

'SLEEPING WITH THE BLUES' Reviews
Bill Chambers

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Kasey's dad and singing partner to Audrey Auld, Bill Chambers ventures forth with his solo release albeit supported by those ladies in his life. Coming out of that Australian community which just loves its Country music, Bill has had more than a hand in the success of a number of others.

Now, it's his turn. On *Sleeping With The Blues*, he makes selections of material from Fred Eaglesmith (*Big Ass Garage Sale*), Mary Gauthier (*I Drink*) and John Sebastian (*Stories We Could Tell*) dueting on the latter with daughter, Kasey. So, you get a flavour of what makes Bill tick. His gruff voice is reminiscent of John Prine and his songwriting has Prine's view of the tougher side of life. There are tales of drinking with *Devil's Bell*, lost love on *Sometimes* and more drinking along with plenty more substance abuse on the co-composition with Audrey Auld, *The Whisky Isn't Working*. The latter being a personal favourite around these parts with its country swing and 'tonight, the bottle let me down' feel.

Nobody will be holding this record up as ground breaking stuff. It's the sound of a talented guy enjoying himself along with some of his equally talented friends and relatives. So, what's wrong with that?

Steve Henderson, 2002

Sydney Daily Telegraph

"Bill sings a little like a cross between John Prine and Bob Dylan and he writes in the vein of the great '70s American alt/outlaw country troubadors."

Peter Lalor 2002

Drum Media

You might of heard of this bloke's daughter. She does all right in the music industry here. The genetics must have kicked in, because this is close to the best Australian country music album I've ever heard. Sadly, I don't think that this is that big a statement, but this is no reflection on Bill. *Sleeping With The Blues* can hold its own on any stage, Nashville and Austin included. Bill is in no hurry with this CD. The melodies and the stories unfold at their own idiosyncratic pace, with Bill's gruff, roughly hewn voice at their centre. Duets with daughter Kasey and Audrey Auld are mesmerizing, but just about all of the songs featured have their own intense sort of magic. The CD reeks of sincerity, which would be damn near useless if it wasn't listenable, but such is the range of genuinely interesting songs featured here you can safely come back again and again and find something new to ponder. There's plenty of space in the songs, which might be what gives it an 'Australiana' as opposed to an 'Americana' edge (though I have to say an American twinge to the accent and references to USA landmarks provide an odd contrast to this).

Craig N Pearce Aust. 2002

Houston Press

Bill Chambers may be from the other side of the world, but in a way, this show is a homecoming for one of God's natural Texans. After all, what is Australia but a sort of giant floating Texas? What is the Outback but a sort of über-Panhandle? And what could be more Texan than hunting varmints for a living? (The Chambers clan spent a decade singing under the stars and supporting itself in the most desolate and remote stretches of the Australian bush by killing such imported, habitat-destroying pests as foxes and rabbits.)

Daughter Kasey grew up to be a soulful singer who's often compared to Lucinda Williams. And the Texan influence shows in the elder Chambers's music, too. On his solo debut, *Sleeping with the Blues*, amid covers of Fred Eaglesmith and John Sebastian tunes, Chambers sings of trying to throw up out the car window and forgetting it wasn't rolled down, carpets sticky with stale beer, and how George Jones's voice can ring the Devil's bell. While Chambers's rough-and-ready Butch Hancock-ish voice can't quite plumb those fiery depths (his daughter's can, but that's

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another matter), his Down Under charm, glinting musicianship and first-rate honky-tonk originals have won him a few shelves full of Australian country music awards.

John Nova Lomax 2002

Austin Americana

Don't be mislead, although there are lots of the blues in these songs, this is not a "blues genre" recording. This man is a skilled songwriter who writes and sings about his blues in the best folk and western-style singer-songwriter traditions. Did I mention he is from Australia? Crikey! No, he sounds nothing like that. He doesn't even sound like his daughter. Maybe you have heard of her, Kasey Chambers. Ironic that in this neck of the woods his nasal-soprano voiced little girl is better known than he. They sing a duet together on the recording and their voices mesh very well.

Then again his voice has an edge, too, kind of like an old rusty hand-saw that manages to slice deep. He brings images of John Prine to mind, his voice and songs of the early 1970s. I haven't listened to those old John

Prine songs in quite a while, but the comparison feels strong. In fact I may have to pull those LPs out and put 'em on the turntable real soon.

These are songs of the human condition - in pain & confused, dreaming & drinking, regretful & randy. Whaaa? You haven't been both regretful and randy at the same time? Sheesh, then listen to "Gimme One More Chance" to

hear what the rest of us have been feeling. It's a pretty good two-step shuffle, too; about the only danceable song on the whole record.

Some of the songs seem simple, but then the emotions in those songs are simple, too. He writes appropriately - complex songs for complex emotions and confusing situations, then plain and simple songs with lovely harmonies as fits the situation.

Most of the songs on the CD are Bill's though he does sing one of my favorite Mary Gauthier songs "I Drink." He also includes Fred Eaglesmith's "Big Ass Garage Sale," John Sebastian's "Stories We Could Tell," and "The

Whiskey Isn't Working" which Bill wrote and sings with compatriot, Audrey Auld. He is backed by a talented band that never overshadows Bill's vocals.

2002

Sydney Morning Herald Feature Album * * * *

It's probably too late to tell Bill Chambers that gargling with broken glass and chasing it with a stubby of sand and pins will do strange things to your voice. But it sure helps him sound convincing on this debut solo album. This is the album Bill has wanted to make all his life, I reckon: a fair bit of Guy Clark, a slab of George Jones (particularly in the drinking duet Chambers co-wrote with Audrey Auld, 'The Whiskey Isn't Workin' Anymore') and a good serve of Dylan's "mature" years (the gravel-and-spit slow dance of 'Sometimes'). To hear him growl through Mary Gauthier's 'I Drink' you'd swear she wrote it for him. And when he clatters through Fred Eaglesmith's hilarious 'Big Ass Garage Sale' you can almost smell the stale beer. He's a good songwriter, too, with the title track and 'Devil's Bell' real crackers and 'The Last Thing I Expected' a fine hoarse whisperer of an ending.

Bernard Zuel, 2002

TOP COUNTRY HITS

A couple of weeks ago I received Bill Chambers' Sleeping With The Blues. After Bill & Audrey's Looking Back To See and Audrey's The Fallen, there was nothing else I could have expected from Reckless Records but pure, great Country Music.

This time Bill sounds more introspective, soulful, bluer, sadder, grittier and smokier than before. If one was only to read the lyrics in the booklet, you would think they were all written for a blues artist, but then the music is pure Country. In the good old tradition of raspy-voiced storytellers like Bob Dylan and Kris Kristofferson, Bill delivers a set of sad, half-spoken, half sung tunes that focus

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on loneliness, drinking, hard times but there's room for some humour too: The Whiskey Isn't Workin' -a great honky tonk duet with Audrey Auld in the Losing Side of Love tradition - and Fred Eaglesmith's "Big Ass Garage Sale" which, in my opinion, surpasses the original, will surely bring a smile to your face. Mary Gauthier's "Drink" is a song that she must have been saving specially to be recorded by Bill, and if she wasn't, well, it sounds just like that (Mary's ultrasad songs are the bluest lyrics I have come across since Mickey Newbury's compositions).

Raúl J. Tejeiro, Uruguay

When Bill Chambers played Houston, Texas, it was dubbed a "homecoming for one of God's natural Texans" by members of the Lomax field music archivist clan.

"After all, what is Australia but a sort of giant floating Texas?" John Nova Lomax wrote in Houston Press.com.

Well, there are probably a few less mobile phones and a few more road trains on the Nullarbor where the Chamber clan roamed like pre fame dingoes.

But the parallel is true for Chambers on his solo debut disc - sequel of sorts to Bill & Audrey duet album, 'Looking Back To See.'

Chambers sings about pain for a lost lover in the Lone Star State capital of Austin in 'Dreaming 'Bout Texas' - inspired by Kasey Chambers gig at a venue eulogised by a now defunct Little Texas in 'Amy's Back In Austin.' "La Zona Rosa held a crowd like we never seen before/ more than one thousand faces were lined up across the dance floor/ but you could've heard a pin drop when we played The Nullarbor Song."

Well, the girl got away as they often do in the neon nirvana of foreign locales, but not the song which sets the mood for this earthy exploration of Chambers roots.

'Devil's Bell' recalls Chambers flirtation with rock - a feat for which I was a humble witness when he did Hank Williams 'I Saw The Light' with a rock band at Pinewood Festival near Mt Gambier just 28 years ago.

"The only masters I did was a course in rock'n roll/ with a foolish heart that fell for souls who rang the devil's bell."

Chambers name checks George Jones - Rolls Royce of country singers - but his world weary vocals owe more to Dylan, Hank, Butch Hancock, Bob Neuwirth and an army of foot soldiers, But, like Tom Pacheco, vocal frailties are a vibrant vehicle for messages of the multi talented musician.

Chambers ambles through verdant valleys of ruptured romance, redemption and better love next time in worthy originals 'Sometimes,' 'Promises,' the title track and 'Hold You In My Heart' performed with 'The Dead Ringer Band.'

He cuts Fred Eaglesmith tune 'Big Ass Garage Sale' with Audrey harmonising and their co-write 'The Whiskey Isn't Working' as a duet.

Bill's lap steel, dobro, mandolin and guitar are extra strings in his bow with Kasey joining him for a cover of John Sebastian's 'Stories We Could Tell.'

Speculative sources of 'Gimme One More Chance' and finale tune 'The Last Thing I Expected' are fertile phosphate for debate among cyber chappies and chappettes.

But that enriches the organic music of Chambers and peers - a product with few radio outlets but a healthy live audience reaped by his offspring. - **DAVID DAWSON, Aust.**

The man behind Kasey Chambers

Melbourne Age

As Bill Chambers got his first glimpse of the Manhattan skyline from the plane, his daughter Kasey leaned over and whispered excitedly to him: "From Nullarbor to New York!"

That night, they appeared together on David Letterman's Tonight Show; Bill played guitar while Kasey sang Cry Like A Baby in front of the viewing millions.

"Kasey was right; from Nullarbor to New York was a big step, a big difference," he says. "But if we hadn't spent those 10 years on the Nullarbor, we probably wouldn't be doing what we're doing."

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Living in the bush gave us a sense of freedom and independence, and I'm sure that's why Kasey has stuck to what she loves, and hasn't had to compromise her music to make a living."

The Kasey Chambers story is now a well-known country music fairytale, which rolls on next week when she performs at the ARIA Awards, having received four nominations for her second, double-platinum, album *Barricades & Brickwalls*.

Her father's story is less well known. Yet Bill Chambers has been quietly making an impact on the country music scene in Australia and the US ever since he and his former wife Diane started busking in rural South Australian pubs. Later, their children Kasey and Nash would join them onstage, the family living off the land around the remote reaches of the Nullarbor Plain between gigs.

The Chambers family group was The Dead Ringer Band, and since its demise Bill has remained central to Kasey's spectacular solo career. He's also been pivotal in the careers of two other mould-breaking country artists, Audrey Auld and Catherine Britt.

Now, at 51, he has made a solo album of intensely personal songs and established his own touring circuit in America's south-west, playing alongside legendary Texan singer-songwriters and earning glowing notices from US country music critics.

"I don't want to ride on my daughter's name," Bill says with a sheepish grin. "But sometimes, if you knock on doors and say, 'I'm Bill Chambers, I've got an album', they'll say, 'Who?' So you say, 'Oh, I'm Kasey's dad'. And at least they know where I'm coming from and who I am."

Bill Chambers was born into a staunchly unconventional family in Southend, a small fishing town about 60 kilometres up the coast from Mount Gambier. His father never had a salaried job, providing for his family as a fisherman and hunter, and Bill followed the same path. Marrying Diane at age 20, he lived by the seasons of lobster fishing and fox hunting, with occasional gigs on the club circuits around Mount Gambier with Diane on bass. After Nash and Kasey were born, the family spent months at a time on the Nullarbor, practising their Seventh Day Adventist faith and conducting nightly singalongs of country and gospel standards and Bill's original material.

By the time Kasey was about nine and Nash 12, they were regularly joining their parents onstage. The close-knit, fiercely independent family determined to make a living, however frugal, out of their music.

"Looking back on those days now, they're very precious to me," says Bill. "Because they taught us how to do it the hard way; how to have faith. It was blind faith; you just believe, and you dunno why."

"We got to Dubbo one time, and found our gig had been cancelled. And we had no money to move on, so we drove off the road into the scrub and camped there until our next gig, living on loaves of bread and cans of baked beans and a dozen eggs."

"With the music industry, you feel like you're banging your head against the wall," he comments. "There was a long time when no one was really listening. But we didn't give up on it. We just wanted to play the music. We had no idea how far it would lead us, of course."

The Dead Ringer Band had success on the Australian country scene and made inroads into the US, but nearly fell apart after a lengthy dispute with their record company and the collapse of Bill and Diane's marriage. In 1998, after more than a decade of making music with his family, Bill took a break and ventured outside the family musical circle.

Moving to Sydney, he hit the inner-city pubs, playing Hank Williams covers with a bar band called Luke and the Drifters. He produced the debut CD by Tasmanian-born singer-songwriter Audrey Auld, and went on to record an album of retro-styled country duets under the name Bill and Audrey, setting up an independent label together, Reckless Records.

Six months later, Kasey's solo career was launched and the family regrouped, with Bill joining Kasey's band, Nash taking on the role of producer and sound engineer, and Diane selling merchandise ? roles that they continue to fill to this day.

"The Chambers have never waited for someone else to do things for them," comments Audrey Auld. "They're very self-sufficient, and they've worked so hard. But I don't think there's anything premeditated about their success."

"I did a gig once with Bill and Kasey in Southend, where Bill grew up. There was broken glass on the floor, people chucking food all over the place; and I realised how they had learned to cope, and to entertain people, even in very difficult situations."

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Auld credits her own continuing musical career to Bill, saying: "I've learned everything I know from Bill, and I know Kasey acknowledges that she's learned it all from her dad. And everything she's learned from him, she's taken a step further, because she's managed to apply a pop sensibility to the rootsy music he loves, that's in his blood."

Catherine Britt calls Bill Chambers "my bestest friend in the whole wide world". At age 17, Britt is the youngest Australian ever to appear on the Grand Ole Opry; she is currently in Nashville signing a recording deal, with Bill Chambers slated as producer for her major US label debut.

Bill discovered the 12-year-old Britt singing at a local jam night at the Steel City Country Music Club in her hometown of Newcastle. "Mum and Dad, being parents, supported what I did," recalls Britt, "but none of us really realised I could sing 'til one day Bill said, 'She can sing, let's do an album!'"

"Catherine's going really well; I'm real proud of her," Bill notes. "She's very young, but totally steeped in traditional country music. She's the hillbilly-est girl I've ever met!"

In Auld's estimation, Bill Chambers' impact upon country music, and imbuing his knowledge of country music traditions upon younger crossover artists, is bound to be recognised. "His style will become evident in time," she says of his work with Britt and other proteges. "A lot of these young artists turn to Bill, because they want some of the magic; they see what's happened around the Chambers family."

Auld says Bill has shied from the limelight surrounding his daughter. "If you're anywhere in the vicinity of Kasey," she explains, "everyone is so Kasey-focused that other talents pale a little around her. Because she's a very bright star. But somewhere inside Bill, I think he wanted to be an artist in his own right."

Sophie Best 2002