

# THE COOL cats

FORMED VIA AN ADVERT IN A TOBACCONIST'S WINDOW BACK IN 1974, SQUEEZE ARE CELEBRATING THEIR GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY THIS YEAR WITH A LIVE TOUR AND NOT ONE, BUT TWO NEW ALBUMS. WE MEET SONGWRITERS CHRIS DIFFORD AND GLENN TILBROOK TO HEAR ABOUT LIFE IN ONE OF POP'S MOST ENGLISH OF BANDS...

STEVE O'BRIEN

**F**ew bands live long enough to salute their 50th anniversary, and at various points in Squeeze's life, it looked like they'd be among those that wouldn't make that milestone.

After all, since forming in 1974 they've split twice, in 1982 and 1999, with its core members – Chris Difford and Glenn Tilbrook – barely speaking to each other in the years in between.

But there's something about these two titans of English pop that keeps them in each other's orbit. *Rolling Stone* wrote in 1981 that "the British New Wave has finally found its own John Lennon and Paul McCartney" and that comparison has hung around the songwriting team of Difford and Tilbrook ever since. But whereas the Lennon/McCartney partnership burned out in 1970, never to be reignited, Chris and Glenn are still writing songs together in 2024, half a century after a 16-year-old Tilbrook answered an advert in a tobacconist's window for a band into "The Kinks, Lou Reed and Glenn Miller".

"It was an unusual set of influences," Tilbrook tells us as we catch up with him pre-Christmas, nearly 50 years on from his first meeting with soon-to-be bandmate Chris Difford. "But then I remember loving Glenn Miller's song *I've Got A Girl In Kalamazoo*." He starts

to sing: "Don't wanna boast/ But I know she's the toast/ Of Kalamazoo-zoo-zoo-zoo-zoo...!" It was the quirkiness [of the advert] that appealed to me."

Much has been made over the years of the tensions in the Difford-Tilbrook buddyship, but as the pair chat to *Classic Pop* via Zoom from their respective pads (Chris in his creatively cluttered man-cave, Glenn from his festively garnished music room), it's clear that whatever problems they have had in the past, their relationship these days is largely friction-free. After all, they've managed to keep this iteration of Squeeze together for 17 years and counting, ever since reforming for a second time in 2007

**Difford and Tilbrook pictured in 1996, just after the release of 11th album *Ridiculous***



and they're now the only members left from the line-up that gave us such pop evergreens as *Up The Junction*, *Cool For Cats* and *Labelled With Love*. So when we say that Squeeze are marking their 50th anniversary in 2024, it's actually the songwriting marriage of Christopher Henry Difford and Glenn Martin Tilbrook that we're really paying tribute to.

"We just liked each other," Tilbrook tells us, remembering that first meeting with the 19-year-old Difford outside a Blackheath pub in April 1974. "He was the first other person I'd met who wrote songs. From the off, we were both keen to do some stuff together."

Over those first months they penned somewhere around 50 songs, many of which have never seen the light of day. However, they both remember the first track that they wrote together.

"It was called *Hotel Woman*" Tilbrook recalls with a smile. "We've never really gone back to it. But it was a good indication of what we could do. It had all the elements of our songwriting and what could be good about it. Of those other songs, we've raided the bank from time to time. *Last Time Forever*, from *Così Fan Tutti Frutti*, certainly was an old tune with a new lyric. It's useful to have unused songs. I'm working on a song now with Chris, and there's a little section of it that was really hard to get, and I had tucked away a memory of something I did 40 years ago so I've nabbed it and it fits perfectly."



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It’s a testament to Chris and Glenn’s productivity at the time that they could have over 50 songs in the bag and be able to cast most of them aside when it came to making up their first recordings. Squeeze’s first EP, *Packet Of Three*, arrived in 1977, with the following year bringing their eponymous debut album. Though, as the band would find out, the tracks for their first LP would come under fierce scrutiny from the man their manager Miles Copeland had hired to produce. Enter avant-garde noisenik

**You need hands: Squeeze in 1979, then with Jools Holland (second from right) in their ranks**

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John Cale. “Growing up as a Velvet Underground fan,” offers Difford, “it was quite an exciting moment, to find out that John Cale is going to produce your first EP. It was an extraordinary thing.”

“He definitely brought a lot to the table in terms of bringing a more aggressive edge to what we did,” adds Tilbrook. “And we liked that. But when we went on to do the album, his focus was on getting us away from what we did, so we weren’t going to be playing pop songs. In fact, he threw out all our songs, and we

rewrote everything in the studio, tailored to what he wanted. I think it’s a really interesting album, but it doesn’t really sound like Squeeze to me.”

With A&M panicked at the lack of potential 45s, two songs were added, with the more obviously commercial *Take Me I’m Yours* and *Bang Bang* both produced by the band themselves. While *Bang Bang* stiffed, *Take Me I’m Yours* would catapult Squeeze into the Top 20 and, on 6 April 1978, to *Top Of The Pops*, fulfilling a long-held dream. ▶



**"I always felt we were a pop band and with that confidence and arrogance, it just felt that was where we should be" – Glenn on *Top Of The Pops***

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"I remember a Rolls-Royce coming to pick me up to take me to the TV studio," Difford recalls of the band's first flush of fame. "Then some years later getting an invoice through A&M for it and suddenly realising not everything was free.

"That was a difficult lesson to learn. But it was brilliant at the time. I remember going into A&M and they had a massive warehouse at the back of King's Road and you'd just leave constantly with arms full of albums."

"It was everything we wanted as a band," adds Tilbrook about their sudden transition from suburban pop wannabes to bona fide chart stars. "I always felt we were a pop band and with that confidence and arrogance, it just felt that was where we should be."

Four albums followed, each one – for the most part – charting higher than the last, until 1982 when it was announced that Squeeze would be disbanding. By that point, they'd lost several members, including original keyboardist Jools Holland as well as his replacement Paul Carrack, while, in Difford's words, his and Tilbrook's relationship was suffering "from fatigue" due to the band's constant touring. "There was no one to tell us to just take a holiday," Glenn shrugs.

When most bands break up, their former members often do their best to avoid each other in the bitter aftermath. Chris and Glenn, on the other hand, reteamed without the rest of Squeeze for an album simply titled *Difford & Tilbrook* ("The order of the names was

## NICE TO MEET YOU



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It was in April 1974 that the 16-year-old Glenn Tilbrook first met the 19-year-old Chris Difford, after answering an ad that read "Guitarist wanted for recording and touring band.

**Influences:** The Kinks, Lou Reed and Glenn Miller". But while it was the first time that the two had actually spoken to each other, Chris recognised his future bandmate from around the Blackheath area.

"I knew Glenn and [Glenn's girlfriend] Maxine from people that I'd seen in the village. So it was lovely to actually put a name to a face, as it were. I always remember seeing Glenn and Max walking around the village. The community of Blackheath at that point was quite tight and there were lots of really nice people hanging about together."

"We arranged to meet outside this pub called The Three Tuns," adds Glenn, "and Chris said he'd be carrying a copy of the *Evening Standard* under his arm. As indeed he was, but he was also wearing a multicoloured lurex coat and I thought that might have been even easier to spot!"

Having finally recognised each other, the two went back to Tilbrook's house where he'd deliberately left a copy of a Tonto's Expanding Head Band album lying around "so he would know I was into some pretty serious music". "We just hit it off," he smiles.

alphabetical," laughs Chris, "we didn't toss coins."). But despite being made by the songwriting heart of the band, Difford is adamant that the release was not a de facto Squeeze album.

"We wanted to do something different," Chris reflects on the No. 47-charting LP. "When you listen to the songs on that album they don't sound like Squeeze particularly. It would be interesting to hear what Squeeze would have done with those songs, but I think it was sufficiently different enough for it not to be Squeeze."

Squeeze finally reformed – with Jools Holland back on the Joanna – in 1985 ("It was almost like somebody had drawn the curtains and suddenly light came back in," Difford smiles), returning with the album *Cosi Fan Tutti Frutti*. But though the late 80s and 90s would produce some of Squeeze's finest 45s (*Hourglass*, *Footprints*, *Some Fantastic Place* among them), they never quite reclaimed their commercial footing, with only 1987's *Babylon And On* LP hitting UK Top 20.

"The dynamic really had changed," says Tilbrook about Squeeze's second coming. "But what happened to us as a band is like with *Babylon And On*, we got increasingly conservative. It was great being back together, but it was soon to crumble into dust."

Though they initially regrouped with the 70s line-up of the band, Squeeze would go through a multitude of personnel changes in the 80s and 90s. In fact, Squeeze have had so many members over the decades that they've got their own Wikipedia page.



**East End Boys:**  
Squeeze in 1981,  
now with Jools Holland's  
replacement Paul Carrack  
(pictured far right)  
© Getty

# “We were jumping through hoops to try to please the people who thought they knew how we should sound, but you end up pleasing no one” GLEN TILBROOK

Do Difford or Tilbrook have any idea how many different people are listed as one-time members of Squeeze?

“Ah, it’s a good pub quiz question this one,” laughs Difford. “I’d say 22?”

“47?” suggests Tilbrook.

The answer, we point out, is 31, that’s including Chris and Glenn themselves.

“You win, Chris, you’re closest!” concedes Tilbrook, with a chuckle.

So why the high turnover of members, we ask. Is it something that Squeeze have used to their advantage over the years?

“I suppose you’re always searching for something,” ponders Glenn. “Like an ability to take in more contemporary influences. And that’s what we have now in the band. Any band worth its salt always takes notice of what’s going on now and doesn’t just think of then. Then is gone, it’s done and dusted. Now is what feeds into what we’re doing and is what makes us interesting.”

Despite the changes in line-up, however, the 90s weren’t a happy time

for Squeeze. Increasing record label interference was, in Tilbrook’s words, “like a circus”. “We were jumping through hoops to try to please the people who thought they knew how we should sound, but you end up pleasing no one,” he grumbles.

With tensions in the band once again frayed, Squeeze called it a day for a

**Squeeze’s current incarnation are ready to roll their sleeves up and get back to work**



second time in 1999, with Difford telling a shocked Tilbrook that he wanted out.

“Chris was definitely up for foraging in other meadows,” remembers Glenn, “And he felt that we’d run out of steam. So that decided that for me. But in fact, it was the best thing that could have happened. I’m so glad that we did split then. I felt like we both learned a lot in the time we were away from each other. I learned about the difference between success and hunger and what I wanted to do with my life was this and if that means you end up playing in a pub to six people – as sometimes I did – then I’m okay with that. And since then it’s been like a superpower, because that makes you invincible to the demands of commercial success. In my mind that has freed us up to be much more experimental, and then we become more interesting. And that wouldn’t have happened without splitting up.”

Whereas before the hiatus lasted just three years, this time it was eight

Having completed a co-headline tour with The Psychedelic Furs last year, Squeeze have grand plans for 2024



**“I feel like we’re in full flow now. The stuff that we’re writing, I think it’s incredible.” CHRIS DIFFORD**

— years that Squeeze were out of action, and during that time these old comrades, who’d known each other since they were teenagers, didn’t speak a word to each other, with Difford saying that he watched his former bandmate’s solo career “from over a hedge”, even sneaking into one of Tilbrook’s shows incognito.

It was the death of Difford’s brother (“he was just the biggest Squeeze fan,” he says) in the mid-noughties that led to Chris and Glenn hooking up with a view to reviving the Squeeze project. Over

lunch, they discussed terms and “with exit doors open”, they officially reformed in 2007 for a series of live gigs, with an album, *Spot The Difference*, arriving in 2010. There have been a further two LPs since then (2015’s *Cradle To The Grave* and 2017’s *The Knowledge*) and there’s another planned for this year’s 50th anniversary celebrations.

“We’ve got an incredibly busy year,” says Chris. “Around the corner, we have a tour that’s selling extremely well and we’ve got two records we’re going to be working on.”

Hold up there, *two records...?*

“Yeah, we’re gonna have a new Squeeze album, which Glenn and I have been working on, and then there’s a record that we wrote in 1974 that we’ve never re-recorded or released. So we’re going to give that a good listen and have a go at those songs, too.”

However, for the new new album, Chris says that he and Glenn and the rest of the current Squeeze line-up will be entering the studio this month and, despite finding it difficult to get started (“it’s all about trying to turn on the tap,” he laughs), Tilbrook is confident now they’ve got an album every bit as vital and infectious as anything from their commercial heyday.

“I feel like we’re in full flow now,” he beams. “The stuff that we’re writing, I think it’s incredible. I don’t know if we’re going to do another record after this, so I want this to be the best record we’ve ever done. I mean, why do one if it’s not going to be the best you can possibly do?”

Exactly this. While there are other bands formed in 1974 that are still chugging along, happy with simply pumping out the old stuff, their songwriting muscles long since gym-fit, Squeeze will be entering their half century celebrations with a fresh batch of songs to perform. Proof, if need be, that Squeeze are, 50 years on, still the coolest cats in town. ■

## ELVIS ENTERS THE BUILDING



Having had a star producer for their debut album, the plan for Squeeze’s fourth LP was for a double LP, with each side produced by a well-known name. Proposed by manager Jake Riviera, it was mooted that Elvis Costello, Dave Edmunds, Nick Lowe and Paul McCartney would all work on what became *East Side Story*. In the end, the double album plan was scrapped and only Costello would end up working on it. Released in 1981, it remains one of Squeeze’s most acclaimed records.

“Jake Riviera came along with a lot of stormy ideas,” says Chris Difford. “It felt like you were joining a club, really, when you were working with Jake, because he had all the artists as he was the co-owner of Stiff Records. I can’t remember the conversation that brought us together with Elvis Costello, but before we knew where we were, we found ourselves in the studio with him. And he brought a discipline that I don’t think we’d really had at that time. It was useful because it created a really great album.

“And so working with him was completely the opposite of working with John Cale. I mean, this is somebody that personally I wanted to impress every day, and the atmosphere that Elvis created for us to record was a comfortable one. You know, it wasn’t like being tormented by John, which sometimes I certainly felt.”

● **Squeeze’s 50th anniversary tour runs from 4 October to 22 November. For full dates and tickets, visit [squeezeofficial.com](http://squeezeofficial.com). They also play *Let’s Rock Shrewsbury* on 13 July. For more details, see [letsrock80s.com](http://letsrock80s.com).**