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Talking about "Birds on Wires" with Tomaloff



◀ Tomaloff (right) in the studio with Chris Garges. 



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With his band The Dammitheads, Racine singer, songwriter and guitarist David Tomaloff made some strides, with two well-received discs and songs placed in TV shows like MTV's "Real World: Road Rules."

So, when his first solo record recently appeared, it looked like Tomaloff ditched the band and jumped into the void. Instead, he says, "Birds of Wires," a gorgeous blend of country and roots rock, has been a long time coming.

As he prepares to officially launch the record on his native Southeastern Wisconsin and beyond, we talked to Tomaloff about the demise of The Dammitheads and the rise of his solo voice.

OnMilwaukee.com: Maybe you can start by telling us what happened to The Dammitheads, as sort background on how you arrived at your first solo record.

David Tomaloff: Well, I think the short answer is that natural progression happened to The Dammitheads. I found my writing really taking on a different direction and I'm just not one to force that sort of thing. It kind of came on slowly and, realistically, The Dammitheads, pretty much by definition of the project, was not one without an expiration date.

To fully understand that, you'd have to understand that The Dammitheads was a project with a particular mission; the whole idea was sort of to re-imagine great rock music as if it had been all shot into space and transmitted back all sort of cross-wired ... or maybe like looking at music through a funhouse mirror; what if The Cars had Keith Richards or Greg Ginn as a guitar player? What if the Stooges were fronted by David Bowie or Marc Bolan?

It was kind of musical theater ... that was the project ... always in character. I'm not even sure if people got that. At a certain point, I guess I felt like I needed to get back to exploring my own musical voice and the timing was such that Steve (Hawkins) also had things going on in his personal life that he wanted to follow through with; in fact, Steve is now co-owner of a downtown Racine pub called McAullife's on the Square, which is doing quite nicely for him.

OMC: The band had had a fair amount of success, was it risky for you to take such a different direction with your first solo project? Or was it way or creating some distance from the band?

DT: You know, I'm not sure I'd really look at it as risky, necessarily. I think it's more risky to continue on with something that you are not really committed to; that can be a very expensive security blanket. That said, there certainly have been difficulties to the new situation. The Dammitheads did see a fair amount of success and made many relationships and contacts along the way.

Unfortunately, many of those relationships and contacts don't necessarily carry over as well into this new world, and that certainly applies to the venues as well. In fact, I'm only just discovering some of the really great places in the general area that cater nicely to acoustic acts. There's definitely been some new homework on top of the work you'd already expect to put into marketing a new project but it's moving along nicely and many folks have been very receptive to the new direction.

OMC: Tell us a bit about writing and recording the disc. Did it happen in one big push or was it a project that developed over time?

DT: It was actually a bit of a long time in coming and was riddled with setbacks at first. Many of these songs were actually written or, at least, started during the last few months of The Dammitheads' existence. I was just writing; I had no idea the new songs would eventually turn everything upside down. Once the decision was made to go ahead in this direction, I had to figure out how to go about turning these songs into something I could go out and get behind. At first, I tried to get other musicians involved in the recording phase but I had so much trouble getting folks involved who were serious, reliable, and didn't need to be coached as far as genre was concerned. It was really frustrating ... I was burning through a budget and getting absolutely nowhere.

It all turned around when I e-mailed a friend in North Carolina -- Chris Garges -- with questions about dealing with session musicians. Chris is a great session drummer and equally gifted engineer, so I knew he would be able to give me some good advice. He did just that and more importantly, he mentioned he would be really happy to be part of the project. We talked about how to go about doing this and decided that it would be really fun to do kind of a long-distance collaboration and send tracks back and forth. I would send him demos that consisted of basic tracks; maybe a couple of scratch guitars, a vocal and sometimes a few melodic bits. He would then record his parts -- drums and percussion -- and send them back to me to finish. At some point, the tracks were sent back to him for further recording of pedal steel, which was played by another North Carolinian, Bob Barone. This really worked out well and, in fact, many of the original scratch tracks ended up making onto the record.

I was happy to have a few of my local friends involved as well. Anneliese Pratt sang background vocals, Mark Harrod played some piano, and Zachary Scot Johnson put down a little violin. Steve Hawkins was there as well, giving me a helping hand with some of the recording.

At mix time it only made sense to have Chris involved, so I drove down to N.C. this summer and Chris mixed the record at Old House Studio. It was a really great cap to a project with such an arduous beginning.

OMC: Was it a weird, or a liberating, experience to make the record and not really have to consider anyone else's opinion, input, etc.; to be able to say, "this is all mine"?

DT: Well, I'd always had the final say on The Dammitheads' records but this was somehow still a little different. It was definitely liberating, but more from the standpoint of where the music was coming from on this record as opposed to the way The Dammitheads worked. "Birds on Wires" is certainly more of a songwriter's record; it comes from a much more personal place so it feels like there is really something more going on under the surface and something more at stake than anything I'd done with The Dammitheads.

OMC: Will you tour behind the record; have you assembled a group to perform it live?

DT: At this juncture, the plan is to get out and do as much playing as possible in the surrounding areas. Touring will most likely happen sometime in the spring. I'm doing solo acoustic shows for now, trying to really hone those skills. It really is another skill-set and I find it to be a really gratifying thing. I find it takes a lot more focus and connection to the songs to get up and really do it convincingly. I could certainly see myself with a classy little three-piece outfit, like an upright bass and maybe a jazz oriented drummer, but ... well, that's for another time I think.

OMC: Tell us about CD release party?

DT: "Over Our Heads Players", a really great theatre troop in Racine, has been kind and gracious enough to allow us to use the 6th Street Theatre in downtown Racine. My good friend, Matt Specht will be hosting the show and I'm pretty sure we will also be showing artwork from several local artists as well. I'm looking very forward to this; I think it will be a really nice atmosphere for people to see a solo acoustic kind of show.