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Fireworks Magazine Online 65 - Interview with The Dowling Poole

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THE DOWLING POOLE: An interview with WILLIE DOWLING

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 Dowling recently teamed up with the equally versatile Jon Poole to create The Dowling Poole, a collaboration funded via the Pledge Music route. **James Gaden** spoke to Willie, who offered his thoughts on the new album 'Bleak Strategies', as well as offering a candid and fascinating look behind the scenes of the music business.



"My aspirations for this record go so much further, I think it is a record that sounds good enough that more people would enjoy it if they could get to hear it."

Willie Dowling

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 got involved with Ginger's '555%' album and he kept asking me to produce. I wasn't that interested because Jackdaw4 were still a concern. He said that we could support him on their tour and I knew where it was leading, after the first night he was asking me to produce again! It was a happy tour and we went from Japan pretty much straight into the studio. 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.

When you decided to make a record together, 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.

I was surprised by the album – I never read the press release first, because they always try and tell you what the album sounds like and I hardly ever agree with it. I tend to listen first and read it when the album is done... so I just have the album in my hand, and the album is called 'Bleak Strategies' and all the little snippets printed in the booklet have a quite negative feel like 'Hope just exacerbates things. Try giving in' and 'If at first you don't succeed... consider failure as a valid option'. I'm thinking shit, this is going to be really heavy going, maudlin music... and it's anything but! It's upbeat, summery, exactly as Jon described it to you.

It's all about juxtaposition! That is so wise, not reading the press release until afterwards – in an ideal world, I wouldn't have to say anything, you'd just listen and tell me what you think of it. For some reason, we're conditioned into presenting these things with some sort of back story, which you know is going to put some people off... the second you mention Wildhearts, Honeycrack or anything like that, it already flavours things. I feel there are maybe slight elements of Honeycrack on here, but it's nothing like Honeycrack as an album. I think providing the comparisons are often counter-productive.

How long did you spend working together before you knew you had an album taking shape?

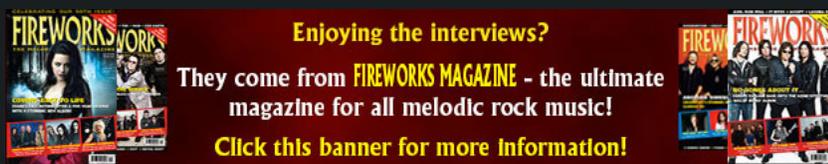
If you measured it in terms of time it took to do, I think it would be about three and a half months. However, as I live in France and Jon was busy with other bands, it wasn't possible to do it in one block. He'd come over for a couple of days and he did all the drum parts – generally speaking you always start with the

drums, and then we'd add bits. The idea was I'd do a lot in his absence, but it was the collaboration itself that really excited me. I had to do some things myself, for example 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.

Regarding the digital age, you've released the album via PledgeMusic. On one hand, that's a brilliant way for an artist to be completely self sufficient. However, while it's okay for someone like yourself who has fans from your previous bands when you had a label, I don't think it's any good for brand new bands who don't have much of a fan base. How can they build enough people to fund a record if they never had a label deal to start with?

It's absolutely impossible. I have so many thoughts about this, many of which are contradictory – like so much of the digital revolution, its many advantages are also its weaknesses. As Jackdaw4 found out, it's so hard to reach out beyond your existing fans with Pledge. Let's discuss the advantages first of all – what it does is it lets you consolidate your support into one big block, one period of time and it engages people, they feel part of the process and there's an interaction which you can never get with a record label. It forms a little community. Sixteen year olds find a band on the internet and they send it to all their mates, they share and suddenly you have a phenomenon happening from teenagers sharing. With our demographic, they tend to like the fact they have their band that nobody else has ever heard of. I had a meeting with the Pledge people after I did my first album using their platform, to see if there was a way to tweak the system. They were very candid about it, they acknowledged that it was a very difficult sell for a new band to go that route. I assume new bands are reliant on young people sharing their music to spread the word – unless there is some huge conspiracy like I witnessed in the 1990s, the smoke and mirrors approach which benefitted Honeycrack. I'm talking about the facts and figures being manipulated, the mainstream press was very much in cahoots with that. If they turned a blind eye to certain details and ran a feature on this new band called Honeycrack, who were putting out their own 7" single on their own label – when quite clearly it was Epic Records doing it – then they will be guaranteed to get a feature with, say, the Manic Street Preachers. It was that sort of tit-for-tat relationship, and I often wonder about that, whether there is still a whole degree of manipulation goes on for younger bands. I suspect not, I think it is more down to young people sharing their enthusiasm for stuff.

There was an article in The Guardian about how the Radio 1 playlist is decided. It's astonishing – they rely less and less on pluggers. Once upon a time, a pluggger, if he had the budget, all he had to do was hire a nice box at a football match, get plenty of champagne, take them out to a nightclub and bang, your record is A-listed. That's exactly what happened to me – and you would expect that I would be happy, but I felt utterly defeated because I realised there was no meritocracy at all. The record could have been absolute shit, and it wouldn't have mattered! Now though, they rely on stats. They get a record, look at a variety of stats, they look on Youtube and Facebook to see how many views and how many likes the band has, and if you're in the 30,000-40,000 margin, you have a good chance of getting your record on the A-list. That sounds like there is some degree of meritocracy involved, but if you know anything about the internet, you'll know how easy it is to manipulate those figures. People are surprised that meritocracy doesn't play a part, but it hasn't for years, so why should it now?



Pledge is obviously a viable alternative to someone with a fan base who perhaps isn't interested in returning to dealing with labels, but is there more pressure on you to deliver, knowing these people have paid upfront before you've really even started? You have complete artistic freedom, whereas when you were on a label, you would have a producer and a label helping shape what sort of record they thought would sell. With Pledge, you're left to your own devices.

Yes, completely, and that's a wonderful thing for most artists. There's nothing worse than having a record company saying who will produce the record, or you can't have this song on the album. Again, this happened with Honeycrack – there's a song on the album 'Prosaic' called 'Good Good Feeling', which had the traditional Honeycrack breakneck speed, sweet harmonies and after the chorus it dropped into a Reggae thing. The label were adamant it had to go, saying we were a Rock band, Reggae was cheesy... it didn't matter when we pointed out The Clash did it, it seemed to work for them, The Police did it, it seemed to work for them, it's just that one song... Nope, definitely not having it on the album. The battle raged and we played some summer festivals. It took them seeing an entire field of Rockers suddenly, when the Reggae kicked in and changed the pace, all bouncing up and down to it. Then they said 'Oh, alright, they get it, you can have it on the record.' It just seemed such an unnecessary battle! We knew what we were doing! So you avoid all of that with Pledge. On the flip side, and I'll make this argument constantly, that encourages complete self indulgence, no editing, you could turn out any old crap. I've seen that happen myself, there is something to be said for having someone there for an overview. The pressure does mount, because of the extra duties. In an ideal world, I'd like nothing more than to write the songs, record and produce them, and then turn it over to someone else to do all the dirty work. I'd go and play live, that would be ideal. It's not going to happen though. That means I've got to do the videos – I'm not obliged to, but because I did it with Jackdaw4, it feels like I have to do at least the same amount as I did with other Pledges, I can't do less! I've nailed myself to a cross on that one because I'm not that keen on doing it, I'd rather someone else did it, music making is my thing. It does create a discipline though, because we've taken people's money and have deadlines to meet.

There's just the two of you on the record, aside from a guest vocal appearance from Givvi Flynn on the last track. When you and Jon were making the record, did you ever take into consideration how it would be replicated live when you're overdubbing things?

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.

There's so many bands now as well – with the internet, any band can set up a Bandcamp page or something, if anything, the marketplace is crowded.

I've used this analogy before, as much as I think there has been a great democratisation of music, with technology these days just about anybody can string something together and it can end up perfectly listenable. The problem is because it's so ubiquitous, there's now an immense muddy field of new music where it's very difficult to spot the green shoots of real quality popping up. It's fractionalised and there's so much choice. It's a metaphor for where life has gone horribly wrong since the 1980s. There was a Reagan-ite, Thatcher-ite capitalist idea that more choice was better and the consumer is always better off with more choice. It's now seen as a complete fallacy with things like the choice between the big six electrical companies. It's a cartel, a monopoly. The same can be said for music, for food choices, television channels – there's too much choice. On TV, you end up endlessly flicking and not really watching anything, unless your attention has been caught in the first 30 seconds. So then everything plays to that 30 second grab, that sugar rush, that immediate hit. You're not encouraged to reflect, think, sit back and engage. It's all 'Look at this, and this, and this! Flash! Bang! Smoke! Mirrors!' I'm not suggesting we should all be wearing grey suits in a Chinese attempt to homogenise the world, a degree of choice of always useful. I think most people would agree that there's too much now though.

Just as an aside, your bio states that you moved into writing music for television. How did that transition happen?

I did, if you look at my website www.willedowling.co.uk there are showreels for some of the stuff that I've done for TV. In my very early days, I worked with a producer called Andre Jacquemin who was the guy who did the Monty Python albums. He co-wrote stuff with them and he spotted something in me, God knows what, and he would call me up for sessions. I ended up doing stuff for Michael Palin and Eric Idle, then doing bits for adverts and it was always for the same reason – he paid cash which helped subsidise The Grip on tour. By the time Honeycrack came around, we did Saturday Night Live which was ITV's version of the Channel 4 favourite. We knew, although it went unsaid at the time, that the band was in a terminal decline, so I made a couple of mental notes about people I really liked the look of. When we were on the show a second time, I used Python as my selling point. The show had bands and comedians on, and there were a few I really liked. One was a guy called Simon Munnelly, who is fantastic, one of the unsung heroes of British comedy. He's a comedian's comedian, he should be fucking huge. There were two other comedians who did a very funny sketch, and they were Alexander Armstrong and Ben Miller. There was a third group, who I liked initially but they did a Shakespearean type sketch as if they were watching a football match. I thought 'Right, you boys are Oxford and Cambridge through and through, I won't bother with you!' and I went to Armstrong and Miller. I sold them on the Monty Python stuff and said if they went into sketch comedy, I'd love to do music for them. Here's the payoff – must have been a year later, it turned out they were both Cambridge boys, and the guys I had decided not to approach were the fucking League Of Gentlemen from Leeds Drama College! (laughs) I couldn't have got it more wrong if I'd tried! I ended up doing music for four series of Armstrong And Miller shows, and that leads to other things. You get to know directors and producers, the next thing I know I'm getting a call from Steve Coogan's people, then Reeves and Mortimer, then I branched out and did stuff for The Bill, then kids shows... and that was the only time I made money out of music! I've done a couple of films, but ironically the money is often better for TV. I like working with orchestras and unless it's a top end film, the budget can't cover that. It's the TV work that has paid for this nice place in France where I'm talking to you from, it certainly wasn't due to my work in Rock and Roll!

TV sounds a difficult area to get into, which is why I was curious how you had managed that transition.

I got into it at the right time. Computer technology was still relatively new and I was right at the front end of it. I stole stuff from Philip Pope and Simon Brint,

known composers who were the go-to guys in the '80s. They did Lenny Henry, Spitting Image, all those things. They were old school, they'd hire a band or a small orchestra and use a 24 track or 48 track studio, and it cost a fucking fortune. I was able to walk into a meeting and say 'Look, technology has changed now, I can do it all on my own at home, it'll sound like an orchestra' and budgets were going right down at the time. I could halve or quarter what they were currently paying, so I got a lot of work. However, I remember thinking so clearly when I walked out of the third show I'd got the work for, I realised I'd sown the seeds of my own demise. Technology moves in ever increasing spirals so it would be inevitable that as technology cheapened, more and more people would be able to do what I was doing and do it cheaper than I could! My system at the time cost me about £25,000 and it's exceeded now by a laptop which you can get for about £1,100! Everyone wanted in on that area, and in the early part of 2000, the big players like ITV and BBC were now paying a fraction of what they had been paying me a few years earlier. If you were a newcomer, you'd do it for even less. I don't do nearly as much as I used to. I'm quite grateful actually, because that's why there were so many big gaps between Jackdaw4 records, which is what I really wanted to be doing. Nowadays, it's a very interesting time to be a musician. If you're just starting out, it's the way it is, you don't know any different. For me, my history is in tape and those long, laborious processes. Those skills are dead now, it's been a rollercoaster keeping up. You can't put your roots down, you have to move with it.



So, back to the album... we've drifted miles from where we started! (laughs) You've got nine songs on the record – were those the nine you wrote in order, or are they a bunch of others that are left scattered by the wayside?

I think we started thirteen, whittled it down with a view to doing a twelve track album and I had come over to master it. 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'. The issue with these two songs goes back to what we talked about earlier, about whether there was an idea what kind of record it would be. 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)

It's funny you mentioned The Beatles, that was one of the only "influences" in your press release that I agreed with when I did read it. Certain harmony parts and a couple of melody lines put me in mind of the Fab Four.

One takes guidance over these things – XTC comes up time and time again and I'm told I'd love XTC. I'm sure I would, but apart from 'Making Plans For Nigel' and 'Towers Of London', you've pretty much just exhausted my knowledge of XTC! People tell me I'm influenced by them – if you say so! (laughs) The Beatles have been with me forever though, every band I've been in. I guess it is the harmonies, although the Beach Boys did some pretty fine harmonies around about the same time.

Having had life with a label and also enjoying success using the Pledge route, would you ever go back to a label or are you done with that now?

I'd be a fool to say never, but I'd apply that to almost any question I was asked. My instinct is no, I wouldn't go back to a label, but that's too simple an answer. It would depend on the terms and conditions. With a lot of musicians, you often look for somebody to blame if things go wrong, and a label is a useful tool for that. One hears about independent labels who offer deals more reflective of the age we live in, where they'll manufacture all the records, give you a bit for tour support and it's a 50/50 split. Deals like that wouldn't be a bad place to start. It would be nice to have the infrastructure and the responsibility taken away so I could just make music. I don't like having to be my own manager/agent/video maker. The number crunching and the hours you put in can be counter productive. By the end of a session, editing a video or something, the last thing I want to do is work on a song idea I've got in my head, I just want to lie down for a bit! The Pledge campaign has done well, better than the Jackdaw4 one, but there's still that limitation. My aspirations for this record go so much further, I think it is a record that sounds good enough that more people would enjoy it if they could get to hear it. That's the objective, to push it further. If we can't, we'll inevitably make another one anyway because we enjoyed making this one so much.

I think that's the way to look at it, with the view that you've made a record you are really happy with, and if other people get it, that's great, if not, you've still got a record you are proud of.

You're quite right, I've always found the best thing about making music is the intrinsic value that it gives during the process of making it. It's something that is indefinable, you just know that you are at your happiest and there are all sorts of ways to measure it, not least you walk out of the studio and think fuck me, it's 2 o'clock in the morning! The problem is when you start having aspirations of where it might take you, how many people will buy it, will people like it... that's why I'm convinced musicians and actors are often known depressives, it becomes somebody else's responsibility to make this thing work for you – please like me! You're looking for accolades or acceptance, validation of your existence and that's where it goes wrong, the best moments are always the moments of creation. The frustration, like I say, creeps in with the knowledge that a simple doubling of figures would put so much more within reach, allowing you to survive doing something you love. I'm lucky that I can make a living doing other forms of music with the TV work, some brilliant musicians have to do something which in their heart of hearts they have no desire to do. There's a fantastic moment in a Woody Allen film where he is a famous writer and he has been surrounded by fans, he gets back to his hotel and there waiting for him is an old school friend he hasn't seen for years. The guy says 'Look at you, you've got all the money, all the fame, me, I drive a fucking taxi!' Woody Allen replies that we live in an era where musicians and actors are held up as deities, and it's just a moment in history. Simply going back 150 years, being a musician or an actor was only one step up from being a whore. It's only really since the 1950s if you think about it, this phenomenon has taken over where people are overpaid and hugely overrated. There was an unbalanced representation of value. It's moved into football and comedy now, that's where a lot of accolades lies now.

Or drop down a class, you have the Heat magazine 'celebrities' who are idolised for some unfathomable reason.

Of course! What a phenomenon that is! Who'd have thought you could be celebrated for actually having nothing to offer? (laughs) It's a remarkable thing!

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