

One the eve of 90s Brisbane legends **CUSTARD**'s highly-anticipated return to our city for the Brisbane Festival, frontman **DAVE MCCORMACK** talks to **STEVE BELL** about the myriad joys of getting the band back together, and their ongoing knack for happy accidents.

**N**one of the members of seminal 90s indie outfit Custard's 'classic' line-up reside in Brisbane any more these days – they're all scattered down the eastern seaboard – but that hasn't stopped them from holding a continually revered place in our capital city's musical heart. The band called it quits in 1999 and didn't play together for a decade, but in recent times the venerable foursome – frontman Dave McCormack, bassist Paul Medew, guitarist Matthew Strong and drummer Glenn Thompson – have joined forces on a growing number of occasions, most having something to do with either their former hometown or the Sunshine State itself.

In 2009, at the invitation of Powderfinger, they played their first reunion as part of the Q150 Proclamation Day celebrations – in honour of Queensland's milestone birthday – and then earlier this year they headlined the *Float On* benefit, successfully raising money for the Premier's Flood Relief Appeal to aid the victims of the natural disasters that ravaged our state at the year's outset. Now they're reuniting once again for the now annual Brisbane Festival, and will be airing out classic tunes such as *Apartment*, *Alone*, *Singlette*, *Music Is Crap*, *The New Matthew*, *Pack Yr Suitcases* and *Girls Like That (Don't Go For Guys Like Us)* – to name but a few of their back catalogue's many highlights – to an adoring throng of both seasoned and new fans.

"These Custard gigs are getting more and more frequent, aren't they?" McCormack enthuses rhetorically. "This will be our second one for the year! I've loved it, it's been so easy it's incredible. Because we didn't play for ten years and then we did that Q150 gig, I think everyone was a bit nervous, we hadn't all been in a room of any sort together for ten years let alone a band room, and from the very first bit of the first song it was sounding good. It's so easy, I'd forgotten just how many gigs we did together and how many tours – it's very intuitive, it's great."

It's pondered whether it's possible to be patriotic towards a state (rather than a country), given the altruistic and celebratory nature of the gigs they've played in Brisbane since getting back together.

"Well you can, you can have an allegiance and a love," McCormack posits. "The flood one was good – raising money – but at least there's no hideous natural disaster behind this one, so that's good. We're just celebrating."

"We all sort of moved out in the late-90s, and the band sort of split not long after that. It is a shame, maybe I'll move back – someone from the band should move back to represent. But it's funny because we haven't lived there for ten or 11 years, but we're still a Brisbane band – it's incredible. I guess we always will be. There's nothing we can do to change that. With these reformation gigs I have been really touched by the warmth and enthusiasm shown by people up there – we do seem to still hold a little place in people's hearts, which is nice. I noticed especially at the Q150 gig that there were people our age getting into but also their kids, and young people who would have been ten when the band were around and who are now 20 and 21, and they like it as well – it's pretty cool."

The band kicked off in Brisbane in 1990 – originally known by the slightly more disturbing handle Custard Gun – and quickly built up a local following due to the fun, slightly quirky nature of their material and the spontaneous frivolity which typified their shows back then: the complete antithesis of much of the angst-fuelled heaviness dominating both the local and global scenes at the time.

"We really liked the Pixies, but we were sort of more quirky pop than them," McCormack recalls. "I guess because we were never really good at realising the music that we wanted to do, that's why we came up with our own style. Because we were pretty average musicians and pretty average songwriters as well – I think it was our naivete that helped us so much."

"We were very influenced by Jonathan Richman and Pavement and the Pixies. I think we were very lucky just to be in our little gang in Spring Hill with a couple of other people like Bob Moore from C.O.W. and John Swingle from The Melniks – they had a much better knowledge of music than us, but they'd sort of share their music with us. I remember the first time I heard Jonathan Richman was because John Swingle played me these songs, and I thought, 'This is incredible!' So we were lucky to have people with cool record collections hanging around us."

And the offbeat nature of these influences in turn coloured their irreverent live show.

"I think that was a by-product of us just having fun," the singer reflects with a laugh. "We loved playing so much, and more often than not the gig would technically not go very well as well, and that would be alright – we'd just go with it. Things would break or we'd forget a song – it was all part of the chaos of live performance. Even now as – let's face it – mature, older men, there's still an element of chaos there. We still don't really know what we're doing. I was always amazed when we'd tour with bands and



# PRODIGAL SONS

they'd say, 'God, you guys are so tight!' They took our mistakes as being well-rehearsed arrangements – 'You guys are so tight and it's different every night!' – but that's just because we were trying to fumble through it."

Of course in hindsight the Brisbane scene of the time proved to be incredibly fertile, but according to McCormack he and his bandmates were somewhat oblivious to that at the time.

"There were always lots of bands from Brisbane playing around the traps and doing stuff, like Regurgitator and Screaming Females and Powderfinger, but we were kind of stuck in our own little world in Spring Hill – we had our own little practice room in Spring Hill, and we all lived around Spring Hill," he tells. "I wouldn't say that we were anti-social, I think we were just quite shy and insular, so we never went for a beer with other bands, or played cricket or went to functions with them. I think in a way that helped us, just sticking in our own little world."

Before long, however, the rest of the country beckoned, and they began playing tours on the coattails of other interstate bands – the first being a rather strange, but incredibly fun, pairing with Melbourne folk-rock icons Weddings Parties Anything.

"Yeah!" McCormack guffaws at the memory. "They sort of took us under their wing. We did one gig with them at the old Waterloo Hotel, and of course we were really late and didn't have good gear and it took forever. But I think they found that quite endearing, and they took us on a national tour – that was our first sort of big national support tour: us and The Badloves and Weddings Parties Anything. And that was a bit of an eye-opener for us, like, 'Wow, these are professional bands! They've got roadies!' It was an eye-opener for us – professional musicians..."

"And even when we toured America, the Americans thought we were like aliens, because we weren't really business-minded, and we didn't have a road crew, our amps were in cardboard boxes, we borrowed guitars, we never changed strings, and yet here we were in America doing tours! They were like, 'How do you guys do it?!' It was just a happy accident – that's the great thing about Custard, there were so many happy accidents that happened. There was never any real great plan, it was always like, 'Oh, we better book a gig somewhere. Where can we play?'

"I was always surprised that anyone would ever come to any of our gigs or buy any records – it was always a pleasant shock. Our ambitions went from getting played on Triple Zed (great!), putting out a record (great!), getting a record deal (incredible!), playing in Sydney and Melbourne (wow!), then going to America... Everything we did was a very pleasant surprise to all of us. We were very happy with anything that we got, knowing the calibre of the band. We felt very lucky."

"Plus I think we were in the right place at the right time as well, because when we started triple j started so we had a national outlet, and record labels seem to be interested in us. Back then record labels were still like proper record labels, where they'd advance you money and do video clips, and all that sort of stuff, and we were getting airplay. Plus [ABC TV show] *Recovery* was still going around that time so we had national TV exposure – it was a pretty good time to be a band."

History will rightfully look back and say that Custard played an integral role in the ongoing foundation of Queensland's powerful and ever-burgeoning music scene, a fact for which they are rightfully satisfied.

"Very proud," McCormack admits of his band's place in the state's musical hierarchy. "And I don't know how we did it, because for a long time we were not despised, but sort of ignored in Brisbane. We always had a sort of small following, but as soon as we started to do well elsewhere that's when Brisbane audiences really got behind us. It was a good place to start a band in because there was little or no industry there – you could be on the dole, you didn't have to have a job, rent was cheap, you could practice at your house, no-one really had to work so you could think about the band and rehearse songs and make stuff up all the time. And I think because we were around for ten years and we had some success elsewhere everyone just really loved us. As proud as we are about coming from Brisbane, I think that they're proud of us coming from Brisbane in a strange way."

**WHO:** Custard

**WHERE & WHEN:** Brisbane Powerhouse Saturday Sep 17

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

With the Custard reunion gigs becoming more and more regular – and proving such joyous occasions for all involved – the obvious question is whether they would ever consider making it a more permanent gig and maybe even write and record some more music together?

"Look, we have been very happy just doing it like this at the moment, but we had our one rehearsal for the year the other day and it was nice, it felt good, so who knows what will happen?" McCormack reflects. "Maybe we could get together and record something just for fun. I can't imagine any business plan being behind it, but if the vibe's there we could do it, why not? We could be one of those bands who break up and then get back together and start recording again. We'll have to see how it goes."

Tellingly, their split at the end of last millennium surely wasn't because their music was suffering or their popularity waning, their fifth album *Loverama* (1999) being well-received and spawning a slew of radio songs.

"My recollection of it, and it's probably incorrect or differs from other people's, but I felt that it's always a nice thing to go out when you're still vaguely doing well, instead of just slogging it out and hammering away and less and less people coming to shows," McCormack recalls. "Because a lot of people, including our record company, were, like, 'You're kidding! Why are you splitting? People are still buying the records and going to the shows!' But like I say, we never really had a grand plan, so one day that was just it – the band was over. And then it was ten years before we'd ever do anything again. It's been good for everyone to try some different things, and after another ten years together I reckon we'd be hating each other by now if we were still together. But the nice thing when we see each other now it's like we're great old friends – it's very relaxed and we've gone through so many highs and lows together that we all really get on – it's lovely. So time will tell."