

# GREAT SPANS OF MUDDY TIME WITH WILLIAM DOYLE

**Like many people, multi-instrumentalist William Doyle found solace in gardens and nature during the lockdown and particularly, a new obsession in BBC's Gardeners' World.**

**Words: Jeremy Blackmore**

**Photo: Ryan MacPhail**

But on digging deeper into presenter Monty Don's books, he found even deeper inspiration. A line in Don's *The Jewel Garden* resonated with Doyle both for its poetry and for the way it vividly echoed his own experiences of mental health.

*"Then I was hit by a bout of depression that kept me to my bed for a number of weeks. If nothing else – and one of the points about depression is that there is nothing else for great spans of muddy time – it gave me time to think."*  
– Monty Don 'The Jewel Garden'

The quote provided a focal point for Doyle's remarkable *Great Spans of Muddy Time*. Don's words captured the essence of the music and provided a sense of collective identity to songs that drew musical inspiration from Bowie's Berlin trilogy.

The making of the album too, saw Doyle confront a sense of artistic loss, craft music in a new way and embrace imperfection. A parallel perhaps with the way we all learned to adapt to a strange, scary new world.

Doyle, who won a Mercury nomination as *East India Youth* in 2014, is a self-professed perfectionist.

He went into lockdown fresh from touring the lovingly produced, multi-layered *Your Wilderness Revisited*, an album that saw him collaborate with childhood hero Brian Eno whose theory on using the studio as a compositional tool was a key early

influence.

Working at home on the follow-up, he went back to writing more conventional songs on guitar when disaster struck in the form of a catastrophic hard drive failure. While he had backed up recordings of his new material, a series of sound experiments and embryonic melodies that he hoped to craft into a separate project were lost.

Or so he thought. Fortunately, he had been experimenting with cassette tapes to see what sonic possibilities they could offer. It meant that versions existed of those instrumental pieces, albeit with a saturated sound.

Unable to go into the computer files and remix them, the feeling was liberating, and the cassette recordings duly formed the basis for *Great Spans of Muddy Time*.

"It gave me a nice feeling of well, the quality here, it's already been decided. Fate has dictated that these songs, this is the final version [of them] unless I was to go and start from scratch, but I didn't like the idea of doing that really," says Doyle.

"I think that was a really useful lesson for me to learn as an artist. It is worth working on things and crafting them into something special that you want. But maybe it's also worth trusting your initial instinct with things. That's as valid as making some sort of grand masterwork. That these things that

you've kind of not spent that much time on, they can have a really deep emotional resonance and quality as well."

After a month of collating and sequencing the disparate pieces, he realised how passionate he felt about the recordings and how they felt suddenly like a complete album. It underlined a lesson he had learned from working with Eno.

"Had I not been making a lot of stuff at that point I wouldn't have ended up with this album. I think that's taught me that the best way, really of me working is to make as much new stuff as possible, as often as possible, because you don't know what the context that's going to appear for that piece.

"That's how Eno works, just constantly making stuff. Every time I go around to his studio, there will be a new piece. We very rarely revisit anything that we've made.

"I was frustrated and confused by that at first, but then I saw that what is important is you kind of keep yourself in this 'permanent state of readiness, I think he called it. Where that album that you want to make will come around and you'll be able to make it out of all these bits that you've archived. Luckily, that was sort of the process that happened with this album."

In lockdown, Doyle added vocals to a

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Photo: Ryan MacPhail

couple of tracks, but only layered a few additional parts on top of his original cassette recordings. Instead, he used the sonic imperfections to build an album that evokes the material Bowie made with Eno in Berlin in the late seventies.

On the album's second track Doyle talks about a time of sudden change when 'the love stopped its happening' but then alternates between repeated twin refrains. 'I'm always dimming the lightswitch' he sings against a stripped-back beat before the mood shifts to the more airy, optimistic 'but I feel alright / I believe'.

The album's centrepiece, Theme From Muddy Time opens by reflecting on a 'terrible time in my life' but offers a mindful prayer, 'to be loved by myself / show some love for myself / glow a lot from inside / turn the rot inside out / and glow a lot'. At that point, the synth plays a gentle, uplifting melody.

"The sun bursts when that melody

comes in and the synth towards the end," he says. "That's just the cloud parting. It's nice for it to be like that, for there to be some resolve. I do feel it's always darkest before the dawn.

"You do get through those moments when it doesn't seem like there's going to be any way out of it, you know. There has for me personally. There has always been a moment where you've transcended that in some way. And it's just important to just hold on to that."

Discovering a perfect album title has always been a galvanising moment for Doyle, suggesting an environment, a world that he can build into. The poetry he found in Monty Don's writing was equally key to unlocking the identity of this album.

Yet while appreciating 'Great Spans of Muddy Time' as a beautiful poetic phrase, he understood too the feelings that lay behind it.

"Those periods of like depression, or bad mental health, they can be coloured in this way, where things

like time, they kind of don't really mean the same things as maybe we've all agreed that time works. It has this massive effect on the way you experience the world.

"So, it just really resonated with me that phrase. Consciously I haven't been trying to mine any of my mental health experiences, or any of the trauma that I've been through in my life for material.

"Nonetheless, I did think there was some sort of quality. Maybe when you're not trying to mine that stuff for material, it actually comes out in other ways. And I do think there are moments in this record that maybe seem to encapsulate how I was feeling when I was making them, even if there are no real words on them."

For all its uses of ambience, loops and synths, Great Spans draws in particular on Doyle's love of a certain breed of English songwriter. He cites Robert Wyatt, Robyn Hitchcock and Syd Barrett as inspirations.



The sleeve notes: 'the painting on the cover is 'A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool', otherwise known as 'The Floating Feather' by Melchior d'Hondecoeter c.1680, taken from the collection at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam and reproduced here under Creative Commons CC0 1.0 licence'.

"They exist in this sort of imagined English psychic realm to me. It's this alternative imagined vision of Englishness that I feel is admirable. Not in the sort of merry old England way and not this sort of imperial past. I don't mean that one. I mean this sort of weird psychedelic version."

Rainfalls for example has a sense of self-deprecating irony that displays a typical English sensibility and uses the weather as a metaphor.

With Great Spans drawing critical plaudits across the board, Doyle is keen to perform the album for live audiences later this year after a one-off appearance at the End Of The Road Festival in September.

Before that, though he is busy finishing his next album, working

on the songs that survived the hard drive failure in his new home studio in Manchester. Although he is keeping it under wraps for now, he has again found that perfect title that has given the material an identity it didn't have before.

He is also acting as musical director for Anna B Savage's tour, promoting her album A Common Turn, which he also produced.

Performing as a backing musician on that tour will be a new experience that brings to mind another seventies Berlin record with a Bowie connection. "After Lust For Life came out by Iggy Pop, he went on tour and David Bowie was his keyboard player. I feel like that's maybe the role that I want to take!"

## Inspiration for the album cover:

"I love waterfowl. Like, when I lived in London, we lived right by Victoria Park, and there's a small lake there. And there's lots of geese, it's an Egyptian goose that's on the front cover, they've got them in there. And I love that.

They're my favourite waterfowl and I think just that that was sort of front and centre of the cover really drew me in.

"Again, it's similar when you find the title for something and it galvanises it and it kind of solidifies – that same thing happened with the cover. As soon as we were all like, yes, this is the cover, it just gave the record this identity then."