

Band's Members Feel the Pressure of Being Squeeze

By BUDDY SEIGAL Los Angeles Times Aug. 9, 1996

Chris Difford was, well, feeling Squeezed out.

Along with longtime songwriting partner Glenn Tilbrook, Difford forms the nucleus of U.K. power-pop veterans Squeeze, at once among the most respected and neglected bands of the last 20 some-odd years, at least when it comes to American audiences.

In a recent phone interview, Difford discussed the latest indignity on his plate: I.R.S. Records had gone out of business (as of last month) right as the latest Squeeze album, "Ridiculous," was being released on that label. This meant no more copies of the album would be shipped, beyond what had already been sent to stores. It also meant there would be no tour support or promotional help from the now nonexistent label and thus not much of a reason to bother finishing up Squeeze's current tour, with no new material to promote commercially. (The band's only other upcoming release is "The Piccadilly Collection"--due Aug. 20 on A&M; Records--a digitally remastered, 18-song retrospective of hits and B-sides previously only available in the U.K.)

Not wanting to let down their fans, however, the group decided to proceed with the planned road schedule, which brings Squeeze to the Coach House tonight for an "unplugged" concert. Despite that resolve, Difford's disappointment was palpable, and one couldn't help feeling sorry for the guy.

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"What can I say?" he said, sighing. "This is a body blow, really. It's very discouraging. You come over here to tour and now you're doing it all out of your own pocket. You do all the promotional work off your own back. . . . For a band that's been touring for 20 years, this all comes as very tough news. My priority is to get back to London at the end of [this] week and see where we stand and what's going to happen to us."

It's never been easy being Squeeze.

While their records have been critically well-received on these shores, sales for all but their greatest hits collection have been disappointing--especially considering the ample amount of airplay the group has received since its first album, "U.K. Squeeze," was released in 1978.

"Tempted," "Pulling Mussels (From a Shell)," "Black Coffee in Bed," "Cool for Cats," "Annie Get Your Gun," "Up the Junction"--all have been radio staples, and familiar tunes to most

anyone who's spent time around a jukebox in the last couple of decades. So it's particularly bizarre to consider that while Squeeze has never had a U.S. Top 30 single, its 1982 greatest hits collection went platinum (1 million units sold).

"We're radio-friendly kind of people," said Difford, at a loss to explain the lack of consistent sales. "Since I've been here, I've heard us on light radio, classic rock and Triple A. I don't know where we fit in. We seem to fit into all of them, which I think is a good place to be."

Squeeze--currently made up of Difford on guitar and vocals; Tilbrook on guitar, keyboards and vocals; Keith Wilkinson on bass and Kevin Wilkinson (no relation) on drums--has endured a number of personnel changes and break-ups over the years, and Difford and Tilbrook have toured and recorded billed as a duo rather than as Squeeze. (The current tour, while billed as Squeeze, does not include either Wilkinson. Difford and Tilbrook are joined by Nick Harper on guitar.) Group alumni Paul Carrack and Jools Holland have gone on to solo careers. It's been a long and twisted road for the band, which first came to prominence during the initial crest of the New Wave, a Beatles-influenced group often favorably compared to its mentors.

"Everyone had the skinny jeans and the skinny ties back then," chuckled Difford, remembering the early days. "We came to America the first time and found that there was a band called the Knack [the much-maligned Los Angeles group that had a hit with 'My Sharona']. People were saying, 'Hey! You're the British version of the Knack!' and I was saying, 'No, we're not. We're not like them at all. I'd rather be put in a bracket with Pink Floyd!'

"It was definitely an interesting time," sniggered Difford, 42. "We managed to surf those waves for a while. We've matured quite well over the years, particularly as writers, but also as musicians."

There are those who would assert that Squeeze hasn't so much matured with the years as lost its once punky edge. The band's albums of more recent vintage have undeniably been ultra-slick and professionally executed but seem to have lost almost all the rock 'n' roll teeth that once bit so sharply--one wag, upon hearing "Ridiculous," likened it to "a collection of Pepsi commercials."

So perhaps it was his disappointment over the group's current situation, or maybe something deeper and more significant, that prompted Difford to hint that Squeeze would no longer continue to be a priority for him and Tilbrook. Rather, he said, the songwriting duo had hooked up with a theatrical agent back home in London, and were looking forward to beginning work on writing a musical together.

“If we do another Squeeze album, I have no idea what shape it would take or when it would ever come out,” he said. “You can only go around banging your head against a wall for so long before you start getting a headache. Oh, we’ll do another album, it’s just a matter of when, I suppose. But if the musical thing takes off, that would be our top priority.”

You can hardly blame Difford for wanting to go the Andrew Lloyd Webber route after so many years of frustration, but you can’t help wishing he’d yank a few more “Black Coffee’s,” “Pulling Mussels” or “Tempted’s” out of his hat before he starts palling around too much with Julie Andrews and Dudley Moore.

* Squeeze unplugged, tonight at the Coach House, 33157 Camino Capistrano, San Juan Capistrano. Hammel On Trial and Nick Harper open, 8 p.m. \$27.50. (714) 496-8930.