

Speaking in tongues comes naturally

Mandy Nolan interviews the interviewer, author Debbie Kruger.

According to author Debbie Kruger, music is very much about a sense of place. Whether it's created in a bedroom in St Kilda, or a Sydney studio, it speaks to where we are, how we felt and who we were. In her extraordinary anthology of Australian music *Songwriters Speak*, Ms Kruger lays bare conversations with 45 of our best songwriters, starting with Joy McKean (Slim Dusty's wife who wrote most of his hits) and concluding with the understated charm of Kasey Chambers. For Kruger, the last four years have really been a labour of L-O-V-E.

'What inspired *Songwriters Speak* was an American book called *Songwriters on Songwriting*, by a guy called Paul Zollo and it was exactly this kind of book – an in depth Q and A anthology of American singers – it really was like living through the history of American music through the songwriters.'

Kruger's book has an impressive and comprehensive list of interviewees that includes contributors as diverse as Rolf Harris and John Williamson to Daniel Johns and Nick Cave.

'Interviewing Nick was daunting, not that I was frightened. I admitted to him that I was a Nick Cave virgin. I was acutely aware that he wouldn't suffer fools lightly.'

'I had to learn how to like Nick Cave, I read his biography, I went on this journey and went to him with six pages of questions. His assistant kept saying I could only have an hour with him, but because the questions was so intelligent he gave me three hours!'

Debbie Kruger is a girl who does her homework. Something that delighted the songwriters she spoke with.

'The guys from Midnight Oil said you really have to do your homework, that's the point to this book. When I found the publisher, Lime-light, one of them said, it's



not just about the songwriters, it's about the art of the interview. I'm doing a session at the Writers Festival on just that.'

'Rob Hirst said to me at the end of my three hours: "You ask good questions",

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and Mark Seymour also said to me, "Thank you for asking intelligent questions." They are so used to people who haven't done their research – or the people that do interviews ask predictable questions like having a chat with Nick Cave and asking about his heroin addiction or PJ Harvey...'

In a sense, the interview is a test for the interviewer.

They have the opportunity to use their questions as a key that opens the door to the treasure of revelation, to reveal the sources of inspiration, or they can stand outside, buzzing on the bell, but not being let in.

'Nick's (Cave) music was a great revelation to me, even his most gothic songs are really funny – the guy has very deep relationships – a guy like that loves, he loves God, he loves his family, he's full of love..'

'And there were other revelations, like John Williamson. We would all think, what a dag, he's a friend of John Laws, he's probably right

wing... but he is the most green song writer of the bunch... he's such an environmentalist, he's just very Australian, very iconic, so it's easy to make the wrong sort of assumptions.'

Songwriters Speak echoes Deb's deep love of music history, and her penchant for music nostalgia. It was Deb's energy and enthusiasm for her subjects that really made the book happen.

'I had a bunch of interviews under my hat, because I had been working for APRA. Both Andrew Farriss and Graeham Goble wrote me letters of endorsement. I sat there with my list, and I'd go, today I'll email James Reyne, and he rang me straight away and said thank you for including me, and then there are those who are very famous, and it's a matter of going through their people and in a few instances I just kept knocking on doors.'

'The great thing about *Songwriters Speak* is that you get to hear the songwriters' voices, some are more literate than others, some are better at articulating the process of songwriting, but I think I have succeeded in capturing their voices.'

'But it was hard, I worked on it for four years. I did a lot of interviews. I didn't want to do phone interviews, I wanted them all face to face. I would record a four hour interview and it would take me a week to transcribe it. I look at it now and I'm amazed.'

'There were lots of songwriters that I wanted in the book like Michael (Hutchence), Steve Gilpin, Marc Hunter, Paul Hewson, Ted Mulry. I didn't want to lose any more before I wrote it down. I felt it was my calling to do this.'

Debbie Kruger launches *Songwriters Speak* (along with CD) at the Byron Bay Writers Festival on Sunday. Joining her at the launch will be Rob Hirst and Deborah Conway.

For more information about the creation of this important anthology, go to www.songwritersspeak.com.

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Jane holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia, UK, and an MFA in Writing (Fiction) from the USA. Australian born, she has taught and published in Europe and Asia.

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