

# in IT for THE BEER!

Kane Hibberd

story by  
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**COSMIC PSYCHOS'**  
**LEGENDARY**  
**INDIFFERENCE**

**“It doesn’t matter what you** do in life, if you keep doing it and you hang around long enough, you know, someone’s gonna notice you for a little bit,” explains Ross Knight, frontman for the storied Australian punk band Cosmic Psychos. “It’s just the rock ‘n’ roll clock: Well, if we’re stuck at quarter to three, that clock’s gonna come around and hit quarter to three every now and again, and we’re still there. So people take notice of you and there will be a little bit of interest.”

Knight’s theory doesn’t apply to every band, but it’s most assuredly true for the trio he’s been with since 1984. This month, an independent documentary about their party-fueled career – or lack thereof – debuts in select cities. *Cosmic Psychos: Blokes You Can Trust* will be screened at venues, not theaters, and each showing will be followed by a live performance. One date is part of the 10th annual Gonerfest, the garage-punk shindig arranged by revered label Goner Records. Naturally, the Memphis imprint – together with Melbourne’s Aarght! Records – is reissuing the band’s first three LPs: *Down on the Farm* (1985), *Cosmic Psychos* (1987) and *Go the Hack* (1989).

While the fest always lures similarly seminal underground acts for its headliners, it stands to reason that the doc played some role in reviving interest. They’ve continued churning out solid albums all these years – three in the 2000s alone – but until now weren’t invited to join. The impetus for the newfound love means little to Knight, though. After all these years, he’s still hell-

bent on maintaining Cosmic Psychos as a hobby, not a job.

“It’s a rare band or a rare musician that can take music seriously and survive for a long time, you know,” he says. “And good luck to ‘em, but it just wouldn’t be for me. If someone gave me ten million dollars to do full-time music for the next ten years, I’d just politely shake their hand and say, ‘No, thanks.’”

Thing is, that apathy is quite contradictory to the indelible mark Cosmic Psychos left on music, the early ’90s Seattle grunge scene in particular. The coarse, rough-hewn garage-punk still stands as an inspiration for many of that group’s most iconic players. A lot of the bands giving glowing testimonials in the doc learned of Cosmic Psychos by sharing bills with them way back when, and their appearances more than pepper the doc – they serve as the backbone of its approach to storytelling. The Melvins, Mudhoney, L7 and even Butch Vig, among others, are filmed championing the band. Funny enough, the film’s director, Melbourne-based Matt Weston, is by no means a Cosmic Psychos fan-boy.

“Matt didn’t even like the band. He’d heard of us, but he didn’t even like us!” Knight laughs. “He came up and we had a few drinks together, quite a long night. And I started rattling off all these stories, which seemed to be pretty easy to do after a few beers, and he started to run with it.”

Though Weston still may not be a typical devotee, it’s not difficult to discern why the narrative is worth telling. Guitarist Peter Jones and drummer Bill Walsh started in an

outfit called Spring Plains in 1982. Their sound found its idiosyncratic sure-footing when Knight joined as bassist and lead vocalist two years later and they became Cosmic Psychos. Having played in Rancid Spam, Knight was no stranger to punk – but his background was exceptionally rural. To this day, he lives and operates a farm that’s been in his family for generations. *Down on the Farm*, the early 5-song release that marked their first for a label, remains an apex of the band’s repertoire. On the title track, Knight bellows, “I love my tractor!” Though it’s no joke that Knight truly cherishes his day-to-day, they generally opted for a tongue-in-cheek, flippant approach – unlike the bulk of their straight-faced, often humorless Australian comrades like X, Radio Birdman, The Saints and The Birthday Party. There’s crude cuts about wanting to be “David Lee Roth” and hoping to “Never Grow Old,” too.

Strangely, American bands (for once) had the savvy to embrace these guys as tour-mates while, in their homeland, their silliness didn’t really register. A lot of folks thought they were just a bunch of merry-making jokesters. In some respects, they were.

When Pearl Jam headlined their first Australian gig, Cosmic Psychos opened. The result was hilariously tragic.

“There was 46,000 people. It was amazing, we went on just as the sun was setting. It was like one of those old Woodstock films where you can see people up to the top of the hill and beyond. It was just an incredible setting,” Knight recalls. “We got on



there and they just hated us. They just *hated* us. They were chanting for Pearl Jam. It was 46,000 people just basically abusing us.”

But Knight and company weren't diminished by the response. Not at all.

“Ed [Vedder] was on the side of the stage. He'd actually helped us set up. He came out and sang a couple of lines to one of the songs and the crowd just went berserk. And this was just before the end of the set, and we thought, *Oh, we've won them over now*. So Ed walks off the stage and they just resumed back to what they were doing. And that was just 46,000 people with a bucketful of abuse for us. So, it was pretty good, and right at the end of the set, I thanked them very much and told them we'd decided to play for another half an hour – and the roar just went up another level. So we just turned 'round and gave them our backs. It was fantastic.”

To clarify, Cosmic Psychos mooned all those ticked-off festivalgoers – without thinking twice. By then, their onstage antics were the norm. Off-the-wall shit simply *happened*.

“It was just about every show, something stupid happened... We're a calamity onstage. Someone breaks a string, we don't have any spares or anything so we just have to make do with what we got. The roadie was so pissed one time that he started juggling in the nude in Belgium. It was a daytime festival, I guess it was a pretty mixed crowd. And he comes out with his pants 'round his ankles and starts juggling fruit – we got arrested by the police! And we're going, 'No, mate, it's art, it's artistic, it's artistic!' But they thought we were saying he was *autistic*,” Knight chuckles. “So they basically said, 'Pull your pants up and do not juggle fruit in the nude in Belgium.’”

The roadie in question is Digger, a guy who, despite his shortcomings, has pretty much always been part of the crew since buddying up to the band after breaking his jaw during an unfortunately timed stage dive at one of their Melbourne shows.

“[The Belgian police] thought he was sort of special, which he kind of is anyway,” Knight adds. “He's coming [on the upcoming tour of] America too. He's come to the states with us quite a few times. He's been with us forever. And he's hopeless. He can't do a thing. We played in Sydney two weeks ago, and I walked onstage and he says, 'By the way, I haven't tuned anything up.' So when he went to turn the amp on, it blew up. And the guitar was so far out of tune it took me 20 minutes to tune the guitar. It was quite entertaining for all. We had to entertain a bloody sell-out crowd while we tried to tune the guitar up and I don't have a guitar tuner.”

The doc recounts similar tales of mayhem, including some S&M and booze-fueled misadventures, as well as the unfortunate loss of guitarist Robbie Watts, who served as lead guitarist from the '90s until

his death in 2006. But although those anecdotes and the Cosmic Psychos' history is a focus, Weston used Knight's own plight as an equally predominant element.

“I was a little bit hesitant [about the film],” Knight says. “I was going through some pretty crappy stuff at the time. I said, 'Alright, whatever.' And I said, 'As long as it's a documentary on the band and not a Ross Knight story, I'm happy. Like everything with the band, I've got other, more important things in my life going on.’”

Knight's personal struggles weigh heavily in terms of screen time. Due to financial issues, he almost lost his farm – his lifeblood. When the film-making was still in progress, he wasn't even living on his own property.

“I'm still battling. Back at the farm, I'm still battling to keep it every day. Every day is another challenge,” he admits. “I could come to the States in three weeks and not come home to a house. So yeah, it's still way up in the air.”

Knight's other responsibilities include taking care of two sons, one of whom has quadriplegic cerebral palsy. It's the main fuel behind his penchant for exercise.

“It's because I drink so much. I've always involved myself in a bit of exercise and because I have to carry my son everywhere,” Knight says. “I decided weight lifting would be good because my son can't walk. What I thought I had to do was be strong enough for two blokes... And I was lucky enough [to go] to Atlanta in 2004 and win a world championship there. And went to Saint Petersburg in Russia and won a world championship there. And then I injured myself, so power lifting I can't do anymore. So now it's Olympic lifting.”

The Cosmic Psychos (which presently consist of Knight, guitarist John McKeering and drummer Dean Muller) are collectively carefree about making music, but Knight is especially outspoken about “not giving a fuck.” A standout line from the doc, which is highlighted in the trailer, is Knight referring to the band as a bunch of ugly guys. But he is by no means perturbed by their lack of commercial success.

“[We were] just not marketed for that. You can't do it. You just can't polish a turd. And we're that turd,” Knight laughs. “And I have no problem at all – I'm not a musician. We just sort of rumbled and tumbled our way into people's lounge rooms. And whether it's done really well or it's famous or influential or cool – we were the guys in the corner with the lampshades on our heads!”

*Cosmic Psychos will rumble and tumble and perhaps even juggle fruit in the nude when they play the EARL on Thursday, Sept. 26th. Hawks will also play, following a screening of the documentary Blokes You Can Trust at 8:30 p.m.*



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