



RETURN OF THE TRIFFIDS

Stars and fans celebrate a Perth songwriter's secret legacy, 10 years after his death cut short a legend, writes **Michael Dwyer**

The Triffids knew the risks when they were invited to play a few precious, dormant songs at a gathering of fans in Belgium in 2006, seven years after the death of their singer, songwriter and visionary, David McComb.

"It is a very fine line that you tread," says Graham Lee, who joined the Perth band in Sydney in 1985. "It was only during the Belgium show that we realised that the best way to remember Dave was through his music.

"It just seemed to work. Nobody in the audience, nobody on the stage was uncomfortable that evening and it even seemed that Dave was in the room with us, almost. It was that strong a feeling."

Thousands of Australian fans concurred at the Sydney Festival last year. Last month, the five remaining Triffids played Melbourne with a distinguished roster of guests — Steve Kilbey, Mick Harvey, Rob Snarski, Melanie Oxley, Youth Group's Toby Martin — and barely a dry eye in the house.

Next week it's Perth's turn at last: a homecoming that is certain to resonate most profoundly of all. Kilbey, the Church frontman who gave one of the Melbourne show's most impassioned performances, says the experience has been "so emotional I can't describe it".

He continues: "I saw a lot of people there every night, a lot of famous Aussie rockers, sitting there and bawling their eyes out. It has an incredible poignancy. I think people who don't even know the Triffids would be really moved by the beauty of these songs.

"It's like they're larger than life now."

The name of the concert, *A Secret in the Shape of a Song*, acknowledges the underexposed nature of the Triffids' catalogue.

Between 1982 and 89, they released five albums and half a dozen EPs, generally finding more

sympathetic ears in Europe than in the Oz rock beer barns of the 80s.

"The Triffids were one of the most influential and important bands to come from Australia," proclaimed England's NME when McComb died after a car accident in Melbourne in 1999. London's Islington Council unveiled a plaque on the site where their masterpiece, *Born Sandy Devotional*, was recorded in 1986.

Kilbey considers the songs that he sings from that album "some of the best songs ever written, certainly by Australians. Some of my favourite songs of all time are on that album.

"The truth is that they are such an incredibly idiosyncratic band. When we did *Lonely Stretch* and the Triffids machine started up and Mick Harvey was playing the xylophone, it was just something unique. They're not like any other rock band."

The show's substantial repertoire also reminds us that

McComb was a formative member of the Blackeyed Susans; that he released an exceptional solo album in 1994, *Love of Will*, and recorded several unreleased songs with a new band, CoStar, shortly before his passing.

Lined up back-to-back, his songs assume a staggering weight. His rich poetry of yearning transcends pop music both in form and content, conjuring the isolation and majesty of the Australian experience with a rare intensity of focus and language.

"He had his own take on Australia," Kilbey says. "And strangely, he also had a bit of that Southern Baptist minister thing, raging from the pulpit, where sex and love and religion all get mixed up. I think there are many similarities between him and Nick Cave.

"It might be hard to tell who was

influencing whom some of the time."

Graham Lee adds that some of McComb's lyrics have assumed a new poignancy in the retelling: "He did talk about death and bad things happening quite a lot. Some of the lines in some of the songs are really quite cutting now."

As in their glory days, the Triffids' innate sense of atmosphere will be underscored on stage by theatrical lighting, stage dressing and projected images originally formulated by McComb with visual designer Peter Mackay.

"It seems right to carry on that tradition of very lush presentation," Mackay says, "with candlelight and velvet and images of the West Australian desert, old iron sheds, as well as images of European culture, a lot of stained-glass windows . . . a

lot of which were directly from Dave". The combined results have a



timeless quality that goes far beyond sentimentality and nostalgia. But Lee is adamant that *A Secret in the Shape of a Song* is a finite project for a clearly defined purpose.

"From the first rehearsals, the reason it worked so well is that everybody was doing it for the right reasons," he says.

"There was this amazing feeling of goodwill, really wanting to do it for Dave, and for the music, and you don't often get that.

"There's heaps of sadness and regret, and guilt. Everything is in there.

"It's very emotional for us and for the audience but it's not meant to be a night of sadness. It's meant to be a night of celebration."

The Triffids and friends play the songs of David McComb tomorrow, Saturday and Sunday at Beck's Music Box for the Perth International Arts Festival. The shows have sold out.

