

A couple of months back I was sent a promo of a new CD by a solo artist named Gregory Darling, a pianist/singer/songwriter. I'll freely admit I'd not heard of him, but as this was a debut solo album, that was hardly surprising. I found the album to be an eclectic mix of songs, merging a variety of styles spanning rock to pop to an almost jazz feel. While undeniably pleasant listening, I wasn't sure what I could find to talk to Gregory about when offered an interview for Fireworks. However, when I discovered he played on a Faster Pussycat record, he landed a slot supporting Bryan Adams, writes with Julian Lennon and Prince once jammed with him, I changed my mind and started talking!



## GREGORY DARLING

Interview by James Gaden

**First of all Gregory, I should offer you some congratulations on your success in Italy, because I hear your new album 'Shell' has done quite well over there?**

Yeah, it's doing ok. They seem to be responding well to it, and I've got a very good team out there, and there's a lot of people who believe in it, which helps!

**I've been told your success in Italy led to the support slot with Bryan Adams. I think his fan base will like your material because when I put the album on, I had no preconceptions at all about what to expect and I found the album cool, laid back and mellow. It's a good album to just kick back and relax to.**

That's right. We did shows in March, and I agree. I think my material might find something to identify with to Bryan's fans.

**I'll go back in time a little bit, just to give a reader who's not familiar with you a bit of background. You're no stranger to record deals are you, because you did have one for your band Darling Cruel a few years back?**

Yeah, I've been around. I've done a lot of work. I've worked with a lot of producers, and I've been pretty lucky to have the opportunity to work in this industry.

**After Darling Cruel, did you work mostly as a session musician?**

Yeah, I did a lot of session work, and then in about 1996, 1997, I did a publishing deal with a company in Monaco. It was there that I met Julian Lennon again... reacquainted this time, in a sober state! We actually got a lot of work done, and that's when I really started enjoying collaborating with other artists. It was a tremendous learning experience for me. That led to a whole separate journey from that point on.

**You've got a few famous names on your session work C.V. There's Julian, obviously, and one that surprised me when I heard your album, and I'm sure it would surprise other people familiar with your style... you played piano on a Faster Pussycat album!**

Oh yeah! You know what, I don't have any idea how I ended up doing that! For the life of me I can't remember how I ended up on their record. I think it was probably one of those times when you're wasted somewhere and you get asked to play on a record, and you say 'How much?' and they'd offer fifty bucks and you agree because you'll be fifty bucks richer!

Fortunately, I have versatile taste buds regarding music, that's for sure, and that can be problematic if you don't have the right producer who can push you

in the right direction. Otherwise you may end up with too many flavours on one album. I don't want to sit there and say I want to make a rock record, or a jazz record, or a classical record though, so I think when it came to making 'Shell', I was lucky with Bob Rose, the producer, because we found a way to make both of us extremely happy with the result. We just put everything but the kitchen sink in and managed to balance the key elements out. That's why it's crucial to have the right producer for the record.

**When I started listening to the record, the bio described it as classic pop, which there is certainly an element of, but I found elements of easy listening, jazz, and the title track has quite a rock beat to it. I found it difficult to categorise as one specific genre, but the album does flow nicely.**

When I listen back to it, I also hear, sonically at least, a little Motown going on in there. When I listen to it now it's finished, I hear things I didn't even realise were going on.

**I found that with your album, it has a unique voicing. Some things I've reviewed have just been formulaic stuff, others have been desperate attempts to be other artists, but for a first solo album, I think it sounds like a songwriters record. It doesn't sound like you've aimed for a certain style, it sounds like you've written songs and made an album out of them.**

Exactly! Bob and I sat down, and I think there were over a hundred songs that I'd amassed, and we picked the best ones. It was pretty weird, because we weren't looking for a theme, we were just looking for the best songs, and they all seemed to co-exist well with one another. That's a producers trick!

**I thought the choice of 'Shell' as the single in Italy was a wise one, because that was the one that I remembered the most after one play of the album. Is that going to be the choice for the single in the UK?**

That's the one. It was a pretty unanimous decision actually. I'm a bit too close to it. I think you could put any song out from this record, so I'm happy that everyone concerned seemed to gravitate to 'Shell'.

**Where did you film the video for it? I watched it on your website and it looks unbelievable.**

Yeah! We did that in Iceland. The director came up with this crazy idea to go to Iceland, and we all went for it.

**It looks fabulous.**

It was pretty funny, because I remember looking around the day before shoot, it was just beautiful there, it was like being on another planet.

**That's exactly what I thought, some of the shots in the video, it was like nothing I'd ever seen.**

It's an extremely surreal place. I remember Kal Karman, who directed the video, getting into the zone for the song, because it's pretty heavy, lyrically. I said 'You know, life is pretty good right now Kal, I'm not really depressed or anything!' to which he replied 'Well don't worry, I'm depressed, that's why I liked the song, and that's why I wanted to direct the song!'

So, the next day, I woke up sick as a dog, I guess because of some fish I ate. Kal however, didn't seem at all bothered, and I realised because I was ill, I looked truly depressed! I gotta tell you James, I ended up really feeling that song! I was not the happiest camper shooting that video!

**It worked out though, because it made for a stunning video. It would have looked all wrong if you were stood there singing with a big grin on your face!**

Yeah, you can't be happy or it would ruin it! Also, the conditions in Iceland are extraordinary... the high winds, it makes Prague, where I'm calling from now, look like a tropical island. I've never experienced cold like that before in my life! It was worth it though when I saw the finished thing Kal put together. I was really happy with it.

**As you have been a writing partner for Julian Lennon for some time, how long have you been thinking about making your own record, before you actually did it?**

I just kind of go with the flow really. My whole existence has been like that, I never thought 'I've got to land a record deal and make myself a lot of money'. It has to feel right... you can fool the managers, maybe fool the record companies, but you can't fool the people. I felt if I made an album it had to feel right and I had to be comfortable not only with the songs, but with the producer, the record company... there's a lot to consider. I actually met up with the president of FOD Records, and we just hit it off, and that was the moment I decided it was something I wanted to do. It was very spontaneous.

**I was looking at FOD records website, and I noticed they have you and Chris Field, who we also spoke to a few issues back, and the website said the record company was more interested in the development of an artist than a quarterly turnover. I thought you and Chris fit with that quite well. Chris plays on your album as well I notice.**

That's right, we love Chris.

**I thought the same with his work - it wasn't a soundalike piece from a production line, it sounded like a new artist.**

Exactly! FOD allows us to be who we are, and there is genuine integrity within that company.

**I think it's a testament to both you as a songwriter, and FOD as a company, that they've allowed you to write songs you want to write, and you're seeing some success because of it, rather than they've forced you to write in a certain style to try to receive airplay on a radio station. It's what the music business needs.**

Absolutely! The other thing is, if you do compromise yourself and write how you're told to write, and they release your record and it drops to the wall, you just sold yourself out for nothing, I don't see the point.

**I was looking at who was playing on your album, and along with Chris, you've got Robbie Blunt from Robert Plant's band, and Nigel Harrison from Blondie!**

Yeah! I'm a huge Robbie Blunt fan. I've known Robbie for quite a few years, we've worked together... drank together... had some interesting times! So, not only do I have a lot of respect for his talent, I think it's important to have someone in the studio you're comfortable with, and who understands you as well. I'm not really into the idea of getting a studio guy,



I'm more interested in chemistry.

**And Julian appears on the album as well, duetting with you.**

Yeah, Julian and I, we come from the same school really. I've known him for ten years... in a sober state! I knew him before that, but we always seemed to run into each other while we were taking a piss! I'd be there, I'd turn and it would be 'Hey Julian!' and he'd go 'Hey Greg!' and we'd start talking about how it was going, right there at the loo. It went on for years!

**People will start talking when that gets out. (Laughing) You know what, let's keep that one off the record!**

## MARK SWEENEY



**While everyone is raving about Gotthard and Krokus, there is another great hard rock band from Switzerland that seems to be slipping under the hard rock radar here in the UK - Crystal Ball. I hopped over to Munich to see the band in 2000, supporting Pretty Maids, and they put on an awesome live show. At that time they were promoting 'Hard Impact' which I personally feel is still their best release. Changing record companies several times over the past few years has not really helped the band build up a solid base from which to exploit their considerable talents, but frontman Mark Sweeney recently hooked up with ex Jaded Heart vocalist Michael Bormann to make his first solo album, 'Slow Food'. For me, the result was**

**So, with you having a hundred songs in the bag when you came to make this album, as it's been well received, would you use some of these songs to make a follow up record, or would you write completely new stuff?**

That's a very good question. There were three tracks we left off that were recorded in Prague, so to answer your question, there will be another record, and we'll probably have about a hundred and fifty songs to go through if truth be told, because I have this habit of writing every week. I make everybody crazy because I keep adding to the stockpile! But I think, the more you write, the more chance you have of making some gems. I had all the cassettes I had transferred to CD, which it a mammoth job, there's a lot of stuff on there I don't even remember writing.

**A lot of artists I've talked to make demos, put them away in a safe or whatever, and maybe come back five or ten years later, play a tape out of curiosity and think 'My God, why didn't I put this on an album?'**

Yeah... I've already run into that..!

**I suppose it's no bad thing, if you are prolific and you can continually write good songs, that has to be better than sat there with no ideas at all.**

Yeah, I don't know about it being a continuous stream of GOOD material. Sometimes I'll come back to something a week later and think 'What is this crap?' But I try to discipline myself to write a certain amount per week, because it's all practice, and you never know what might pop up.

**When you tour, is it the same people as on the album backing you, or do you have a different backing band?**

It would be fun to do it with the guys on the album, but they've got steady work so it's not possible. It would be nice, but I think I'll have other

**Michael really such a talented all-round musician?**

He definitely is a talent and he played almost everything on this record. I had some other great guest musicians who played on it but the biggest part was Mr. Music himself. I guess that in just 2 or 3 songs the bass is programmed, the rest is handmade by Michael.

**The style of the album is very different from your work with Crystal Ball. What was your aim when you started out with this solo album?**

My goal was to show that I have a another side in me! Imagine, for over 10 years, I screamed the highest metal notes out of me and the goal was always: faster, longer, higher! But I like also the quieter songs and first of all it was a challenge to sing like I sing now on 'Slow Food'! Michael really was a very good vocal coach and I learned a lot from him! My awarness was that it isn't necessary to scream the highest notes to transmit that you are a good singer! Feeling is the magic word!

**So what style of music do you prefer - or is it a case of different styles for different moods?**

First of all it is that. What I do with Crystal Ball means: power, melody and alot of dirt, haha. But you're right, sometimes I need different styles, depending my moods.

**Can you explain to us the album title and artwork concept?**

I guess 'Slow Food' says all: I feed you with some slower stuff, haha. In a world this hectic, we need some slower moments! Take time, sit or lay down, enjoy the music, listen to the words an eat a good meal... most suitably a lobster, hahaha! No, seriously, I find that

guys with me on the road.

**One thing I really was impressed by was what happened with you and Prince...**

Oh yes! It was a freak night. I was playing a show in Century City, and I was playing a song, and this tall black guy comes over to the stage and asks me do I know a song called so and so? I said no, I don't, and he walks off. I just thought that it was weird, and carried on with my set. Next thing I know he comes back and says 'Is it ok if the Artist Formerly Known As Prince comes up to jam?'

I didn't believe him, so I just said 'Oh yeah, sure'. Before you know it, the audience parts, and a little man in a golden suit approaches me, walks right up on stage, looks directly at me and says 'What key are you in?' I said 'We're in C', and he replied 'Does your bass player know that?'

I'll never forget it! My bass player is shaking, he's terrified. Fortunately, my guitar player recognised this, so he picks up the bass, hands Prince his guitar, and we went off for twenty three minutes on a musical safari, full of chord changes, alternating tempos... an absolutely extraordinary experience. That's when you really understand the term 'genius'.

It was a very proud moment in my career, and also very humbling. It made me want to work harder and continue to do better.

**Anything you'd like to add?**

You've done such a spectacular job, you've covered everything, I really appreciate it.

**Find out more about Gregory, and his brand new album 'Shell', over at his official website [www.gregory-darling.com](http://www.gregory-darling.com).**

FIREWORKS

the lobster on the cover was a good choice in different aspects: it IS slow food; he looks a bit 'menacing' and I guess, it's an eyecatcher.

**Do you and Michael intend doing any live shows to promote the album?**

No, not really. It's already hard to play with Crystal Ball live and nobody would be interested to see Mark Sweeney solo unless I would have a very good radio promo or a hit! I like my album, but I don't think that this will change my life. It's my "different" baby and that's it!

**Have you and Michael discussed working together on a more hard rock orientated album? It would be interesting to see what a mix of Jaded Heart/Crystal Ball would create!**

Oh yes! Crystal Ball will enter the studios in April/May to record our 6th album! And where do you think we will do this? Yes, with Michael in Duisburg! So I guess you can hear very soon "this mix" of Jaded Heart and Crystal Ball! I really look forward for this new album an I hope you'll like it!

**Well, I for one will be waiting keenly to hear the new Crystal Ball, and hoping they go back more to the melodic hard rock of their earlier albums than the more metal of the latest - and with Mr Bormann at the helm, I'm thinking that's exactly what we'll get. Meantime, be sure to check out Mark's solo CD - definitely a late night, summer time album with many fantastic hooks, as can be heard on the track 'Superman' on our cover CD.**

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