



As die-hard Australian music fans gear up for a thumping summer of sell-out festivals, **Damien Francis** explores Meredith – the laid-back, one-stage, BYO-booze bonanza declared by one muso as “simply the best festival in the world”.

Photography by **Damien Francis**

A FESTIVAL DEBUTANT

When we meet Paul Mac he doesn't know all that much about the Meredith Music Festival. One of Australia's seminal electronic music artists, Mac first rose to prominence as one half of dance act Itch-E and Scratch-E, famously thanking the “ecstasy dealers of Sydney” when accepting the group's 1995 ARIA award. He has collaborated with the likes of Silverchair, remixed everyone from Kylie Minogue to George Michael and carved out an accomplished solo career. But when we meet Mac he has not been to Meredith. Not quite yet anyway.

The setting for our encounter is a campervan depot in Melbourne's western suburbs one Friday afternoon in December, the opening day of the Meredith Music Festival. A sense of nervous anticipation is evident amongst those collecting vehicles for the 90-minute drive to the festival site. Mac is billed to take to the stage at 2am on Sunday morning as part of Itch-E and

Scratch-E, and is genuinely intrigued as to what awaits him at the end of the highway. A three-day music festival with only one stage? And you can bring your own alcohol?

A FESTIVAL HISTORY LESSON

When Meredith was first held in 1991 as an end-of-year party in a paddock for friends and friends of friends, the home movie footage of the gathering gave no inkling it would become a staple on the Australian festival calendar. The musical entertainment was showcased from the back of a truck and at times drew what appeared to be only passing attention. Attendees sat on hay bales and drained cans of beer before staggering to tents and cars as the air temperature dropped and fatigue set in. “It wasn't even meant to be a festival,” festival co-founder Greg Peele later observed. “It was just a party in the bush.”

Yet the DNA of the event that has flourished in subsequent years, accruing goodwill annually among its rusted-on followers, was

evident at this first tentative step. One stage. BYO alcohol. No commercial branding.

The story of the festival is the story of the Nolans – Jack and Mary – on whose family farm the festival is staged, and their son Chris, one of the event's instigators. In the four years following its debut, Meredith grew organically, adopting a ‘better before bigger’ mantra.

However, the personal circumstances of Chris Nolan meant that 1995 was almost the final festival. While working as a lawyer in Hanoi, Chris suffered a multi-organ collapse. Critically ill, he spent six months in a coma. The brain injury he sustained means that, 16 years later, Chris is confined to a wheelchair and cannot see or speak. However he is able to communicate and his passion for the festival and its music is undiminished. Festival-goers drop by each year to Chris's tent with a view', dubbed the Nolan Stand, to convey their personal connection with the event that still bears their host's fingerprints.



A FESTIVAL LOCALE

The open-air, multi-day music festival is a global phenomenon but each variation has quirks and characteristics that reveal something about its hosts. Attending a local festival is a surefire way to plug into a destination. Glastonbury is unmistakably English, from the stiff upper lip required to stare down grim weather conditions, to the eccentricity evident in its counter-culture heritage. The Fuji Rock Festival, which has not been staged at Mount Fuji since the disastrous initial event in 1997, is a window into Japanese culture. And Serbia's Exit Festival has a unique history (it began as an anti-government protest) and location (on the banks of the Danube) that provide visitors with an appreciation of its host nation.

Australian music festivals also wear their sense of place on their sleeve. The Woodford Folk Festival is unambiguously a Queensland gathering, and Adelaide's parkland setting and arts community distinguish WOMADelaide. Similarly, the essence of the Meredith Music Festival can be traced to its locale. The whistle-stop township of Meredith is located between western Victoria's two major regional cities, Ballarat and Geelong.

As the organisers acknowledge, the festival site can sometimes feel like its very own country, but local people and local features abound. The City of Ballarat Municipal Brass Band has opened proceedings each Saturday morning since 2005, and members of Meredith's sporting and community groups toil over the hotplates at the perennially popular Tucker Tent. Funds raised from sales of bacon-and-egg breakfast rolls to hungry patrons recently helped the Meredith Primary School acquire gym equipment, funded an upgrade of the Meredith Golf Club's mower and bankrolled the repair of the nets at the Meredith Tennis Club.

A FESTIVAL SOUNDTRACK

The single stage at Meredith sits at the bottom of a gently sloping tree-lined tract dubbed the ‘Supernatural Amphitheatre’, or ‘Sup’. The evil of drink tickets has no place here. Coolers loaded with BYO beverages are dragged into place with couches for what is invariably top-shelf people watching, backed by a superb soundtrack. Ringed by food outlets and two bars, the setting is never static. As a day progresses in the Sup, the sun crosses overhead before dipping beneath the paddocks in the west. The human tide ebbs and flows from nearby campsites as artists arrive, perform and take their leave.

It's all about the music, right? The brains behind Meredith back their knack of programing a crowd-pleasing on-stage lineup. The pre-festival primer, never shy of eyebrow-raising adjectives, billed the 2012 line-up as a “eucalyptic, pre-apocalyptic

neuvo classic charismatic flyin' purple people eater bush rave-up happening... featuring the crackest squad of musical mavericks”.

It was certainly eclectic, ranging from 85-year-old blues saxophonist Big Jay McNeely to Syrian wedding singer Omar Souleyman. It was also contemporary, boasting Perth-bred psych-rockers Tame Impala and Canadian ‘dream pop maven’ Grimes, both of whom featured atop many critics' best-of-2012 lists. And it was, at times, transcendent. Never more so than throughout Spiritualized's Friday night performance and then during the amphitheatre sing-a-long the following evening when Primal Scream delivered ‘Come Together’. Asked about the set months later, Primal Scream frontman Bobby Gillespie recalled a “really magical energy in the audience... It was like a force field. I loved that gig”.



MEREDITH

A FESTIVAL RITUAL (OR THREE)

Meredith trades in traditions: moments that have been repeated and then enshrined as part of the folklore of the festival. The most infamous is the Meredith Gift, a footrace that was devised at short notice to fill time when Spencer P Jones was running late for his Sunday afternoon spot in 1994. The handful of entrants swelled annually in proportion to the festival and the dash became more fiercely contested and, well, more naked, on account of the stipulation that runners be 'nude or underpanted'.

Another Meredith ritual is 'the boot'. Melbourne live music audiences are not a particularly demonstrative bunch. Their non-expressive ways have prompted visiting musicians to dub the Victorian capital, 'the city of folded arms'. However, over the course of the weekend at Meredith, at least one act will be left in no doubt as to the level of audience appreciation. A moment will arrive, most likely late in their set, when they will gaze out over the amphitheatre to a sea of footwear being held aloft.

The boot was first witnessed during the 2007 edition of Meredith's sister festival, Golden Plains, staged at the same location every March. Patrons of Meredith's December event quickly adopted the custom, bestowing the honour on the likes of Paul Kelly (2009), Neil Finn (2010) and Graveyard Train (2011). According to the festival's mythical matriarch, Auntie Meredith, this collective display "happens when the whole of the amphitheatre unites in appreciation of something that has wildly exceeded expectation. You can't plan the boot. It can strike at any time of day or night."

Other organic traditions await the uninitiated, including 'the red tree' (a painted gum where red-haired festival-goers gather at an appointed time) and the 'arch of love' (a mysterious installation that has hosted wedding ceremonies since first appearing in the mid-90s). The next Meredith tradition? My vote is for the regular return of the home-made Nick Cave rocking horse, delivered by one proud punter to the amphitheatre in 2011.

A FESTIVAL WEATHER FORECAST

Uncooperative weather conditions are the scourge of outdoor music festivals the world over. Meredith is preceded by a fortnight of anxious scrutiny of meteorological predictions for the presence of unwanted guests: blazing heat, wind gusts that send tents cartwheeling, and torrential rain that transforms walking tracks into watercourses. Fortunately, conditions at December's festival were benevolent: a made-to-order



Caption Required.

summer evening on the Friday followed by a blustery but dry Saturday.

Most Meredith veterans will recount the weather-affected years with a mix of disbelief and pride. Surviving the 2004 festival, that of the '100-year storm', is often worn as a badge of honour. The tempest that descended on the Friday evening was so brutal that the plug was very nearly pulled on the entire weekend. The following night, festival favourites The Dirty Three performed against a breathtaking backdrop: an electrical storm that hissed and spat over neighbouring paddocks but ultimately spared the festival site. Melbourne musician Dave Larkin, who has graced the Meredith stage with his former group Dallas Crane, was among the gobsmacked crowd. "The band is incredible without the light show," he says. "But with God on lights, they were amazing."

If that episode constituted a near miss by Mother Nature, her aim was true at the 2008 edition of the festival headlined by MGMT. It really rained. And then rained some more. Some attendees were woefully ill-equipped for the onslaught. Others were creative in their battle with the elements, a number donning both full-length wetsuits and football boots for the duration of the weekend. A wise man once said: "Only bad drugs or bad weather can ruin a weekend at Meredith." Experience suggests that even very bad weather may not be enough.

A FESTIVAL CONVERT


It is approaching 3am on Sunday morning, around 36 hours after our encounter with Paul Mac at the campervan depot. Mac has just closed out Itch-E and Scratch-E's 60-minute set to a throbbing Meredith amphitheatre and has seen enough to make

an assessment of this annual gathering.

"Hey, Meredith", declares Mac as he prepares to depart the stage to a cheering early morning crowd, "this is the best fucking festival!"

Weeks later, when the paddock dust has settled, Mac's opinion is more considered but has not changed. "Amazing, such a pleasure to play", he says, listing with approval Meredith's distinguishing features: BYO alcohol – "super cool, instead of being ripped off by stupid bar prices" – and a single stage – "makes for a more universal experience, where we all go through it together."

"I was told that it was the music lovers' festival before I got there, and that was totally true."

It should come as no surprise that a seasoned festival pro like Paul Mac has been seduced. After all, to know Meredith is to love Meredith. 

GET PLANNING

Get There

The Meredith Music Festival takes place in mid-December each year, a short drive from Meredith, 90km west of Melbourne. Tickets are limited and are snapped up promptly each year. Most are sold via a subscriber ballot, details of which are available on the festival website. www.mmf.com.au

Stay There

Hiring a campervan is an increasingly popular way to tackle the festival. Our Mighty Campervan delivered us in style to Meredith and back, along with providing that most precious festival commodity: decent sleep. www.mightycampers.com.au