

BLURT

THE MOTOR CITY IS BURNING Flogging Molly

Jun 03, 2011



With Detroit's economic and social woes as a metaphor for America, on their latest album the Celt-punk rockers deliver an emotional masterpiece.

BY JOHN B. MOORE

As a working class band, blending punk rock and traditional Irish roots music, you'd be hard pressed to find a more appropriate town as your base than Detroit.

The Motor City was probably hardest hit by the recession that decimated even those supposed recession-proof cities. So, no strangers to struggles, Flogging Molly front man Dave King and his wife and band mate Bridget Regan (fiddle) - a long time Detroit resident - summoned the rest of the band from all corners of

the globe (literally) to take up temporary residence in Detroit to start work on their latest record, *Speed of Darkness*.

The city certainly left its mark on the record, 11 songs of anger, despair, uncertainty and ultimately a sliver of hope over the economic plight of millions. Look no further than the fifth track, "The Power's Out," for the vitriol that corrupt industries, selfish executives and flaccid politicians have inspired ("The power's out, there's fuck all to see/The power's out, like this economy/The power's out, guess it's par for the course/Unless you're a bloodsucking leech CEO").

The record, the band's fifth, not counting a handful of brilliant live albums, is also the first on their own label, the just-launched Borstal Beat.

Fresh off a tour, that's about to start right back up again, King spoke recently about the record, the city that inspired it.

BLURT: I know that you and your wife live in Detroit part time. Living in that city, it's particularly hard to ignore what's the country has been going through economically. Was it your intention from the very beginning to focus this album on Detroit and the situation there or did that just happen after you started writing?

DAVE KING: Well, we started writing the album between Ireland and Detroit and we thought it would be a good idea to use Detroit as a base, because the band lives all over the place. We just started writing and you couldn't get away from it. Between Ireland and Detroit, they've been hit really, really badly. Even the neighborhood we live in, you walk the dog around and you see so many vacant houses and it's really sad. I'm a musician, so unfortunately I don't have the answers for something like this, but as a social commentary, I think it's important for us as a band to talk about this.

As someone who grew up there, what have been you're wife's reactions to seeing her hometown falling on such bad times?

Yeah, our house is still in the same area she was born, Green Acres. It's just very sad; it kind of reminds me of when I was a kid in Ireland. Growing up in Ireland was really depressing, then the Celtic Tiger came along and now that's been declawed. They've built like housing estates in Ireland, but now they're just these shells sitting there, not being finished.

Are you starting to see things finally get better in Detroit?

Well, honestly we haven't been here a lot because we've been touring since January basically, but I don't see any improvement whatsoever yet. The house next to us was all boarded up, but now the boards have been removed, so maybe someone has moved in. The taxes that people have to pay in Michigan are ridiculous as well. That's another reason why people can't afford their houses here. It's not just paying their mortgages; it's having to pay their taxes as well.

Lyricaly there's a lot of anger obviously just based on the subject matter. Do you see it that way or is there some optimism there as well?

To me it's an album that has hope. Lyricaly there is hope. I mean things are bad right now. We meet people at our shows from all walks of life and people are having a hard time. I can't get away from that and I don't want to get away from that. I want to look at this album in 10 years and say "thank God that period is over. We got through it." It is an optimistic album. The title is just about how quickly things can change.

This is probably your strongest album thematically. Was it harder to write or easier to write when the songs all had a common thread?

If you had asked me a month or so before we started writing if this was going to be an easy album, I don't know what I would have said. We have such a different mindset when we are on the road, so we come

home, we take a break and that's when the writing comes in. Knock on wood, when we get together to write things move along very quickly.

How did the rest of the band take the news of relocating to Detroit to write this one?

One of the things that's good about this band is that we are very focused on what we do. Like when we record the album, some of the best albums come about when we're all living in the same space while we're recording and going into the studio together in the morning. I think we tend to work together better like that.

The album hasn't come out yet and you just finished a stint of shows on the road. Do you plan to tour a lot once this one officially comes out?

Yeah, we will be. I can honestly say John until the end of the year at least.

At this point is it drudgery, having to spend so much time on the road?

Oh, no, no. We're very fortunate as a band. For example last year we headlined a punk festival in Blackpool, England one night and the next night we headlined a folk festival in Belgium. So we played with Richard Thompson and the Chieftains and the next night we played with Motorhead. For a band to be able to do something like that is quite incredible and we're grateful to be able to do that.

You worked with Ryan Hewitt (who also produced The Avett Brothers and Red Hot Chili Peppers) on this one. Was this your first time working with him?

No, second time. He did *Float* as well.

Was it easier now that you know each others' styles and how you work?

We work pretty well together with Ryan. He's an exceptional man when it comes to recording. What we never used to do before was get several backing tracks down, but with Ryan it was one a day. You'd start with a song in the morning and by the end of the day it was done. It was a really good way of working and you really got to know a song better that way. It was very focused and that's what we need. We have seven people in this band and it's easy to lose focus.

Where did you go to record it?

We went to Ashville, NC [to Echo Mountain Studios]. It was amazing, absolutely beautiful. The people there were so nice. If anybody needed anything you'd just put the word out. If Bridget needed a fiddle, she'd have 12 fiddles the next day to choose from. It really was an incredible experience.

This is also your first record in a long time not on SideOne Dummy. You started your own label for this one didn't you?

Yeah, we decided to reinvent ourselves a little bit I suppose you'd say; take on a little bit more responsibility for what we do and hopefully bring on other bands.

Have you already started looking at other bands to sign?

Yeah. Well obviously we've got to get this record out first, but we have our eyes on a couple people that we really, really like. There's this fantastic band from San Diego called the Drowning Men. We've had them out on tour with us and I'd love to work with them.

Is there anything about running your own record that surprised you?

It's a lot more work, absolutely. The amount of people that have to be involved in getting an album out is quite a lot. We've got so many people behind the scenes with this band that do so much work. There's a lot of people doing the blood and guts work. It is a lot of work, but we're lucky to have it, you know. We're lucky to be in the situation that we are. We could be a band at that stage where no one is coming to see us anymore and thankfully we're not. So we're extremely grateful for it.

It's exciting to hear that you guys are looking to sign other bands.

Yeah, there's so many great bands out there, great live bands that don't get a chance to go on tour and get their album out. It's not as easy as it was and if we can do anything at all to help, that's great.

There's one more question that I've been holding on to for about a year and a half. You put out a video online about PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) awareness awhile ago and I was really interested in how it came about. My father is a vet and has PTSD and on a personal level I was surprised and glad to see you talking about it.

Well, a friend of me and Bridget's, back in Ireland, unfortunately took his life and it affected us... we just couldn't believe it. One night he was in the pub laughing over a joke and the next day he's dead and I think in Ireland there's a stigma about suffering from depression. You just never go to talk to someone about it. It stems from there, and we have so many military fans who come to our shows. It's so weird you should mention this because the day before yesterday, at our last show on this tour, this soldier came up to us before the show and said that that video saved his life. He came back from Iraq and was thinking about committing suicide. I met a lovely girl after a show and she said "you guys took care of me." We play music, you know, and to have somebody say that to you. Music can make a difference and I think in these times between humor and music, they're probably the only two things that get you through it.

So, yeah, it does make us proud. We want to be *that* band. We're not just popcorn, we're not just candy. We're a real working class band and we're surrounded by working class people. That's what we're about.