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Charlie Mgee and His Merry Band



Where might you find a musician with a passion for permaculture? Melliodora Permaculture Farm in Victoria, that's where!

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Charlie Mgee of Western Australian band, Formidable Vegetable, is a passionate proponent of permaculture and sustainability, a passion he shares through stories and song writing. Spending his early years on a remote Aboriginal community and later settling in the idyllic south-west of Western Australia has played a major part in forming Charlie's lifestyle choices and his environmental mindset.



The sound of a spoon clinking against glass accompanies Charlie Mgee's cheerful greeting from the kitchen of his current home, a tiny house on Melliodora Permaculture Farm in Daylesford, Victoria. Melliodora is where David Holmgren, one of the co-origins of the permaculture concept, resides. It is one of the best documented and well-known permaculture sites in the world. When *Re:Think* visited recently, Charlie was making yogurt.

Charlie, 36, is the exuberant frontman of Western Australia's 'permaculture-funk' band, Formidable Vegetable. Charlie Mgee writes and performs funky songs about permaculture and sustainability based on the three permaculture ethics of earth care, people care and fair share. Formidable Vegetable has released three full length albums, several remixes, and numerous, quirky, kid-centric music videos.

Formidable Vegetable usually comprises Charlie, Mal Webb and Kylie Morrigan, the last two of whom currently live in Melbourne. According to Charlie, "the band has up to 45 members who have never all been on stage at the one time!". Formidable Vegetable have performed in over 20 countries, but they like to keep their performances "bio regionally appropriate" to minimise their carbon footprint.

During Victoria's first wave of Covid-19 restrictions, Formidable Vegetable played some online gigs. One remote gig was 2020s

Glastonbury Festival. Charlie and his band had made the decision earlier in the year not to attend this year's Glastonbury Festival so as to further reduce their ecological impact. Ironically, no one went to Glastonbury this year, so they got to perform in the iconic festival remotely, after all.

Charlie has been living a life of peace and permaculture for some months. Being creative comes naturally to Charlie. "There is plenty going on", he says. He and his partner, artist Brenna Quinlan, have been collaborating and creating a set of permaculture action cards for schools, and the band is currently recording two new albums. Charlie and Brenna have fitted out Big Red Bev, a "Biosphere Emergency Vehicle", fuelled by vegetable oil waste. Bev, an ex-fire truck, has been transformed into a tiny mobile home that doubles as a performance space, using mostly recycled materials.

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"Big Red Bev", as the name suggests, is big and red. Bev has been a project of Charlie's for two years, and she is his fourth vegetable oil conversion. So just how does Bev work? The system initially starts on diesel, which heats up the sticky, cold oil. This ensures that the cold engine does not get clogged up. The truck takes 200 litres of waste vegetable oil and it has two tanks. A centrifuge filters the oil from the first tank and sends the clean oil into the second. This clean, filtered oil is what fuels the truck.

In 2019, Charlie road-tripped Bev the length of Australia, from South-west Western Australia to Cairns. The drive extended



over a three-month period and he used around \$200 worth of diesel for the entire trip. So where does one get hold of enough vegetable oil to travel around Australia? Fish and chip shops, restaurants, and fast food joints, that's where! Charlie says, "waste vegetable oil is more sustainable than biofuels in that it's already a waste product, unlike bio diesel or ethanol".

Once Covid-19 restrictions have lifted, Charlie and Brenna have plans to hit the road in Big Red Bev to visit schools and collaborate with teachers. For now, they rely on social media to communicate and share resources. According to Charlie, many teachers are doing amazing jobs teaching sustainability in schools, despite an overcrowded education system. The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Gardens program and the Beyond Foundation are two examples he gives of programs currently being facilitated by enthusiastic teachers.

Changing systems, permaculture and music are the things that Charlie feels strongly about. Music was a big part of his childhood. He was born in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory on a remote Aboriginal community where he recalls hearing Aboriginal lawmen singing. His dad, a teacher, would play "anything that you blow into", while his mum, a clinic nurse, became a jazz singer at the age of 40. "There was always music around – interesting, weird fringy world music", he explains.

Charlie has always had an interest in using music as a memory and learning tool. "The only thing I remember learning in high school was the word mnemonic", he professes with a laugh, "and ever since then, I've kind of been a little bit obsessed by different mnemonics and ways to remember things". While attending cultural studies at university, he found that there were

many links between music, memory, and storytelling. He refers to Lynne Kelly's *The Memory Code* (2016) and her discovery that some Indigenous, ancient civilisations used powerful memory techniques, such as the Australian Aboriginal songlines.

A couple of years ago Charlie had a chance to work with children and youth in a remote Indigenous community when he spent some time with 'Desert Feet', a Western Australian-based music program. On his trip out into the desert he became more aware of the landscape and the part it plays in Indigenous Australian stories. Similarly, permaculture is about the patterns we see in nature and the landscape. It's a set of 12 design principles centred on whole systems thinking. Permaculture has traditionally held strong links to global Indigenous cultures. Bill Mollison, a Tasmanian and permaculture co-contributor, attributed much of what he came to create as "permaculture" to what he learned from the Aboriginals in Tasmania and global indigenous cultures.

Charlie says, "[permaculture] is such a great opportunity in this country for reconciliation, and for acknowledging Indigenous people and listening to Indigenous people". While he doesn't see permaculture as cultural appropriation, he does feel that there needs to be more recognition of the cultures who have inspired the thinking process. "Permaculture is not about dogmatising any one technique, or saying this is the way to 'do' permaculture. It's about finding inspiration and finding ways to read the patterns in your own context, based on maybe a more Indigenous way of thinking", he explains.

After busking his way into a permaculture course at TAFE, Charlie felt it was a natural response to write songs about permaculture.



"Permaculture is all about designing the landscape and working with the landscape and with natural processes and as a musician this is, like, the perfect intersection of the two things", he explains. So, is Formidable Vegetable a kids' band? Formidable Vegetable have recently signed to a children's label and they are working on a kids' album. "I've kind of tossed up and down over the years about whether to promote ourselves as a kids' band. I've resisted that because, you know, we've played gigs from everywhere like Glastonbury Festival, big electronic dance festivals and schools. I love that diversity and being able to sort of move between worlds". Folk troubadour Pete Seeger is one of Charlie's musical idols. "Pete Seeger was popular with kids

through to grannies, and the work that he did on environmental issues and, you know, social change was just super inspiring!"

So, whether it's kids' music or just music that appeals to the kid in us all, Charlie has a dream of a low-carbon, low impact music industry. "The utopian 'permie' in me kind of likes the idea of this future of house concerts, and backyard festivals and community gatherings where musicians are valued in their local areas. In traditional Indigenous cultures, music was just a part of everyday life. People who could write a good song might be a little bit more revered in their community, but then everyone would sing the song."

In Charlie's utopian dream there is less of a distinction between a band and the audience. He sees smaller, intimate concerts as spaces where people can have conversations and discuss ideas; a space where they can talk about permaculture and form permaculture groups. "It's this real juicy, communal sort of vibe you get from a small show."

If you are lucky enough to catch the band performing from Big Red Bev's deck in a backyard or school near you, beware, you will find it very difficult to hear a Formidable Vegetable song without smiling and tapping your feet. Once "My Dad's Dunny Doesn't Flush" becomes stuck in your head, the earworm is there to stay! And who knows, you might just learn something along the way.

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