

SQUEEZE BIOGRAPHY, SEPTEMBER 2015

Long before you finish your first listen to the new Squeeze album 'Cradle To The Grave,' you realise that no one has ever come close to taking their place. For the admirers beyond number who've been willing their return, the release date of the band's first record of new songs in 17 years should be a national holiday.

'Cradle To The Grave' is the sound of Squeeze going backwards to go forwards. It marks the complete and, frankly, triumphant reintegration of the masterful songwriting axis of Chris Difford and Glenn Tilbrook, in a beautifully-observed series of fond vignettes about childhood, growing up and the absurdities of the ride through life we're all on.

Squeeze's 14th studio album was produced with old comrade Laurie Latham, in a refreshed band line-up that now features Stephen Large on keyboards, Simon Hanson on drums and Lucy Shaw on bass, all three of them from Tilbrook's own band on his solo albums and tours, the Fluffers. Early Squeeze bassist John Bentley also played on the first half of the recordings.

A collection of fresh Difford & Tilbrook copyrights to stand tall among the anthems they've lodged in the public consciousness since the late 1970s, the first new Squeeze album since 1998's 'Domino' is joyous news enough. But it's also receiving a brilliantly appropriate introduction, with songs from the record featuring prominently in 'Cradle To Grave,' the new BBC2 comedy drama based on Danny Baker's memoirs and starring Peter Kay.

After a hiatus in which they pursued solo projects to great acclaim, Difford & Tilbrook started performing shows and writing new material together some years ago. In 2010, they revisited their illustrious catalogue for the 'Spot The Difference' album, and began to tour again in both two-piece and band configurations.

Then along came Baker's 'Going To Sea In A Sieve' autobiography, which charted an eventful south London upbringing on a Deptford council estate, on parallel lines to the early lives of of the Squeeze custodians. Suddenly, serendipity breezed into view. Glenn takes up the narrative.

"Chris and I had a couple of stops and starts at writing, but I think we had a collective doubt about what a record was for," he says. "We'd done 'Cradle To The Grave' and a couple of the other tracks on the record three years ago, really to have something new to give the band some impetus, and to make it an event within a show, which it did.

"Totally coincidentally, I had three days in bed and read Danny's book, got in contact with him and played him the track. Like magic, it was their ready-made theme tune, so that worked out great for us." Difford agrees: "Everybody needs discipline, and it was very useful to have it, because it kept Glenn and I focused."

Thus the majority of the songs on 'Cradle To The Grave' were recorded in an ultimately bounteous six-month period. "Really the first three months were Chris and I getting to know where our boundaries were, and how we were going to work together, and that was a very gentle process," says Glenn.

"I can, I know, upset the applecart on occasions, and I was very much trying not to do that, and to allow Chris his space to work. It meant that that process of the last three months was really intense, but through that time, we gained an understanding of each other as working writers now, which we didn't have before."

The richly comic and evocative reminiscences of Baker's memoir were an especially productive seam for the Squeeze frontmen. Their professional paths crossed with those of the writer and broadcaster from early band days, but the connections went back further. Chris and Danny went to the same school, albeit a few years apart; Glenn and Danny went out with the same girl within a short space of time.

"Having all of that in my back pocket was easy reference for me," says Difford, the man whose vivid lyricism has been illuminating Tilbrook's enduring melodies and guitar lines since the days of 'Up The Junction,' 'Cool For Cats' and 'Labelled With Love.'

"The album is very reflective, but then it needed to be because of the script," he goes on. "It's like going to your bottom drawer and pulling out a box of photographs, it makes me feel very warm when I listen to it. It's a place that makes me feel very comfortable, and it's given us a really good calling card."

On the album, the misty memories of a happy childhood in a very different England come sharply into focus on songs such as 'Nirvana,' 'Only 15' and 'Top Of The Form.' "The further away we get from our childhood, the more amazing it seems," reflects Glenn. "Growing up around bomb sites just seems amazing now, and the amount of empty property, compared to the way London is now. It's a dreamscape, and that's fertile ground for Chris and myself."

Allied to the renewed innovation in the Squeeze engine room, the band's continuing evolution has also helped with the spring-cleaning. "It's the first time we've recorded with Steve and Simon, and they bring something different to the table," says Glenn. "We had John Bentley on half the album, and we did the last dates with him over the summer. He's such a great player and a great bloke, it was a very emotional time for us all."

"But now Lucy Shaw is there, and it's going to be great. Lucy played on the other tracks, and that was a change for us, but it was with more of an awareness of music of the last 20 years being brought to the table. I'm not turning into Skrillex

or anything like that, but as a musician, I like hearing what's happening, and you have to absorb it."

The "two rooms" principle of songwriting is traditionally applied to the collaborations of Elton John and Bernie Taupin, but it's a methodology that has always worked just fine for Difford and Tilbrook as well. It has again on 'Cradle To The Grave,' but with adaptation born of maturity.

"We were in adjoining rooms, and we didn't close the door. I don't think we were ever in the same room, apart from lunch," deadpans Chris. "But we were very close, a few yards. Historically, I would write the lyrics and send them to Glenn. He would write the music and the next thing, we'd be in a rehearsal room and the band would be thrashing them around, then we'd be in a studio, and that would be the album.

"This was very different. We combed through a lot of different ideas and Glenn contributed lyrically quite a lot. So really, it seemed the best thing for me was to leave him to percolate and do what he does best, which is come up with genius melodies and great guitar solos. I'm not a great lover of recording studios per se, but Glenn is, he loves that environment, so I could leave him to it, I could trust him."

Tilbrook, for his part, explains: "I was very wary of treading on Chris' toes, I didn't want to do that and I love and respect the place that he occupies. The thing about this record is that it's solidified our relationship as writers, and that's something we can carry forward. Our personal relationship was good, and we were getting on, but creatively, we're now definitely in each other's pockets, and that's great."

With such revitalised positivity, the future's bright, the future's Squeeze. To namecheck the first single from the album, 'Happy Days' really are here again. Visitors to the 'Cradle To The Grave' tour this autumn are in for a treat, and so are the band.

"We're in the lucky position of selling more tickets now than we ever have," says Difford. "We've got to push ourselves to be the best, and if you're not doing that, you've got no business doing it.

"We can really deliver a great show, it's properly played, it's got full enthusiasm, it's the whole thing. It's not cynical, it's just like, you've got all this stuff behind you, plus the present. Why not just revel in it, because it's a great place to be."