



MUSIC BRINGS US TOGETHER AT A DEEPER LEVEL ... WOMAD CELEBRATES THIS MOST BEAUTIFULLY

on trumpet, and Jamshid “Jumps” Khadiwala on decks and percussion.

Their combined passion for performing was matched by their determination to succeed: Riebl recalls sneaking about the Melbourne CBD in the wee hours of the morning, spray painting The Cat Empire’s show dates and now famous logo – a cat’s eye wearing a crown – on city walls.

Adelaide had already confirmed the band’s rising star status in 2002, when The Cat Empire’s 12-night residency at the Fringe Festival – at the Spiegeltent in the Garden of Earthly Delights – drew just 20 people the first night, and had lines snaking out of sight by the end of the week.

“That Adelaide residency was a huge boost for us,” says Riebl, father of two young children with actress wife, Eloise Mignon. “It was what got us the slot at WOMADelaide in 2003, where we were sort of like the hosts at this incredible late night party.”

Months after storming WOMADelaide, the band flew to London to play WOMAD UK, the original (World of Music, Arts and Dance) festival founded in 1982 by a group of friends including Grammy-winning English musician Peter Dinklage.

The Cat Empire continued on to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, busking on the street by day to generate a buzz for their late-night residency, whose queues, once again, were legendary.

The Cat Empire played WOMADelaide in 2004, the year the festival began its

annual cycle of presentation. This time they played the main stage, before tens of thousands of people. They were welcomed back to the main stage again in 2009, 2013, 2016 and 2020, the year that Riebl and McGill also presented Spinifex Gum, their collaboration with a 30-strong choir of teenage Indigenous women singing in English and Yindjibarndi.

“Ollie is the main collaborator in my life,” says Riebl of McGill, who he first met aged 13. “Growing up we played in so many bands together. Jazz bands, hard rock bands. Experimental art bands. Nothing was off limits, and that was the vibe when The Cat Empire came together.”

He flashes a smile. “Starting out at WOMADelaide meant we could avoid pigeonholing our sound. We felt free to get on with doing something different.”

The Cat Empire toured relentlessly, hopping around the globe: from North America, South Africa and Spain to Malaysia, France and Romania.

Their appeal transcended language, which was always Riebl’s intention: “When I was 16 a friend on an exchange to France brought back this cassette by (French-Spanish singer/songwriter) Manu Chao. I didn’t understand it but played it non-stop.

“Up until then I’d been comfortable playing drums and percussion. I was shy; being a vocalist was unthinkable. But suddenly I really felt like singing,” he says. “I sensed music’s universality, of how it

brings us together at a deeper level. Of the festivals we’ve (repeatedly) played over the years” – think Glastonbury, Bonnaroo, Bluesfest and Winnipeg Folk Festival – “I think it is WOMAD that celebrates this most beautifully. It connects people, encourages them to look outward. It brings different artists together to celebrate life through music. The backstage area at WOMAD is always a great place to be. It is full of musicians genuinely excited to be travelling, interested in other musicians and wanting to share their creativity.”

The Cat Empire surfed the WOMAD circuit: New Zealand, Singapore, UK, Adelaide – which by 2010 had extended to four days. “Time spent at WOMAD meant we became mates with acts like (Tex-Mex band) Calexico, whose guitarist Depedro has guested with us, and French-Cuban sisters Ibeyi, whose performance blew us away.” Another smile. “A festival has to be pretty special for very recognisable performers to feel totally happy being out in the crowd, watching the acts. So many of these people are maestros, revered in their own countries. WOMADelaide really is a festival in the true sense.”

Riebl is looking forward to checking out this year’s largely domestic line-up, with its international vibe and strong First Nations component; to catching Baker Boy or Courtney Barnett here; Paul Kelly or King Stingray there. To being greeted by fans who’ve followed The Cat Empire from the get-go, who’ve named kids after them, or had their logo tattooed, who know all the words to perennial hits including “The Chariot”, “Two Shoes” and “Hello”. All of which are likely to be on a set-list that will celebrate the Cat Empire’s career, alongside fresh material and special guests.

Much more than that, Riebl isn’t saying. “Me and Ollie are really excited about taking the band forward as a reimagined collective featuring different musicians from around the world,” he says.

“But look, at the moment it’s really about the original line-up. About this extraordinary project that took on a life of its own, so much bigger than any of us could have dreamt or imagined. And it’s about WOMADelaide, the festival that helped us on our way.

“The festival we love the most.” ■

WOMADelaide KEY FACTS

Where and when is it on?

It returns to its traditional seven stage format in Adelaide’s Botanic Park to celebrate 30 years, from March 11-14. Gates open at 3.30pm on Friday, and at 10.30am from Saturday to Monday.

Can I attend if I’m not vaccinated?

No. Patrons 12 and older must be fully vaccinated to attend the event. Individuals who cannot provide proof of Covid-19 vaccination, or an official medical exemption, will be denied entry. Boosters are encouraged. Children aged 5-12 years will need to have received a minimum of one dose of pediatric Covid-19 vaccine.

Are international artists coming?

There will be some, but due to ongoing international travel and quarantine restrictions, the 2022 line-up will be predominantly Australian and Australia-based artists.

Can I bring my kids? Adults who have bought a ticket can bring up to two children 12 and under for free. Additional children’s tickets can be bought at \$25 for a festival ticket or \$10 per day.

Can I camp? No.

Can I smoke? Designated smoking areas will be clearly marked on the festival map.

Can I use cash? All bars and vendors are cashless, accepting only cards.

Don’t bring ... Tents, sunshade or chairs – if you bring a chair to sit on, it must be of the low-standing, beach-style variety, especially if you want to use it in front of the stages for seated performances. Otherwise, those who want to remain seated for a performance must sit at the outer edges and rear of the audience. Also no large umbrellas, glass, drones, remote control aircraft or cars, professional cameras or audio devices, selfie sticks, alcohol or illicit substances, weapons or knives, fireworks, flares, sparklers or fire-twirling equipment.

More details:
womadelaide.com.au

