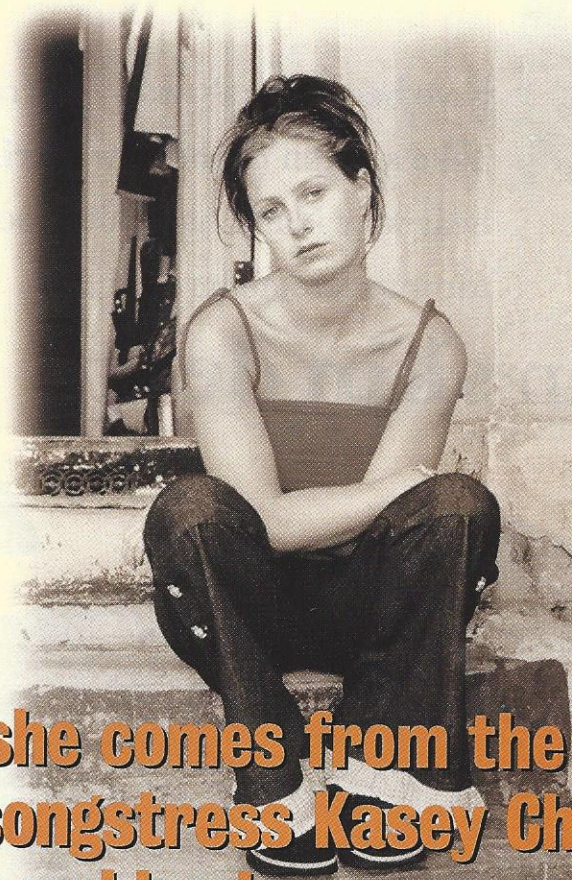


DOWN DEAD RINGER FROM UNDER



Although she comes from the land of Men At Work, songstress Kasey Chambers has twang in her blood. BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

IN Australia, the newspapers are calling Kasey Chambers "the Queen of Pop" — a surprising title, perhaps, because she's more or less a country singer. But it's not undeserved, considering that her album, *The Captain*, is platinum-plus in her homeland, and she's just been awarded an ARIA (the Australian Grammy) for Female Vocalist of the Year.

Here, however, we're less attuned to royalty, and Chambers' arrival in the United States has been less than regal. Having arrived from down under just a few days before, she's in a cab stuck in San Francisco gridlock, the victim of a late pre-election-day campaign swing by Bill

Clinton. What would her Aussie fans make of this?

"It's funny. Because I've got a record deal here, they think I'm a big star in America," says Chambers, who is easy with a laugh despite being inconvenienced. "But I'm going, 'Yeah, we've got a record deal, but I don't even know if we've sold an album yet.'" (*The Captain* has only just been released in the US, on Asylum/Warner Bros. Records. "No one's even heard of me over here. But in Australia, they think if you're even in America, then you must be a big, big star.")

Well, give it some time. Chambers is an extraordinary talent whose clarion voice at times recalls Iris DeMent with just a hint of an Aussie accent, and whose songs have

reportedly brought Lucinda Williams (one of Chambers' heroes) to tears. Her American fans are said to also include the likes of Steve Earle and Buddy and Julie Miller; in fact, the Millers appear on *The Captain*.

"I'll tell you, it's weird doing a gig and looking out in the audience and Lucinda's standing there watching me," Chambers says. "It's overwhelming and a little nerve-wracking. It's kind of like, when people like that say nice things about you, you've got a lot to live up to after that. People are coming to the gigs expecting a whole lot now. But it's very flattering."

She may have a lot to prove now, but let's face it: Chambers has faced tougher crowds back home than America could ever throw at her. Before striking out on her own, she cut her teeth performing, for the better part of a decade, in the Dead Ringer Band, a family act that played pubs in the Australian outback. Compared to that, a showcase at the Bluebird Café (in Nashville) might seem a walk in the park.



"We were a pub band," she recalls. "We were playing half country songs and half old rock'n'roll songs. My dad played a lot of Creedence and Eagles, and all the things people like to hear when you're playing in bars. And I also went through the stage of wanting to sing what was on the Top 40. I'd never really experienced that when I was younger, so I really wanted to play all the cool songs of the time, which turned out to be just the worst songs in the world during the '80s! It was really bad—I was singing, like, a Tiffany song or a Bangles song, and then an Emmylou Harris song. I was a little confused."

Chances are, Chambers' inclination toward pop music was just her way of making up for lost time—her upbringing was pretty much devoid of anything smacking of popular culture. When she was just three months old, her parents decided to move to the Nullarbor Plain, the desert in South Central Australia, where they made their living hunting foxes and rabbits for the pelts. They lived out of their car and a trailer, their only link to the outside world the train line

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that runs from one side of the country to the other. Every two weeks, they'd pull into a railway station to buy supplies. For entertainment, they were pretty much on their own.

"My dad says that every now and then, if it was a really still night, we could pick up a radio station, but not very often," she says. "Apart from that, we had a tape player, and my dad brought out all of his favorite albums. That was our only form of entertainment. We'd sit around the campfire playing songs."

"I was just lucky that he liked good music, and wasn't listening to Neil Diamond or anything like that," she adds with a laugh. "He was listening to Hank [Williams] instead. A lot of Gram [Parsons] and Emmylou, and Amazing Rhythm Aces, Jackson Browne, that sort of thing, that rootsy style of music."

When Chambers was 10, her family moved back to civilization—sort of. "When we say 'civilization,' it was a town with like 200 people in it," she says. There they formed the Dead Ringer Band, and eventually she got the courage to get up and perform with them. After a couple of years, the family decided to tour Australia pretty much the same way they lived out on the Nullarbor, sleeping under the stars and, when they could, catching showers at truck stops.

With no clue as to how the music industry really worked, the band still managed to record four albums, and eventually picked up

a few Australian Country Music Awards as well as an award from ARIA (Australian Recording Industry Association). Still, Chambers says, "we never sold a lot of albums. It was mostly about playing live for us."

After Chambers gathered a number of songs that didn't seem like a natural fit for the Dead Ringer Band, she decided to make a solo album. When her parents split and the band became inactive, she says, "that was the time that I thought, 'Well, I've got to do something. I can't sit around here any longer. I've gotta pay my rent. So I'll bring out an album now.'"

One of the more vexing problems Chambers had to surmount was that there weren't many female singer-songwriters like Emmylou Harris or Lucinda Williams in Australia to have opened the door for young performers like herself. Country music down under, she says, is "a little bit of everything. We have our bush balladeers, which is kind of the original country music that Australia made, without an American influence. And then we have a lot of, like, American clones—we have our Garth Brooks over there, and our Shania Twains. Most of the country-music industry and the people that get the awards and things like that are kind of like the American pop country artists, the mainstream artists. But there's really not a lot of people in Australia doing the sort of music I'm doing. There's no girls that are singer-songwriters, there never really have been. That's why most of my influences are all American."

When she finally got set up to make *The Captain*, Chambers relied on her family to help out—her dad plays guitar on the album, and her brother Nash produced it. And in the spirit of her childhood, she chose a remote location to record it—Norfolk Island, a small piece of land between Australia and New Zealand.

"I spent some time out there, living there a couple of years prior to the album being made," she says. "A lot of the songs were inspired by Norfolk, too. We set up our studio in this old homestead over there and recorded the album in about a month. No pre-production or anything, we just went in—and the band I play with live, that was the band on the record. The songs all came to life in the studio. Then we went to Nashville and finished a couple of tracks over there with Buddy and Julie [Miller]."

Chambers' trip to Nashville was eye-opening, but in a way she never would have expected.

"All of the stuff that we get in Australia from Nashville is all the mainstream country stuff, you know? I kind of

thought that's what Nashville was all about. But then I got there and realized there was this little underground thing going on there that no one really hears about in Australia. There's just like the best singer-songwriters in the world out playing in these little bars. It's so cool! I had no idea.

"The first night I was ever in Nashville, I went out to a bar and Matthew Ryan was playing. That just changed my whole life. To see an artist like that was just amazing. He ended up becoming one of my favorite singer-songwriters ever. It was

really encouraging to see someone of my generation doing that. I've always listened to Emmylou and Steve Earle, Lucinda. To get there and see someone like Matthew Ryan, who is my age, playing these amazing songs...I thought the whole world had gone haywire before that, and it kind of restored my faith a little bit."

Before it's all over, Chambers may have the opportunity to restore the faith of a few fans herself. She's already won over Australia, of course, where *The Captain* has just climbed back into the No.1 spot on the charts, thanks to Chambers' ARIA award. But America remains a question mark that Chambers is prepared to win over her way or not at all.

"We were in a really lucky position with the deal we got in America," she says. "I have a deal in Australia, I have a career in Australia, they paid for all my albums, they paid for all my video equipment, all of that. So I wasn't in a position where I needed a record deal here in America. That was just a bonus on top of everything. We were able to wait for the best deal that came along. We had offers from people who said, 'Come over, we'll re-record the album, you know, bring in the A Team,' and I was like, 'Well, that's not really what I want to do.' So I was able to say no to that. Eventually we ended up with a deal where the record company said, 'We understand that you don't want to go in the mainstream country market, and you don't want to change things on the

album, and you want to just do what you do.' And I was lucky enough to be able to wait for that deal, and eventually it came."

Her career may be going places, but for now, Kasey Chambers is going nowhere fast. Still locked in traffic, she says such a situation is unusual for the kind of life she's led up to now.

"I'm okay with cities now. I think if I'd been thrown into them a long time ago, it would have been a bit of a culture shock. We've spent a lot of time in cities now, but I don't think I could live for a long time in one. I like getting back to the isolated areas. I'm much more comfortable there." ☒



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