

A Conversation with Thomas Dolby
by Frank Goodman (7/2007, Puremusic.com)

I got an email recently from a publicist friend of mine that read something like: Would you like to talk with producer Thomas Dolby about the reissue of Prefab Sprout's 1985 pop classic, *Steve McQueen*? (What's your next question, I wondered, would I be interested in a date with Scarlett Johansson?)

By the time of Prefab Sprout's second release, *Steve McQueen*, Paddy McAloon had been recognized by critics and serious fans alike as one of the most important songwriters of the '80s. His lyrical lexicon and melodic invention bloomed in the synth pop atmosphere of The Smiths and The Cure, Scritti Politti and ABC with a more macho intelligence, minus the cotton candy or the constipated vocal stylings.

Prefab Sprout had already made critical leaps and a reputation with the precedent CD *Swoon*, but in a moment of brilliant serendipity engaged the zeitgeist genius of Thomas Dolby to bring their musical muscle to the masses. *Steve McQueen*, once the McQueen estate bridled at the title, was released in the US as *Two Wheels Good*. The singles and albums charted more seriously in the UK than in the States, but it did remarkably well here, considering how smart the music was.

When you listen to the four clips on the Listen page, we'll bet that you recognize at least two of the songs, even if you don't know the group by their name, or the name of their creator Paddy McAloon.

It was fascinating talking with Thomas Dolby about the group, the music and the time--he's ever sharp, very eloquent, and a very witty character. We also delve into his new music, his technological windfalls, the relative shambles that the music industry finds itself in, and what the future may hold.

Kudos to Columbia/Legacy for the truly Deluxe edition of Steve McQueen. Along with the excellent liner notes by Paul Lester, disc Two is eight sterling acoustic renditions of the tunes by Paddy McAloon. Just listening to the clips on the Listen page will bring back memories of the best things that happened in the '80s.

Puremusic: Thank you for being such an important part of this new Deluxe Edition of Prefab Sprout's *Steve McQueen*.

Thomas Dolby: Well, it's been delightful getting back into it after all these years.

PM: I mean, it's so amazing how high that beautiful little record climbed, critically around the world, as opposed to its relatively modest commercial success, for how truly great we know it was.

TD: I think so, yeah. I mean, I think often there's not that close a correlation between something that's truly valuable with its commercial stats. And this is a good example.

PM: Yes, absolutely. And the excellent liner notes by Paul Lester told me so much that I didn't really know, even as a fan. Most significantly, he recalled how important to the original recording you truly were.

TD: Well, I can't take that much credit for it. The band was already in full swing before I ever heard them. They'd released *Swoon*, which in its own way, had a lot of critical success. But in a way what they needed perhaps was somebody with a little bit more experience, not from the engineering side, but from the musical side to help them fine-tune their sound to make it a little bit more accessible, a slightly easier listen. Because *Swoon* is a brilliant album, but it's quite demanding.

PM: Right. It's more difficult.

TD: It's definitely more difficult. And I think the reason for that was that you have to start with Paddy, I think. He's a lyricist, first and foremost. When I met him he was in a tiny bedroom with a mattress stacked on top of piles of song lyrics that he'd written over the years.

PM: Unbelievable.

TD: And he'd pull them out one by one, and he'd squint at them and strum his way through them. And he would write notes for chords and melodies over the top of the lyrics. But primarily it was about the poems. What happened when the band started to arrange those was that there were lots of extra beats here and there, strange chord changes or rhythm changes, or odd lengths of phrases. The musicians tried to sort of accommodate those, but in fact what needed to happen was a few of the rough edges needed to be trimmed off.

But at the same time, I didn't want to throw out the baby with the bath water. I mean, what made them so unique is that they defied logic. So the task, really, at hand, for me, was how to elevate them to a more accessible level, commercially, without homogenizing the essence of the music.

PM: It's a curious alchemy that really needs to take place to take that germ of genius, that kernel of genius and make it something to which the world can say, "Ah, yes, I hear that, I see that."

TD: And there are different kinds of producers. There's your engineer producer, the Steve Lillywhite type, who can get a great sound for the band, but maybe is not so qualified to

go right back to scratch with the arrangements themselves and adjust things at that level. And obviously, you start with a great song, but then when the arrangements and the structure of the songs are right, there's very little for a producer to do other than just judge what makes a good performance and say, "Take three was the one, let's go with it."

PM: And some producers, as you know, are much more attuned to the lyrics than others.

TD: Yeah, yeah, I think that's certainly true.

PM: And it sounds like you were on the same page with him lyrically, that essentially that's who he is, that's what it was, and your task was to round out the edges, and bring it to the world. It's really unusual that such a revered songwriter like Paddy McAloon would allegedly have called *Steve McQueen* "Thomas' album."

TD: Well, I think he's being too nice. It was given that I was a performer in my own right, and quite opinionated. It would have been very easy for them to say, "Watch it, step back, don't try and impose yourself on our album." And they were very respectful of the slight edge I had over them in terms of experience and the range of artists I'd worked with at that point, and the sort of spectrum of musical styles and sounds that I had under my belt already. They were very humble, and said, "We're just a bunch of hicks from Tyneside, and what do we know?"

PM: Oh!

TD: "So we'll go with your better judgment."

[laughter]

TD: And that was very nice of them, to give me that free hand. But in reality, the respect was very mutual, and I tried to be very sensitive. Being an artist myself, I knew that Paddy wouldn't want to be diluted by what I added to the album. So I tried to be very sensitive to their wishes as well.

PM: On the other hand, it's written that you actually picked the songs. Is that so?

TD: Well, yeah.

PM: That's beautiful.

TD: I mean, as I say, Paddy pulled out a stack of lyrics and played me probably 40 or 50 songs. And from them I picked my favorites. And I often visited him up in Tyneside, and picked my favorites and asked if he would make me demos of them. So I think over the next couple of days with a cassette recorder he put those songs down and sent me a cassette. And that's what I had to work with, in terms of the planning that I did for the album.

PM: Unbelievable. Just guitar/vocal demos on cassette.

TD: Yeah. And in fact, when we made the decision to re-master the album, SONY asked him whether he would be prepared to dig any of those demos up and include them on the album. And he said no, which I think is a little sad. But in reality, the quality of them was very basic. He didn't particularly try to catch great performances of them--they were just really done there as a notepad for me.

But I think that was what led him to make the decision to re-record the new versions of those songs acoustically. And the nice thing is that that gives us new interpretations, different interpretations of those songs. Given the distance that he now has from that era, it definitely throws some new light on the songs.

PM: On top of the fact that this time he really took a much more high-handed, perfectionist stab at the acoustic versions thereof.

TD: Yeah, I think that's right.

PM: And got some great performances as a result.

TD: Yeah. And one of the things about that era compared to today is that you had one shot at it. If you were lucky enough to get signed to a major label and given a budget to go into the studio, you really had one shot at it. It was all or nothing. And if you were lucky enough to get the record out, and it was successful, then you're stuck with that version, that snapshot of the songs for years to come. But in reality, for a songwriter like Paddy, music is not a rigid thing, it's fluid. So sometimes it's uncomfortable to be sort of landed with this one instant in time where you made your master of the song. What's nice these days I find is that between downloads and podcasts and iTunes, plus the cheaper economics of recording and manufacturing CDs, there doesn't have to be one definitive version of the song. It's not this all or nothing thing anymore.

PM: What about the songs not taken? Do you know much about them, the unchosen from that 40 or 50, did they end up somewhere, are they just under the bed somewhere?

TD: They're probably back under the bed, quite frankly.

PM: Right.

TD: And every time I--every few years I've gone to see Paddy, and he'll play me some other stuff that he has lying around, and very little of it ever sees the light of day. He had whole entire album projects abandoned, basically, for one reason or another.

PM: On this new deluxe addition, do you know why the bonus tracks of the original were not included, "Yearning Loins," and "He'll Have To Go"?

TD: I don't know why they weren't included, no.

PM: Just one of those record company things.

Paddy's language, both the musical and the lyrical language is so unique. But when it comes to things like unusual voicings of chords and elements of harmony, is that generally the artist or the producer's hand at work there?

TD: Oh, I think for every relationship between artists and producer there's a different story every time. I mean, in this case, the choices that we made, I'd say, were certainly collaborative. And I feel that I was handed the responsibility by the label to sort of supervise those choices, and there was very little involvement from the label in terms of coming in and saying, "Well, we like this as a single," or, "these choices for the album," or, "Could you make this a little bit more catchy," or whatever. We were pretty much left to our own devices. But a lot of the songs, things just fell into place, and in many ways my job was very easy.

PM: So this edition that you've digitally remastered, how extensive a project did that turn out to be? And what did it take, gear-wise and sonically, to get it where you wanted it?

TD: It was not extensive like when George Martin goes back into the Sgt. Pepper multi-tracks.

PM: Right.

TD: I used the mixed masters, which were on analog, quarter-inch tape. We fed them through modern equipment, and we just let them breathe. When you cut vinyl in the old days you had to make a lot of compromises to the dynamic level, just to get certain things on vinyl was quite hard. When I think of a mastering engineer looking through his microscope at the grooves in the master, it seems like something out of H. G. Wells. But that was the technology that existed at the time. My task was not to sort of reinvent the album, because it was great to begin with.

TD: So you didn't have to mess with too much with EQ, and all that stuff?

TD: A little bit. We were able to do that with a free hand without having to make any of those compromises that one used to in the vinyl era. But I didn't try to change it, really, I just wanted it to breathe.

PM: Can you recall your very first meeting with Paddy McAloon, and would you share that story with us?

TD: Yeah. I mean, I can absolutely remember it. It came about because I had been invited by the BBC Radio to be a guest reviewer of new singles. They had a show called, I think, Round Table. And a couple of their DJs and a guest reviewer would listen to new releases. And I sat there for like an hour, and I hated everything. I was sort of the Simon Cowell figure of that particular show.

PM: [laughs]

TD: And this song came on which I just thought was really special, from the opening chords it was just really wonderful. And the other guys, the DJs, didn't get it at all. And I said, "This is really great. Who are these guys?" It was "Don't Sing." And it sort of opened with this guitar chord and this harmonica, and it was just magical to me. And so I said very nice things about it, and I got a call from Prefab Sprout's manager saying, "We were tuned in listening to you, and we were holding our breath, because we thought 'he's going to massacre ours'."

[laughter]

TD: And then I was the only one that said nice things about them. And they said, "It so happens we're actually looking for a producer right now. Are you interested?" And I said, "Absolutely, I'm interested." And so they said, "Well, we don't have many songs on tape to play you, but we'd like to invite you up to Paddy's house." I took the train up, spent the day there. And he lived on the top of a hill in an old Catholic rectory where his mom had looked after the church. And there were crucifixes on the walls. His Dad, who'd had a stroke, was ill in bed upstairs.

And Paddy took me to his room, and he pulled out this stack of songs. And we sat there for a few hours listening to them. That was the first meeting with him. He's a very interesting guy, very, very well read, but humble.

PM: And a soft-spoken fellow, or--

TD: Yeah, fairly soft-spoken. He's also got sort of an exhibitionist side, which comes out every now and then when he's got a few brown ales in him.

[laughter]

TD: He can be coaxed into letting rip every now and then. So one of my favorite things about the album is that you get these occasional primal screams.

PM: Definitely.

TD: The way he sings "Antiques," the opening line. And then later on in "Johnny, Johnny," which is this very sort of lush soft song, and in the chorus he just lets rip at the end with this scream. And I always liked that he did that on that album. In later years he tended to be this sort of breathy crooner, and you hear less of that raw side.

PM: Right. How is Paddy doing these days?

TD: His health is very poor, and it's uncomfortable for him to work in the studio. And it's a great shame, because I think he's sort of in a mood to do some more recording. I'm

going to be in England a lot over the next few years because my kids are going to school there. And we had hoped to do some more work together, and still may try. But that would require his health improving, or him sort of adjusting to this new way of life.

PM: When I talked to Andy Partridge [XTC] not that long ago, he was having trouble in the studio as well, trouble with his ears.

TD: I didn't know about that. That's very sad.

PM: Yeah, it was really driving him nuts.

TD: I haven't talked to Andy in a long time. And is it tinnitus?

PM: Yeah.

TD: So that's kind of a curse to have great ears, because if something goes wrong, it's just very, very aggravating, and throws everything off. And so I don't know what Andy's affliction is, but--

PM: It was some kind of a freshman studio accident. Something happened in the studio that went terribly wrong in his cans. [headphones]

TD: Oh, no, he got like a blast of--

PM: Exactly.

TD: Oh, dear.

PM: So he was trying to treat it, but it just really wasn't that promising. It seemed like there wasn't that much you could do. What about Paddy's eyes? One reads that he's got some kind of a condition. Is that what is called macular degeneration?

TD: I'm really not able to talk about the medical side of it at all. I know that it was very bad. But it didn't prevent him from working. But in the last year or so he's had this issue with his ears. This made it very hard for him to be in the studio. So I don't know where that's all going.

PM: This songwriter buddy of mine who knows Paddy fairly well said that he would write, as you referred to a little while ago, whole albums on subjects like Michael Jackson--

TD: He had two particular albums that I know ended up on the cutting room shelf. One was about Michael Jackson, and other was...I'd have to call it a Christian album. But it was sort of an examination of religion that his record company vetoed because they felt like it would be perceived as a Christian album. And it had some fantastic stuff on it,

which didn't--I mean, I'm not remotely religious, but it never occurred to me until I heard it from the record label that it would be viewed that way.

PM: Oh, well, that's interesting. And yeah, it's a shame that when he turns his light on the subject of religion that it's just perceived as Christian instead of something more general. But that's a record company for you.

TD: Well, yeah, and I'd like to think in this day and age that one can sort of declare one's independence, and you don't have to live on those terms anymore. For me, I don't really imagine that I'll ever be sitting in a meeting with some major label again discussing what I should or shouldn't be doing. I think of the old days as being a time when you had this whole obstacle course you had to navigate before you'd ever actually get your songs out in front of the public. And I think what's great about how things are now is that that's over, for a very interesting set of reasons.

I mean, it sort of starts with the economics, we don't need record companies anymore to finance our time in the studio, because we can do it in our back rooms. Nor are there these narrow windows of opportunity to get stuff released and marketed, because it used to be the label would sort of say, "Well, weeks three and four in July, that's when the sales force is going to be focused on your record." And basically that was the window of opportunity you had. If it didn't catch fire during that time, it was basically back to the drawing board for a year, year and a half. If the phone wasn't ringing off the hook during that time you just felt totally depressed. And you don't have that anymore; first, because there's such a diverse range of ways to get your stuff out there and distributed; and second, because shelf life is no longer something important. I put out a live album in December, and it's spiked several times since then. It has on weeks and off weeks, but I do an NPR interview and suddenly there's a new sales spike. And that can go on for years.

PM: Absolutely.

TD: I'm building, now, a digital portfolio of masters and compositions that I own and control. And that portfolio waxes and wanes, but it doesn't lose sight of you. It used to be so polarized in terms of hit or miss.

PM: And it's always available. You have it on your site. You say, "Well, here it is. You can audition it, you can buy it, and you can do the whole thing right here."

TD: It's a way better state of affairs than I've ever seen before. It's kind of sad, but the press tend to focus on the woes of corporations and so on, and not on the fact that for music fans and for musicians this is just heaven on earth.

PM: Absolutely. I don't know what's going to happen to radio, but that also may not be something that everybody needs the way they did one time, either.

TD: Yeah, I think that's probably the case. To me, the record industry missed an opportunity 15 years ago to overhaul radio and its relationship to the industry. It drove me absolutely berserk, and still does, that if radio is my main source of finding new music that I'm going to like, then how come they don't back announce it? And how come even if they do back announce it, and I hear the name of the artist, I have to somehow remember next time I'm in Tower Records in the D section that that's an album that I want to buy. And then I have to spend 20 bucks on it to get the one song, and I have to take 20 minutes unwrapping the cellophane. It's just fundamentally a really bad product, it seems to me.

PM: Every step of the way.

TD: And looking back, there's no excuse for it. I mean, the nice thing these days with the internet is that, yeah, you can hear some music for free, but if you do get the warm fuzzies about that music, then the buy button is right there, and now you own it for 99 cents. And so the point of sale is right there where people fall in love with music. And that to me is just so much better a product, even apart from the vagaries of physical distribution and manufacturing.

PM: I think one thing that hasn't really been figured out is that unlike a tried and true and well-known artist like yourself, how does the new artist get himself in front of an audience so they can get warm and fuzzy about their music. I think that's not quite solid yet.

TD: No, it's not solid. And I don't know if it will ever be solid. But personally, I'd rather have "ameristocracy" than a system of filters in place where somebody gets to play God and decide what we do and don't get to hear.

PM: Right.

TD: And one of the worries when the internet came along was the fact that people in the industry were saying, "There won't be hits anymore unless there is the machinery in place." [laughs] And that's just not the case. I mean, there are still hits, but they're genuine hits because of popularity, not because some network executive decided that these were right for prime time.

PM: Yeah, hits where the people decide.

TD: Yeah. So you look at YouTube or myspace, or whatever, and stuff gets popular. And very often that coincides with--I've got three kids, it coincides with them mentioning a song or a video, an artist or whatever, and seeing it there on myspace, YouTube. I think it's great.

PM: Absolutely.

It's amazing that on the one hand you're a very perfectionist, highly considered producer; on the other hand, you're supplying audio to cell phones, which is maybe the most compromised sound that you can get on a device, but in this case, of course, your company, Beatnik, is responsible for the audio in half the cell phones of the world; it's unbelievable.

[laughter]

TD: Well, yeah, it is unbelievable. It was kind of an accident, frankly, because the company started out with very lofty ideals creatively, and it ended up that the one area where we could really make some impact, from a business point of view, was in cell phones.

PM: So is that, in general terms, the almost unspeakable success that it sounds like?

TD: It is pretty unspeakable, Frank, yes. [laughs]

PM: Bully for you.

TD: Somebody said to me the other day, "Didn't one of the Monkees invent liquid paper?"

PM: [laughs] Yeah, yeah, Michael Nesmith's mother, I believe.

TD: I think his mother, yes. So in future editions of Trivial Pursuit, perhaps I'll be in the same stack as Michael Nesmith.

PM: "Who was the unlikely inventor..."

You're cited by far flung artists as a major influence. What do you think about hip-hop or about techno, or electronica? Anybody out there turning you on musically?

TD: I think maybe hip-hop has slightly had its day. I was really more interested in the backing tracks, really, than in the lyrics. In fact, I've quite often found a lot of inspiration, really, in hip-hop and then rap backing tracks. The way that they used sampling technology and drum machines and so on, I found very interesting. But culturally, I mean, obviously, a lot of the lyrical content just didn't particularly float my boat--

PM: Go figure, yeah.

TD: Yeah, I mean, go figure. Regardless of genre, I've always been into eclectic songwriting with a voice, with a lyrical voice. And that could be Paddy, it could be Tom Waits, it could be Van Morrison, it could be Joni Mitchell, it could be Roger Waters.

PM: Sure.

TD: I can tolerate, I can enjoy, or I can deal with almost any musical style if there is a personality there that speaks to me.

PM: I just heard several cuts at CDBaby off your recently released Live in Chicago DVD. That sounded great.

TD: Oh, good.

PM: That is what? That's a DVD of a show a year previous?

TD: Yeah, so I've done a one-man show over the last year, year and a half, really to just sort of get back into music and cut my teeth again. I've got new songs, but felt like after 15 years away I had no right to go straight back into the studio. I needed to sort of repay my dues as a performer.

PM: Go play.

TD: Yeah. And to do that, there is a muscle group required that tends to get out of condition.

PM: That atrophies, sure.

TD: So I needed to get out and do it. And having done that, and sort of worked through that, I now feel ready to go back in the studio and start making some new music.

PM: And your voice sounds great. Did you have to do a lot of singing to kind of feel like, "Okay, I think I'm in shape for this"?

TD: Yeah. I took a couple of lessons, recorded them, and then I carried cassettes or MP3s of my own singing lessons with me wherever I went, and whenever I'm driving in car, I'll warm up with them. It's quite hard to recondition my voice after that much time. I have a different range now, a different set of things I can and can't do.

PM: Yeah, it's a little bit lower, just like Paddy's acoustic versions of these songs.

TD: Right.

PM: You said you were not even remotely religious. Are you at all inclined toward what could be called metaphysical or spiritual matters, as opposed to, say, religious ones?

TD: Somewhat, but it's not something that I indulge very much, and certainly I wouldn't join a club or a church that would have me as a member.

[laughter]

PM: Are you a big reader? Is that part of your routine?

TD: I wouldn't say so, particularly, no. Probably more than average, but I'm not a voracious reader at all. My kids are actually much bigger readers than I am.

PM: What are they like? How old are your kids, and what are they up to?

TD: Two teenage girls and an eleven-year-old boy. Yeah, I mean, they're very individual special people. My oldest daughter, who's 16, was just in New Orleans giving a speech about Hogwarts at a Harry Potter convention.

PM: Wow!

TD: She's sort of a de facto world authority on the architecture of Hogwarts.

PM: That's unbelievable! [laughs]

TD: People read it at Cambridge, which is sort of interesting.

PM: You must be very proud of her.

TD: I am, indeed. We don't have any idea how the same gene pool produces such different people, but it does.

PM: Yeah. It's a wonder.

You've been very kind with your time today. It's really nice to meet you.

TD: Thanks, Frank, likewise.