two of the songs.

Both of them I think are pretty good songs, we ended up giving them out as free samples so to speak, to draw people in. One was called 'The Straw Man' and was all about Jimmy Savile and the BBC, the other was called 'White Light'. Those two, as good as they were, turned too many corners. It was a criticism often levelled at Jackdaw4, that it was too diverse. I always thought that was its strength. The identity of a band comes from the strength of its song writing – why that has to be limited to a certain style I do not know. I always cite The Beatles as a prime example, from album to album there was so much diversity. Now, if you're a Metal band, you make a Metal album, that's that. Anyway, I digress – those two songs did not compliment the rest of the body of work, which had a real continuity to it. It was quite cathartic as well, because as it happened, those two songs were both mine! (laughs)

I enjoyed a 60 minute chat with Willie, of which this is only a small fraction. You can read the entire interview at www.rocktopia.co.uk, where Willie also talks about the pros and cons of Pledge Music, working for television and a fascinating look behind the scenes of the music world.

