



*Photo: Megan Spencer*

## Short Poppy Syndrome: the Cannanes

By Megan Spencer (c) 2013

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**By the time you read this, Bendigo-based band the Cannanes will have returned from their gig at The Bell House in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, one of New York's most-loved 'way-hipster' indie music districts.**

They will have been revered by a small, intensely-loyal army of fans, played and recorded with some of NYC's finest (including producer Stephen 'Explosion Robinson' Hermann and Los Fancy Free drummer Carlos Icaza), and re-united on stage and in-studio with their Sydney-based trumpet player, Penny McBride.

Now they're gigging locally and nationally to support latest CDs, EP 'Small Batch' and album 'Howling At All Hours', released within weeks of each other.

Recorded in their home studio in Bendigo and in New York (where it was mixed and engineered), "mini-album" 'Small Batch' is part of what band member and guitarist Stephen O'Neill hopes will spearhead a plethora of Cannanes releases and re-releases. Sighing happily at the thought, he's keen to embrace the opportunities offered by the 'digital download' age, owning a whopping backlog of previously unreleased material and unencumbered by labels and tricky contracts.

But who are the Cannanes? And why have so few people 'round here' heard of them, especially since they've been living in Bendigo's backyard for the last nine years, are regarded as "Australia's best kept musical secret" and were on Kurt Cobain's list of favourite bands?

It's a question both Stephen and co-founding member Frances Gibson struggle to answer when I blurt this out after we meet at their fantastic, two-storey "post-Cape Cod" mansionette. Partners in music and life, their home feels like a creative oasis that has dropped from the sky deep into the heart of Bendigo suburbia, resplendent with a music studio, chequered linoleum kitchen floor and a sweeping driveway flanked by palms and a wild, over-grown garden. ("Cocktails will be at four," I imagine someone melodically calling up the stairs...)

Bemused at my question – and one she's clearly fielded many times – Frances says "I don't know," looking to Stephen who's simultaneously stuttering through a rollcall of possibilities, only to finally react with a *we're-not-too-fussed-by-it-either* kind of smile.

Before digging further into this apparent conundrum, a black cat suddenly bolts past the window with a baby possum in its mouth; Steve dashes out while Fran runs in the opposite direction to head it off. She comes back, crestfallen. The rescue mission was not a success. "It's not even our cat," she says sadly.

Point taken 'universe'; there are more important things in life than worrying about fame and fortune, especially when you're content doing what you love. In this era of *Idol-idolatory* and Bieber-born success, it might sound ridiculous or not even remotely possible; but in essence, what drives the Cannanes is that they *love making music*. They love it so much that they can't *not* make music. And what they do is make really good music, for a small, loyal audience.



*Frances Gibson & Steve O'Neil. Photo: Megan Spencer*

What is important to know about the Cannanes is that they originally formed in inner-city Sydney in the mid-80s, and while cherished members have ebbed and flowed (including titular member Michelle Cannane, drummers David Nichols and Maryborough-based Richard King), Fran and Steve have lovingly kept the band alive and kicking for nigh on 30 years.

They have recorded ten albums, countless singles and EPs, many times over touring Europe, Japan and the US (their kind of 'spiritual home'). In the process they have garnering a network of committed peers and fans that only comes with time, experience and unique talent.

"We've probably played more overseas than here," reflects Fran. "You struggle to get a show here if you're 'not of the moment'. The rest of the world has a bigger pop scene, so they're able to accept something a bit different."

"We have some amazing fans," she beams. "They're lovely - small but committed! They go out of their way for a band they like. One reason to keep doing it," she laughs, thinking back to more of my questions from earlier in our 'kitchen table' meeting.

"We got some really nice letters from Japan and Mexico," says Steve recalling the Sydney post office box 'HQ' they kept, even after leaving the city's inner west. The Cannanes are nothing if not hand-made and hands on.

Family and work brought the couple to Bendigo in 2004, both employed at La Trobe University: Stephen in the library and Fran as Coordinator of the School of Law Program. (Fran is a lawyer 'by trade' and a legal educator with extensive experience.)

Now the Director of Experiential Studies at the Faculty of Law at UNSW, she finds herself spending a lot of time online and regularly commuting interstate, while Stephen predominantly works in music full-time, often playing in Melbourne and interstate, "as needed".

"Recently I discovered that my grandmother was born in Bendigo, and that my great-grandfather is buried in Eaglehawk cemetery," says Fran of her Bendigo genealogy. Steve adds, "Supposedly Dad's side of the family was involved in setting up Bendigo Pottery - 'the Bannisters of Bendigo'. Not sure if it's true or not," he laughs of the legend, "but it's funny to find out all these connections we never knew we had."

Now in their 50s, their distinct ethereal indie-guitar pop sound has been mined over decades, updating and

evolving with the benefit of new technologies and collaborators. It's the kind of ageless flow that involves "loving what you do" and "not taking the music industry too seriously."

"Age shouldn't have a bearing on whether you play music," says Fran. "This sort of music is associated with the young but the young don't make this type of music any more!"

"I really like music, and I quite like *our* music," she finishes. "There's something there worthwhile doing."

"It's the most enjoyable thing we do," says Steve, distracted again, this time rescuing a caterpillar from the floor.



*Fran & Steve at ABC Central Victoria studio in 2013. Photo: Megan Spencer*

'Survival of *the fittest*' is the motto likely tattooed upon 99% of souls embedded in the music biz, especially those weary brothers and sisters 'decades in'.

In the unassuming Cannanes' music household, it's 'survival of *kindest*'. Had I stayed longer I'd wager I'd have found a yellowing tea towel with those very words embroidered upon it, jammed down the back of a linen press or slung on the back of a kitchen door, drying off...

Find the Canannes on [Facebook](#) and visit [www.cannanes.com](http://www.cannanes.com)

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