



*Fran Gibson & Steven O'Neil, 2015. Photo: Megan Spencer*

**Lost Album:  
'Communicating At An Unknown Rate'  
by the Cannanes  
Written by Megan Spencer**

A slightly shorter version was published on the Double J [website](#) in January 2015.

You could argue that *every* [Cannanes](#) album is “lost”, such is the band’s low visibility on the radar of Australian music.

According to book *Baby Take A Bow: a short history of the Cannanes*, their first ‘unofficial’ gig is likely to have taken place at ‘12.08am, 15/2/1985 on the steps of the Hellenic Hall in Abercrombie Street’ in inner-city Sydney. In a matter of weeks ‘the world’s most indie rock band’ will officially celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Inside the teetering terraces of 1984 Newtown, Michelle Cannane (sister of The Drum’s [Steve Cannane](#)), David Nichols and Annabel Bleach formed the Cannanes with neighbours Fran Gibson and Stephen ‘Hairy’ O’Neil.

For three lively, rambling decades the latter duo has lovingly kept the band alive in various incarnations and cities, nowadays Central Victoria.

They’ve released thirteen albums, countless EPs, “splits” and singles, and contributed to more compilation cassettes, LPs and CDs than you can poke a stick at – both in Australia and overseas.

Variously courted by major labels (EMI, CBS, Chrysalis) and having signed with some of the world’s coolest indies (Ajax, YoYo, Chapter Music), the Cannanes have consistently toured America, Japan and Europe. Small armies of fans around the world adore them.

Inspired by the 'post-hardcore' lo-fi fuzz and jangle guitar sound of 1980s Olympia Washington and later exploring funk, psychedelia and dance (sometimes all in one song), seminal recordings pinpoint the Cannanes as forebears to some of our most popular indie acts today, namely Dick Diver, The Twerps, The Stevens and Beefjerk.

'Hairy' drummed for Sleater-Kinney; Beat Happening's Calvin Johnson is a 'comrade'; rock critics Everett True and Greil Marcus sang their praises, and on [page 229](#) of his posthumously published diary Kurt Cobain names the Cannanes as a favourite.

And how many bands can say they have their very own 'Chuck Taylor' [All-Star Converse sneaker](#)?

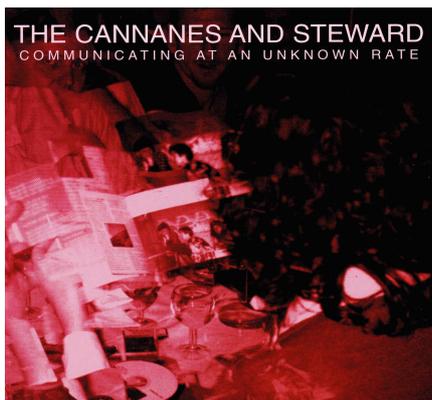


*The original Cannanes line up and cover of first EP, 'Bored, Angry & Jealous' (1985). Photo supplied.*

They *are* Australia's Yo La Tengo, yet while that legendary Hoboken indie three-piece plays Sydney Opera House the Cannanes struggle to get a gig on home soil, barely rating a mention in rock publications worth their salt.

Not that they're complaining. Disdainful of 'industry' and fiercely independent the Cannanes' story is one built on an idiosyncratic, 'anarcho-collective' architecture way too complicated to explain here. Their music however is simply awesome. And their luscious sound has evolved in league with an extensive rollcall of talented collaborators.

One is fan and friend Stewart Anderson (aka 'Steward'), formerly of 90s Leeds fuzz-pop band, [Boyracer](#). Landing on Gibson and O'Neil's Erskineville doorstep in 2000, he helped instigate and shape what singer Fran nominates as the Cannanes' most overlooked album, [Communicating At An Unknown Rate \(2000\)](#).



'I always thought it was one of our best but it got I think, no notice in Australia and maybe not much elsewhere - though I note there was a Pitchfork mention and [Greil Marcus](#) gave it a mention,' she remembers with characteristic humility.

'More importantly, no friends or fans ever refer to it really; the few people who give a toss about the Cannanes seem a bit fixated on the early stuff.'

She's right. While *A Love Affair With Nature* (1989) is considered

definitive and *Short Poppy Syndrome* (1994) an affectionate favourite, *Communicating* was a watershed recording for the band. It didn't get the recognition it deserved and it's still fresh as a daisy.

Musically speaking, it wraps itself around you like a giant serpent and when it strikes its intoxicating songs rapidly release into your bloodstream. A journey into ethereal, drum-loop dream-pop, live instrumentation fuses with synthetic to reveal an artistic maturity perhaps not seen on previous records. Digital technology transformed their process.

Guitarist/producer Steve had 'just bought a Power Mac'. He says 'it was the first time the band recorded on computer and an [entire] album at home.' Along with bass player/singer Andy Coffey, they negotiated 'Cubase software, drum loops, synth, MIDI and sampler' to transform what drummer/singer Stewart calls the album's 'random bits and pieces' into cohesive songs.

Retaining their indie sound they wholeheartedly embraced loops on tracks like "Oh Yeah", a sweet psychedelic instrumental, sparse love song "Astra" and sparkly dance number "Savage".

'We worked up the songs,' remembers Stewart, 'and [Fran] did the vocals after [she] came home from work.'

Her voice is mesmerizing and showcased sublimely on "Not Quite Right", "Kurrajong Hotel" and masterful exercise in space, "Remember The Theremin".



*At Brighton Beach on their 1999 UK tour. L-R Adam Hervey, Fran, Steward and Steve. Photo supplied.*

It's on opening track "Hey Leopard" she emerges as a force to be reckoned with, responding to Stewart's angry jilted-lover lament like a breathy Marianne Faithfull. Over melodic trumpets, a fervent bassline and snarky guitar, her heart-wrenching vocals insist he let - it - go. Her sorrow is palpable as she trails off with '*there's just nothing left to say*'. Beautiful work.

By Cannanes' standards *Communicating* sold 'okay', with repeat CD pressings and a glorious vinyl picture disc designed by Coffey. Later that year they toured it to Melbourne, Sydney and the States, playing

eight East Coast shows. But it's kind of been forgotten – just like their other albums.

A decade would pass before the band released another album, the revelatory *Howling At All Hours* (2013). But the Cannanes abide, continuing to produce better and better music perhaps now at the height of their powers. Along with a phenomenal backlog of material a 'sequel' to *Communicating* is forthcoming, recorded late last year in Arizona with all of the the original players.



*Fran and Stewart recording at Studio Patchwork, Flagstaff, Arizona in October 2014. Photos: Andy Coffey*

'Presuming we are still alive, we have agreed to meet in another fourteen years to finish off "The Trilogy",' laughs Fran.

Former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam passed away while they were there. To mark the loss of one of their heroes they quickly wrote a tribute song and released it as a free [download](#).

By the time the Cannanes reach their distant demise, a slew of notable musicians will undoubtedly line up to pay similar respect to one of Australia's most heroic independent bands, sadly one that still dwells underneath that radar...

*A HUGE thank you to Frances Gibson, Steve O'Neil, Guy Blackman and Stewart Anderson for their generous interviews and access to archival material. And to Andy Coffey for the photos. - MS*

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Visit the Cannanes [website](#) and [Facebook](#)

A digital re-release and re-master of *Communicating At An Unknown Rate* is now available through [Chapter Music](#).

View the Cannanes documentary [Short Poppy Syndrome](#) by Thomas Ashelford.

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