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PARENTS BATTLE OF THE BANDS

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HOW A BUSKER TOOK OVER THE WORLD

See side mention of Parents Battle Of the Bands



CLAIRE LEADS ASSEMBLY TO GLORY

THE PARENTS ARE ALRIGHT

In Melbourne, the Parents Battle of the Bands doesn't just raise funds for music programs in public schools – it raises the roof, inspiring grown-ups and their little rockstars alike.

by **Claire Millie Jenkins**

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Claire is a writer, music teacher, partner and parent. She grew up in Montreal, lived in Toronto and is now in Narm/Melbourne: a hat-trick of excellent cities.

I'm at the Corner Hotel, a major band venue in Melbourne's inner east. I'm on stage, front and centre, I'm down on my knees and I'm belting out a song. Maybe 600 people are here. It's a school night and most of us are primary school parents; lunches will still need to be packed in the morning. But here we all are, daring exhaustion to stop us, swaying together, singing and yelling: *Lola, L-O-L-A, Lola*.

Brunswick East Primary School (BEPS) parent Lara Cameron is here, too. "I'm surrounded by a bunch of people I know," she tells me after the set. "We're out of the house for the first time in ages, singing along to a song. And, I just...I don't know. It was a really moving moment."

I'm the lead singer, so when I point my microphone towards the crowd, that's their cue to sing. Our collective voice is incredibly loud and all-consuming. In this euphoric state of participating and conducting, I have pointed my microphone towards the crowd too many times. My guts tighten while the lyrics in my mind fracture. What comes next?

Launched in 2018, the Parents Battle of the Bands (or PBOB) is the brainchild of Anna Vermooten and Dagmar Yeaman. It's a series of live events raising money for school music programs, and proof that people south of the Yarra also have creative ideas. "Anna was at a school event where their dads-band was playing," Yeaman recalls. "And she just thought: *What a fantastic idea. I'm going to start a mums-band.*" The next day at assembly, one of the dads-band members approached her to share his reaction: "But this school already has a parents' band." Hmmm. The mamas and the papas joined forces and became Parental as Anything.

A neighbouring school also had a parents' band, and the idea of a fundraising battle surfaced. Anna ran with it. Three more schools were found, including Dagmar's. The pair met, joined forces and started refining PBOB's battle structure.

All musicians must be primary carers for kids currently enrolled at their participating school. The battle gig is an 18-plus affair. And money raised through ticket sales must be used to directly support school music programs: instruments, music stands, a musical excursion or incursion. Public schools are so low in funds that any money raised could easily be used to fix a leaky roof – so they needed to safeguard the earnings. And the school principal must agree to these terms before the cheque is handed over.

The battlelines drawn, the first PBOB really kicked off. Pretty soon events attracted a stellar line-up of judges including The Bamboos's Kylie Auldist, Dylan Lewis of Brown Hornet, *Recovery* and Double J fame, and Aria Award-winner Kate Ceberano, to name a few.

In 2023, schools in Melbourne's inner north jumped on the bandwagon with their first battle. It went off: a sold-out night of beaming faces, dancing bodies, and waves of nostalgia. Northside Records owner Chris Gill – a local music legend and judge on the night itself – was struck by the euphoric vibe: "The fun people were having, it was...unbridled."

Tim Watson – parent, founding member of Taxiride, and returning judge since 2019 – agrees. "The most surprising thing is when there's a room full of people, especially parents, remembering what it was like to go out and watch live music. But your responsibilities change. It's for the kids, so it gives them permission to go out and have a great time."



REIGNING PBOB CHAMPS THE RIP-OFFS FROM RIPPONLEA PRIMARY



OFF THE RECORD, AFTER THE 2025 BATTLE

At BEPS the great time lasted beyond the hangover some experienced the next day. PBOB became a place to pour unused adult creative energy. Fresh conversations cropped up at pick-up. “I was thinking next year, you gotta do a Spiderbait song.” or “It was like, if I wanted a serious relationship I would have chosen you guys, but for a one-night stand, I would have gone home with the winning band.” A reprieve from discussing cost of living, aging parents and general health.

And the names! We’re Assembly. Kinda okay. In my defence I had 20 hours to get a band together, complete with name, before ticket sales went live. When grade three Maddy pointed out it was a terrible name because our school has “gatherings” not assemblies, it was too late. A selection for your enjoyment: Lunchbox 20, AB/CD, Red Hot Chilli Parents, Naplan Death, and my favourite, Richmond Primary’s Rage Against the Canteen. Do they have a canteen? Nope. Take that, Maddy.

Musical taste, as we know, is a thing – finding a consensus on a setlist is near impossible at times. One keyboardist who wishes to remain anonymous left his band’s WhatsApp chat when it became “vicious”. Incredibly, when Brunswick South Primary had finally agreed on their songs, they discovered another school had two of the same ones. Heavy negotiations were only resolved when they gave up the Divinyls tune and kept the Blondie.

It’s hard for busy people to commit to extra-curricular practice. One guitarist is lost to home schooling. Bass player Tim, too busy with his work as a professional musician, can’t make rehearsals and so is replaced by another bass player, also named Tim. Most of us, though, just needed a good reason to prioritise playing music – and once we’ve got one, it’s all we want to do. Drummer Andy Murray says he practices every day, while Micheal Hall, lead guitarist, says playing all the time means he’s falling behind on work.

So, why do we do it? I’m a pre-school music teacher. I can reel off facts of how music learning supports all learning; how it lowers cortisol and can help to reduce symptoms of dementia. I can tell you how important music is to families; how parents want to support the musicality in their children because they know it’s an important life skill. And I can also

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report that most of those same kids, now parents themselves, no longer play the instrument they loved playing.

This is a tale of how some parents are being given permission to play music again, and the impact it’s having on the generation they’re raising. Parent and performer Lara Cameron’s work with the band has encouraged her kids to be “a little braver”, she says: “Like I reckon Addy’s been more inspired to join the choir as a result of me doing some singing stuff.”

The replacement Tim, too, was ultimately convinced to sign up when I told him that the PBOB projects were spiralling off into family side-projects, our kids joining in for a jam. “Agghhh!” he said: “You had to bring the kids into it!”

Founder Dagmar has also noticed this welcome development. “What we quickly discovered – in actual fact, it smacked us hard in the face – was it was about way more than just raising funds,” she explains. “We saw the impact it had on community connection, school connection, but also what it was doing for the mental wellbeing of the parents in the practice of rehearsing and playing music.”

And the movement is growing. In 2025, 39 schools battled it out across eight different nights. Who knows how much it’ll grow in 2026? A chord has well and truly been struck.

Back to me on stage, on my knees. Panic is falling away. The performance doesn’t really matter. It’s just the catalyst we needed to make time for these things that give us joy. I remember the next line and sing it. *That’s the way that I want it to stay. And I always want it to be that way.* ■

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