

STILL ELECTRIC

MYKE BARTLETT MEETS
RELUCTANT ROCK STAR,
IVA DAVIES

(CYBELE MALINOWSKI)

Iva Davies has spent the past 40 years trying to write songs about anything but himself, though it hasn't quite worked out that way. "I believed my stuff wasn't that important," he says. "But when I now go back and perform songs from the first album, they're about all the things going on in my life that I thought I'd so scrupulously avoided."

This came to a head during a recent gig in New Zealand, where he choked up while singing 1984 single *Don't Believe Anymore*. Written during a period of intense isolation and alienation following the unexpected success of his debut album (and subsequent split of the original band), the song is a time capsule of powerful emotion.

"I remembered everything that was going on when I wrote that song and it was quite devastating. I got to a point where I could barely sing, which had never happened to me before."

This year Iva is celebrating his 40th anniversary in the pop world, with a sell out national tour. He was a 21-year-old drop out from the New South Wales Conservatorium when he teamed up with bassist Keith Walsh – whose mother owned the squash court where Iva worked as a part-time cleaner.

Originally called Flowers (confusingly, their debut album was called *Icehouse*), the band broke up in 1981, only to be revived almost immediately by Iva as a solo project called Icehouse. Since then, he has remained the only constant in an oft-changing line up.

"I never recognised rock n roll as a career option," Iva says. "It wasn't until the first royalty cheque came through that I believed there was any money in it. I was back living with my parents. We had absolutely no money. The cheque was for \$15,000."

Some rockers would have taken the cheque to the nearest pub. Not Iva. "I bought the cheapest house in Sydney. It was a complete dump, but I honestly believed

I would never see another cent from the music industry. It was my attempt not to squander that one achievement I ever thought we were going to have."

Four decades later, Icehouse's achievements are set in stone. Eight of their nine albums reached the ARIA top 10, while 1987's *Man of Colours* (featuring No.1 single *Electric Blue*) remains one of the best-selling albums released by an Australian group.

Next month, Icehouse will play at A Weekend In The Gardens alongside fellow '80s legends John Farnham, James Reyne and Daryl Braithwaite. Iva says he couldn't resist the chance to play in Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens, although he usually avoids sharing the bill with other "heritage acts".

He says Icehouse never belonged to any one scene.

"I NEVER RECOGNISED ROCK & ROLL AS A CAREER OPTION"

Often thought of as a pop band, it was actually born in Melbourne and Sydney's hardcore punk clubs.

Iva already knew a thing or two about not fitting in. The son of a chorister, he had played the bagpipes since he was six, joined a folk band at 15, and was training for a career as a classical oboist, when he realised his real love was the less orthodox music of The Rolling Stones, Roxy Music and the Sex Pistols.

Not that he minded being an outsider. "I was never going to be part of the punk movement because I was classically trained. On the other hand, I alienated the entire classical world by believing pop music was art."

Iva found little appealing in the rock-star lifestyle. While other artists craved celebrity, he strove to remain under the radar. Touring with David Bowie at the

height of his popularity in 1983 gave him a bitter taste of fame. "It confirmed my fear of celebrity. It was really impossible for him to go anywhere or do anything."

Still, Iva's fame in the late 1980s was such that he had to recruit a bodyguard – who, he says, ended up saving his life. While Iva resisted the perils of sex and drugs, he was so driven, that he became isolated and overworked.

In 1988, in the midst of a gruelling international tour, he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. His ever-present bodyguard was the only one who noticed. "It was really killing me," says Iva.

"My bodyguard intervened and took me to the sleaziest boxing gyms he could find in each town and made me do two hours of training. For two hours each day, the record company wasn't able to do whatever they wanted me to do. If he hadn't done that, I would definitely have come apart."

Years on, Iva says he's uncomfortable considering the band's legacy. It took his children to see his achievements with any perspective. While he had no time for a personal life during the 1980s, he settled into family life in the next decade.

Icehouse stopped touring in 1993, when Iva's daughter Brynn was six weeks old. He continued to record in his private studio, working on high-profile projects with Sydney Dance Company and film director Peter Weir, but his children grew up without any idea of what dad used to do for a living.

"It wasn't until we re-formed in 2009 that my children got to see me play. They were 13 and 11. The look when they came backstage after seeing their father perform in front of 40,000 people was absolutely priceless." ●

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