Jason Williamson on making political music

March 13, 2017 - Sleaford Mods are an English music duo comprised of vocalist Jason Williamson and musician Andrew Fearn. Over the past decade, the band has released ten albums and three EPs, all of which deal largely with issues related to politics, poverty, and the life of the working class in austerity-era Britain. The band's most recent album, *English Tapas*, was released this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2005 words.

Tags: Music, Politics, Inspiration, Process, Income.

Sleaford Mods have been putting out records for a decade now. How do you and Andrew approach making a new album? How do you start?

We never enter into new recording projects thinking, "Yeah we're gonna write something great here!" A lot of the time it's a feeling like, can we write anything else? Is there anything else to say? You know what I mean? There'll always be things to say, but if we can't dress it up right, then it's game over. It feels like a pretty honest place to start from: *What is there to say?*

As for how we start, Andrew will either send me the tunes via email, and I'll work on them at home, or we just get together and improvise. And that's not changed, really. We went through a stage with *Divide and Exit* and *Key Markets* where I'd just turn up with lyrics and hope for the best, because we thought the kind of rap/ranting that I do was really strong and prominent, and that really took over from trying to do other things. The vocals felt like our strength, so we played up to that.

We worked like that for a long time but then it became apparent, this time last year, that that wasn't working anymore, really. We couldn't rely on the same old formula, so I went back to getting him to send me music so I could work on it at home. And the thing is that both Andrew and myself both keep improving with what we're doing—so the music he was sending over was better, and what I was putting onto it was better as well. This most recent album is a lot more concise, I think, than the other ones.

So our process has not really changed at all. The only thing that changes is the fact that you become better at what you're doing, hopefully. That keeps going on and on until you run out of any kind of creative energy with the person you're doing stuff with, you know what I mean? Then you should stop.

The focus of Sleaford Mods has always been on your lyrics, which, as you mentioned, often take the form of epic rants. How do you tend to write?

Usually we have a sort of cooling off period between touring and writing sessions—around four months—and then you start writing again. For me it's about going back through everything you've written down, and looking for that one line, that one train of thought, that will perfectly describe whatever you're thinking or whatever you see. It's about trying to talk about the same things but in different ways. For me, that same thing happens to be the deterioration of civilization. That's what's really quite inspiring for me. That's what has pushed Sleaford Mods from the start. It was a way to push back against all this fucked up stuff happening around us.

I've started to be a bit more introspective and talk about myself more in the songs as well, but the challenge there is to not sound too full of self-pity or too self-absorbed. It's tackling these things intelligently, but at the same time making them attractive and interesting to listen to.

While other artists might couch their political views in metaphors or allegories, you've always been able to address them in an incredibly direct way. Given how crazy global politics have become since you released *Key Markets* in 2015, does it feel even more important to be making new Sleaford Mods music right now? There is so much to talk about.

A little bit, but right from the start our music was inspired by having fuck all, and not functioning very well as a human being in this society. It was always about finding yourself in environments where there was no hope, nothing. I find that a lot of artists, particularly people in bands, haven't really… well, they haven't necessarily had sheltered lives, but really haven't often experienced that kind of desperation. They aren't coming from the same kind of place that we are. I think a lot of bands' experiences are usually just a bit tame. Having years and years of failure and years of living under very poor circumstances left a massive mark on me, so I'll always talk about that. Andrew will always write music that will accompany that, I guess.

If you're gonna talk about politics and, say, the horror show that is your new administration there in the states, you've also got to look at the whole broad thing. You've got to look at the way the whole world is; you've got to talk about capitalism. It hasn't really changed has it? I was having a much worse time six or seven years ago, when I was on my arse, than I am now. Obviously, that's because I'm now in a semi-successful band, and I'm earning okay money now.

People are like, "Oh Brexit! You're gonna have so much to write about now!" But it's like, "Well, I had so much to write about before". Just because we've suffered a couple of political atrocities in this country over the last 12 months isn't gonna make me want to talk about that stuff any more or less, because these atrocities have been happening for fucking ever.

I keep writing about this stuff because I feel like I have to. I can't *not* talk about what I see happening in my country and around the world. At the same time, I'm very wary about it. You don't want to put yourself in a position where you're writing to order, where you think, "I better write about this", or "People will expect me to write about this." I was aware that I'd have to say something about Brexit because it's such an important thing to document, but I held off until the very last minute and I really only mentioned it a couple of times on the new record. Just specific things that pissed me off about it.

What I hate about people, especially with bands, is when they try to make out they're political when they're really not, or they try and force an issue when you know it's just bullshit. You've gotta feel it, be fucked off about it, because bad politics touches a *lot* of people, but there are also a lot of people it doesn't touch because their lives are quite protected—there's always money coming in, they've got their health, they've got family around them. So, it's a difficult one really. Still, there's a positive in that if things are *finally* bad enough for even those protected people to be like, "Ok, *now* I've gotta start actually thinking about this." Great creativity can be born of the worst circumstances sometimes.

Given the heated, political nature of your music, as you began playing to bigger and bigger audiences, did you often wonder if people were really getting it? Or if they were maybe getting off on it for the wrong reasons?

Yeah, you do, but you just have to get on with it. Most of the time I'm just concentrating solely on the performance. I look at the audience—and I don't treat them as something that isn't there, we try and bring them into it, and obviously we do connect with them—but I'm solely interested in the performance, and undergoing the performance in a way that will completely elevate it to the same level every night.

As you get bigger people take from it what they want to take from it. A lot of these songs can mean different things to some people, and that's just the way it is. I don't expect people to always totally get what I'm going on about. I guess that it's just the… well, not the tragedy of things but, you know, if you've got someone coming to the gig who hates women and votes UKIP, but *still* thinks that what we do is brilliant, what does that say to you? It's unavoidable, even if I don't always understand it.

You don't have control over the way the work is received, necessarily. All you can do is make the work.

You can't control it, but it is nice when people *do* get it. You can spend hours talking to a writer about your music, and then they'll write the story and you'll read it, and you still get the impression that they didn't quite understand what you were saying. They can and try and explain it the best they can, but sometimes it's off the mark. It's just the way it is.

Our music is quite a complicated message sometimes. It's full of jargon. It's full of slang. It's so fast and some of the words are disjointed, sometimes they don't mean anything. It's a tough call, really. In the end you just have to worry about what you make… and if you're gonna talk about politics, you should know what the fuck you're talking about and you should

be prepared to defend your positions.

Does the persona that you put forth in your music tend to follow you everywhere you go?

A little bit, but not too much. It helps that I don't drink anymore and I don't do drugs. I'm straight down the line. It hasn't been too tricky. I normally do the gig and just fuck off, you know what I mean? I can't afford to drink or drugs anymore 'cause I've just had enough of that. So, I've gotta keep it real. But people assume you're like this or that, and when you sit there and you talk to them they can't believe, "Oh, you're really intelligent." It's like, "Well, what the fuck did you expect?" If I behaved in public the way that I do onstage, that would be insane. That would just be stupid.

People are surprised too that I'm a dad. My daughter is five years old and she thinks that every daddy sings for a living. My son's only one so he's still getting to grips with his limbs. It's good for them to see what I do and, eventually, to understand where I came from. I think it sets a good example for what you can actually accomplish in life, that you can come from nothing and still make something of yourself.

You were kicked out of the Labour party in 2016 because of things you'd said on Twitter, not because of your music. This seems like a situation when music is the perfect way to respond.

They suspended me. They've been trying to call me of late and get me back on, but they can fuck off. Not interested in that shit. Because I criticized one of the MPs, they suspended me. They did it to thousands of other members as well and used lame excuses. So Labour's basically shot itself. It's fucked. It's dead, really.

It's all pretty scary, but this is how politics is now. The political situation in this country is abysmal—it's just a death machine—and it's getting worse and worse. It's not touching me at the minute because I've got money and I'm healthy, but the minute one of those two things goes away, it'll just eat you up. This is why I continue to make music, not just to spare myself from that fate but also because I feel like I *have* to, you know? You don't have a moral obligation to make your art about politics, but you do have an obligation to be honest, regardless of what kind of art you make. If the world is going to shit all around you, I don't know how you can't talk about that.

Jason Williamson recommends:

Record: Consumer Electronics - Dollhouse Songs

Programme: *Homeland*

Book: Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School by Stuart Jeffries.

Food: Fish and Chips

My main ambition: Sleep

Name
Jason Williamson

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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