



Cheese Excursion in Bendigo. Photo: David Field

Nuclear Family Meltdown **by Megan Spencer (c) 2014**

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“Cheese Excursion? What kind of a name is that?” is the incredulous question this eight-piece Bendigo band has fielded many times over, throughout their decade-and-a-half together.

In a band where experimentation, taking risks, happy accidents and playfulness reigns supreme, actually? The name makes perfect sense.

Co-founding member, singer and bass player Larz Van Ioha (his preferred moniker), laughs broadly when I ask him about how it came to be – and whether the name might possess some kind of ‘deeper meaning’.

We meet one hot, sunny Saturday afternoon in Bendigo with two other “Cheese” members: relative newcomer James Fowkes (since 2005 the band’s metal uke player extraordinaire, percussionist and sound engineer), and trombonist Brendan Bartlett, another co-founder. All aged 32, they’re as precociously talented as each other.

Larz answers, “It was that Monty Python kind of idea, where random words are mashed together - .” James finishes his sentence. “It sounds like it means something,” he winks. “But it doesn’t.”

It is however, a perfect analogy for describing Cheese Excursion’s eclectic blend of music. Forming in 1998 at Bendigo Senior Secondary College out of a desire to play together a) in a big brassy soul band, and b) in the school’s Battle of the Bands competition, six friends from Year 11 maths class quickly ‘got their music on’. “We had no songs, but a huge banner,” remembers Brendan, laughing.

From that institution perched high atop Rosalind Park – and that moment onwards - Cheese Excursion’s music hurtled down the hill like the proverbial ‘rolling stone’. Only this boulder gathered as much moss (read ‘as many musical styles’) as possible.

Landing at the bottom, the band eventually swelled to eight (including current members Ryan McRobb (guitar), Alex Dullard (trumpet), and drummer Paul Hunt). Cheese Excursion soon found a loyal audience in Bendigo as they cut their big band teeth in local venues like the Newmarket Hotel and “the old Crown”, in a previous incarnation as a vibrant live music hub.

“It’s where we played some of our best – and wildest gigs – gigs,” recalls Brendan.

Over the years their sound parlayed into a hybrid of soul, jazz, ska, punk and metal, with a pinch of psychedelia thrown in. Frank Zappa would be proud to call them his own.

“If James Brown and Rancid had have had a baby together in high school..” grins James.

Cheese Excursion’s fans adore them to the point where gigs still are interrupted by people loudly arguing over what the band’s set list “should include”. Tracks like ‘Jimmy Don’t Fix The Toaster’ and ‘Sinister Minister’ instantly get people up and dancing, as anyone who’s experienced a Cheese Excursion gig can attest. Performing like a dazzling, over-excited mutant orchestra, their energy output has to be seen to be believed.

From Melbourne venues the Tote, Art House, Corner and Espy Hotels - to numerous regional Victorian festivals in Guildford, Castlemaine, Heathcote, and Bendigo – by anyone’s standards, Cheese Excursion can’t be written off as a ‘gimmick band’. They’re a musical force to be reckoned with, turned up to ‘11’.

And high achievers; given the amount of qualifications held within the group, Cheese Excursion could take line honours as one of the most edified bands in the ‘grungey’ world of rock.

Regular ‘zine publisher Van Ioha is a classical guitarist and an “amateur theologist”, who routinely studies a “religious salad” of esoteric spiritual philosophies.

Violinist and teacher Cally Bartlett is the Musical Director of Bendigo Brass Band, also married to Cheese’s Brendan Bartlett, a landscape architect. Trumpet player ‘Dr.’ Nick Schultz has a PhD in Ecology, while overseas compadres Joel Kent (Cheese’s first drummer) works for Reuters in London, with sax player Adam Sloan a gun “software developer” based “somewhere in Europe”.

“We think he’s off building a death star somewhere,” whispers James, only half joking. “We stay in touch with ‘remote’ members and send demos, and audio postcards – they’re still considered very much a part of the band,” adds Brendan.

Seems the commercial imperative that often overlays forming a band, doesn’t apply here. Something bigger is afoot. While Cheese Excursion has been together for a long time – having recorded only two albums (a third *is* on the way) - there’s no sense that they feel ‘done over’ by a lack of orthodox ‘success’. They clearly relish coming together to play in their hometown of Bendigo. With improvisation encouraged, much of their creative evolution comes about on stage.

“It’s a lifetime membership thing,” says James about the band’s longevity and connectedness. “Nobody officially joins, and nobody leaves; it just kind of swells and contracts, like osmosis.”

‘You can check out but you can never leave’... Understood. Cheese Excursion is a kind of ‘Hotel California’ for a group of talented Bendigo musicians, addicted to music, creativity and camaraderie. That’s a band I’d join.

More about Cheese Excursion on [Facebook](#)