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**Celtic rock for the recession**

Flogging Molly's Detroit ode  
Published October 6, 2011 by [Kyle Mullin](#) in [Music Previews](#)

Every morning Dave King walks Django, his hulking Irish wolf hound, down Detroit's ailing streets as if to sniff out the trail of the wounded. But he's no hunter — in fact he's longing for healing.

During those daybreak strolls, the frontman of Celtic punk troop Flogging Molly is always left aghast by the foreclosure signs dotting his adopted neighbourhood's front lawns like flimsy gravestones. The only thing that shocks him more is what Detroit might reach and grasp in those death throws.

"Every four or five houses you pass by are empty, and they're absolutely beautiful homes. It's really, really sad," King says (his normally lilting brogue slumped to a monotone). "You'd never know from the people you meet on the street, there's such a positive energy about people here. But you still can't get away from the fact that the city seems to be closing down on ya."

Their mettle under such adversity was a huge inspiration for King and his band-mates on their latest album, *Speed of Darkness*. Songs like "Don't Shut 'Em Down" are anguished pleas for a former industrial hub gutted by 2008's plummeting auto sales and a simultaneous recession that's strangled the nation to this day. That sharp decline crushed King as if he were a lifer.

The Dublin-born troubadour moved to Michigan nearly a decade ago to buy a house in the hometown of his wife and band-mate Bridget Regan, because she longed to live close to her folks. But in a way, Detroit's recent economic slump has helped him empathize with his new home on a more intimate, almost stifling level.

"I think that's what drew me to the lyrics that I wrote in Detroit, I was feeding off when I was younger and times were really, really bad in Ireland," King says. "And even though I'm singing about 'don't shut em down' about the GM factories, I'm singing about communities in general that are going through hard times. And growing up in Ireland in the '70s was pretty hard."

If anything, that's an understatement — for both Ireland and King. At the age of ten he lost his father to cancer, and money grew so scarce he had to quit school before his fifteenth birthday to scrounge up some income. By then, his country's finances were as ravaged as his family's, thanks to nationwide inflation and endless workers' strikes in the mid 1970's. So King worked to seek out a living for his family at the petrol pumps, following his old man's work ethic almost exactly.

"The gas station — that's the only job I ever knew my father had, and he would wear a suit and tie every day. I mean what would you think of that these days, a man in a suit and tie fillin' your car full 'a gas? That's what he was like. That's one of the reasons why I always wear a suit and a tie onstage, because he took great pride in what he did and he did the best that he could."

King donned that dapper attire and packed his bags for the U.S. in the late 1980s, after a European stint in Motorhead guitarist "Fast" Eddie Clarke's side project Fastway, which was an opening act for AC/DC. King then bobbed around Los Angeles hoping for his big solo break. But he ended up painting houses to scrape together a living and enough beer money for his weekly stints at Molly Malone's pub where most of the city's Celtic ex-pats would congregate.

"At the time, we were playing there the seven of us couldn't even fit on the stage. Sometimes there was more people onstage than in the bloody pub," King says of the band-mates he acquired at those ramshackle gigs, including a certain Irish born violinist named Bridget who would become his beloved. Their weekly punk drunk sets soon grew reputed as nearly thrashing, or "flogging," the venue to shreds — thus the name and the band, "Flogging Molly," was born. Most A&R men weren't interested in branding such a rare breed



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of beastly Celtic rock. But after years of rummaging around the scene's fringes they perked ears at alt label Side One Dummy, who released Flogging Molly's debut disc, *Swagger*, in 2000. From then until now the troupe has toured constantly, gaining a resilient reputation that drew fans to their early hangover anthem "The Worst Day Since Yesterday," their latter Detroit ode "Don't Shut 'Em Down," and all the rip-roaring rhythms in between.

From minimum wage jobs to record label refusals, King has spent most of his life witnessing how elusive meaningful employment can be. And now that his career is stable and successful, the recession has rotted away the city he calls home — Detroit, once the country's car manufacturer, the quintessential blue collar American town.

Thankfully, King says the city has seen a resurgence of novel mom and pop operations since the recession began. His favourite is The Rust Belt Market, a former Old Navy outlet that's morphed into a venue for budding artists to showcase their work. Co-owner Tiffany Best, who founded the market with her husband Chris, says establishments like theirs are better equipped to usher in recovery than any big box store.

"More money... stays in the community and surrounding areas- not overseas to sweat shops and corporate overlords," Tiffany Best says of the promise these alternative shops hold for crippled cities. "The vibe is one of promise for the future and independence (from cheaply made, toxic goods.)"

In fact King says Best and her husband exemplify that revivalist vibe — the Old Navy that they replaced fled Detroit just after at the height of the 2008 recession, leaving a shabby shell of a building in its wake just when the city needed all the revenue it could get. Best passed the abandoned structure everyday on her way to work for nearly half a decade before glimpsing an opportunity in that eyesore.

"It was vacant for nearly 4 years and (Old Navy) left the downtown area without an anchor. We were way out of our league when negotiating a lease. I actually can't believe it all worked out, thinking back on it. Who were we to think we could lease a big box, 15,000 square foot commercial building? I guess some naiveté and raw ambition lends itself to much needed brass balls at times."

So on those morning walks, when King tugs on his wolf hound's leash and strolls around the neighbourhood where a few naively ambitious locals open for business amongst all the boarded up doors, he can't help but ponder what's being gained amongst the recession's losses.

"When times get hard people from places like Detroit and Dublin, they get tough and do their best to make ends meet. I think that's what's great about Detroit — it's reinventing itself."

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