This interview with
DEAN PITCHFORD
was conducted by the Library of Congress
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Dean Pitchford

Library of Congress: I had read that you got your inspiration for the movie "Footloose" from a short newspaper article?

Dean Pitchford: I did. After I had written the song "Fame" with Michael Gore, for which we won a Best Song Oscar, I was approached by numerous film executives about writing more for film. But all of the ideas they were pitching to me were all about finding music in the most expected of places: the boy in the small Southern town who wants to be a country star. Or the girl in New York City who dreams of being a Broadway star. But what I have always loved about Broadway musicals is how—traditionally--they're about finding music in unexpected places. So that was my mission; I wanted to find a story idea outside the box.

Then, in a Saturday morning edition of the "Los Angeles Times," I read a tiny item about a small town in Oklahoma--Elmore City--that had just lifted an 88 year-old ban on public dancing. With the ban repealed, the local high school was able to throw its first prom in 88 years. And the entire senior class--all 14 of them--attended that historic celebration.

And I thought: "Well, *there's* a place where you would not expect music!"

So I quickly wrote out the roughest of outlines, and I flew to Oklahoma to spend a week there. I couldn't stay in Elmore City because it was too small to have a motel, so I stayed in another town--"down the road a piece," as they say in Oklahoma--called Ardmore.

I spent a week there, and I got to sit in on classes at the high school that I'd read about in the news. Now I was only 29 at the time, so the students were very accepting of my presence. I talked to local merchants, and I went to prayer meetings and the community socials that always followed them.

The first draft of the resulting screenplay was purchased by 20th Century-Fox, where it languished for about year. They eventually put it into turnaround, and it got snatched within 24 hours by Paramount Pictures, which finally made the film in 1983. But not until I had rewritten it 22 times!

LOC: If I'm not mistaken, this was your very first screenplay, wasn't it?

DP: Yes, my first screenplay. I had begun my career as a performer, then became a songwriter and then, with Michael Gore, did three songs for the "Fame" soundtrack. I was getting a lot of pats on the back for that but, inside, I always felt somewhat sheepish. I had come from New York and the Broadway community where songwriters didn't just write *a* song but a whole score! So I felt like I had to prove myself by writing a screenplay as well as the lyrics to all the songs.

LOC: You had already worked with Kenny Loggins or knew him before the "Footloose" project, didn't you?

DP: Yes, and I'd been a huge Kenny Loggins fan since forever.

When I began writing the "Footloose" screenplay, it became clear to me that the voices on the soundtrack had to be stand-ins for the characters in the film. So, the singer of "Footloose" had to be the "inner voice" of Ren, Kevin Bacon's character.

I always thought Kenny had a really clear and youthful voice. Even today he has that quality, and you can hear it in songs like "House at Pooh Corner" and "Your Mama Don't Dance," for instance. Plus, there's something very….*American* about his voice.

When we first met, after we wrote "Don't Fight It" with Steve Perry, I sent Kenny an early draft of the screenplay. He was very encouraging and kept saying, "Let me know when you are ready to make this movie."

It wasn't like I came to him offering a job. Or even a song title. In fact, it wasn't until three months before we began filming that I came up with the title "Footloose;" before that I always used a dummy title.

LOC: What was the dummy title?

DP: I was calling it "Cheek to Cheek"! *[laughs]*

I knew it was bad title. I deliberately used it, though, so that nobody would ever fall in love with it and insist on that title. Everyone understood that it was a placeholder.

LOC: Can you tell me about the writing and recording of the title tune?

DP: Before we were to begin filming in Utah, Paramount insisted I get together with Kenny and write the title song. That way it--or at least a demo of it--would be available for playback during production. But just before our first writing date, Kenny had an accident. He fell off a concert stage in the dark, landed on a packing crate and broke several ribs.

His recovery--which took weeks--cut into the time we had scheduled for writing. And, complicating matters was the fact that Kenny was trying to get back on his feet in time to leave for a tour of Southeast Asia. So our window of opportunity was shrinking fast.

Finally, when Kenny was healed enough to sit up, his manager called to say that he'd be playing a weekend gig in Lake Tahoe, and that if I could get myself there, we could have three days to work together.

So I flew up to Tahoe and--between his performances at night and his wife and family (with three small kids) in another wing of the hotel--Kenny and I managed a couple hours of work each day, during which time we wrote the verses and the chorus of "Footloose."

We didn't get to the bridge of the song at that time. (We wouldn't get to that until Kenny returned from his Asia tour.) And we didn't have time to demo the song before Kenny left for Japan.

Because we wouldn't have a track of "Footloose" to use for playback during the upcoming shooting of the movie, I asked Kenny, "At what tempo do you imagine cutting our song?" And he said that Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" was the model he had in mind.

So my music editors dug up a recording of "Johnny B. Goode." Now, it's great to dance to but because it was recorded in an era when a band might lay down a track that wasn't necessarily strictly in tempo, the musicians moved in and out of rhythm which is a no-no when you're shooting film to playback.

So what my music editors did was to transfer a 45 of "Johnny B. Goode" onto reel-to-reel tape. Then, with a razor blade, they cut the tape to extend it or shorten it, so as to standardize what we call the "click" or the BPM, beats per minute.

And we used that doctored version of "Johnny B. Goode" for playback during the filming in Utah. Then, once we finally cut the record version of "Footloose" at the same tempo, the edited movie footage matched up with the Kenny recording. It was the MOST AWKWARD, painstaking way too synchronize a musical number, but I really have to credit Kenny and my music editors for making it work.

LOC: As a songwriter, who do you consider your greatest influences?

DP: The great thing is I born in Honolulu, Hawaii. My mother liked Broadway a lot; my dad liked classical music, but Hawaiian music was always around, as well. And Hawaiian music was also the accompaniment for the hula and other native dances. So music and movement were always tied together in my mind.

Then, when I was ten, one Sunday a playmate said to me, "You are watching the Beatles on 'Ed Sullivan' tonight, aren't you?"

I had never paid any attention to pop music until that night, but after seeing the Beatles and the effect they had on their audience, I went down that rabbit hole. From that day on, I listened to the one and only pop music station in Honolulu non-stop.

Of course, I also liked the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein…and Paul Simon. Then (eventually) Don Henley. And Billy Joel.

Then, in the late 60's, I went from Honolulu to Yale, and I arrived to find that my freshman year roommate was a real folkie. So he introduced me to Tim Hardin and Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. And Laura Nyro. And Joan Baez! And once again, I went down the rabbit hole!

So by the time I started writing EVERYBODY was an influence. There was no style that I wasn't open to. Every musical genre and all those terrific artists--they all have places of honor in my memory.

LOC: In some of the press about "Footloose's" addition to the Registry earlier this year, someone said that the song is timeless but also emblematic of the 1980s. Do you think "Footloose" is very "'80s"?

DP: To be honest, I sort of take exception to that.

A year before "Footloose," "Flashdance' had come out from Paramount**,** and I think that film is very much a product of the era. Its soundtrack is comprised of lots of synthesizer sounds and the bubbling computer programs that were so popular at that time.

Working on "Footloose," which took place in the heartland, I was very conscious of not depending on the sounds of the era.

"Footloose" [the song], for instance, is what's called a "Saturday night special," y'know? It's the kind of tune that you could hear being played by the bar band after a long night of drinking.

The other songs on the soundtrack are all stylistically diverse, with their roots in traditional genres: "Dancing in the Sheets," for instance, is a true R&B song; "Let's Hear It for the Boy" is pop and owes as much to the Brill Building sound of the 60's as it does to the 1980s; and "Almost Paradise" is a ballad that transcends the 1980s; it could have been written today.

But as we were finishing the soundtrack, the executives at Paramount, unbeknownst to us, listened to our rough mixes and FREAKED… and not in a good way. One year prior, you have to remember, they'd had a blockbuster hit with the electronic sounds of the "Flashdance" soundtrack. But nothing on our album--they agreed--sounded like that. Nothing sounded like a hit to them.

They wanted to replace most of the songs without me knowing it. It was a secret until, per our contract, they had to deliver a copy of the rough mixes to Columbia Records. And [Columbia] went BONKERS! This time in a good way. They were over the moon about what we had delivered. They heard a soundtrack that crossed all genres. They heard Sammy Hagar and Kenny Loggins doing rock; they heard adult contemporary hits (both "Almost Paradise" and "Let's Hear It for the Boy" topped those singles charts). Not to mention R&B ("Dancing in the Sheets"). And dance music ("Holding Out for a Hero"). Our soundtrack recording covered the full spectrum of contemporary radio, they felt.

That's when the President of Columbia called the President of Paramount to shout, "My gawd, do you realize what a hit album you've given us?!" So Paramount quietly quit trying to replace the songs. We ended up with six Top 40 hits off that soundtrack. In addition to which our record replaced Michael Jackson's "Thriller" as the #1 album on the "Billboard" charts--and stayed there for 10 weeks.

And, look it! It's 35 years later and we're still talking about it.

LOC: That was kind of my next question. The film has gone on to be remade as a theatrical film and as a long-running musical on Broadway. The title tune is heard everywhere from high school dances to baseball stadiums. Why do you think the song and the film have remained so firmly within the culture?

DP: The song and the movie are, of course, intrinsically bound up together. You have Herbert Ross as director, and that CAST: Kevin Bacon, John Lithgow, Dianne Wiest, Sarah Jessica Parker—all of them at the beginning of these AMAZING careers….

But I think it all comes back to the film's story. People get it wrong sometimes: it's not a film about a boy and the town where he can't dance. It's about a boy who has lost his father and a father who has lost his son. And those two characters clash and then find common ground. The music is the outgrowth of that resolution. That's a classic story. That's a timeless fable. It

doesn't matter what's going on in the news right now… or 20 years from now. The story of "Footloose" speaks to the heart. And because of that, it speaks to generations.

And think about it: you can't hear that word "footloose" and not hear the song in the back of your head, can you? You may not realize it, but you are emotionally hooked. It's an emotional memory that combines with a musical memory, and the result has a way of grabbing hold and not letting go.