

debbie kruger

SONGWriters SPEAK

Debbie Kruger is a familiar face to many in the local and international music industries, having written for many publications here and overseas, and as APRA's PR Manager for a few years. Her real passion lies in writing about the artists she respects and admires. This she has done with great vigour and determination in *Songwriters Speak*, an in-depth exploration of the cream of Australia's songwriting crop over the past few decades. A labour of love for over four years, Debbie is excited about the book's nationwide release this week. She has kindly taken some time to talk with TMN on some of the hurdles she had to overcome and what motivated her to complete the project (even without a research assistant!)...



You began your career as a journalist in 1986. What have been some of the highlights and achievements since this time?

"I wrote for the trade paper Variety in the late 80s and early 90s in Sydney and London, and that was great because it gave me a such a broad overview of the entertainment industry. Then I moved into PR in the 90s and had my own business based up in Byron Bay, all the while continuing to write. So for me, career highlights have varied from running publicity for major music and film festivals to just getting a great interview with somebody, which I guess leads back to *Songwriters Speak*. I think one of my greatest achievements was when I was living in LA in the late 90s and I went to interview Linda Ronstadt, who is an idol of mine, and spent five hours with her at her home going through a huge list of questions. It's really gratifying when you want to speak to somebody in-depth about their work and career and they realise very quickly that you know what you're talking about and give you the time. That's very much a trademark of this book, that I got to spend so much time with these people. I've done different things in and around the entertainment industry (particularly with music), writing for and representing artists or doing their PR, and getting the word out about great artists is what I enjoy the most."

So how did the whole idea for *Songwriters Speak* come about?

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"I just kept thinking, 'Why can't there be an Australian version of *Songwriters On Songwriting*, why can't somebody speak to our greatest musical poets and find out more about how they are inspired, how they actually craft their songs and what the stories are behind them?'"

"I read this book in 1997 called *Songwriters On Songwriting*, by an American guy called Paul Zollo, and it really changed my life. I was thinking about going to live in LA and was immersing myself in books about American music, and when I read this particular book I saw that there was a way to interview people that was really intelligent and could evoke answers much different to those you get in run-of-the mill artist interviews. That edition of *Songwriters On Songwriting* had fifty-two interviews in it but it's a much bigger edition now. I read it from start to finish, unlike most people who dip in and out of anthologies, and I felt like I'd taken a huge

journey into American songwriting. I went to

live in LA, met and befriended Paul

(who was editing a magazine called *Performing Songwriter*)

and he asked me to do a few interviews with songwriters in America.

When I moved back to Australia he asked me to interview Kasey Chambers, who was just starting to break over in America with

The Captain. It was around this time that I also started working for

APRA as their Communications & Public

Affairs Manager (editing the *APrap Journal* and interviewing songwriters and composers). And I just kept thinking, 'Why can't there be an Australian version of *Songwriters On Songwriting*, why can't somebody speak to our greatest musical poets and find out more about how they are inspired, how they actually craft their songs and what the stories are behind them?'"

I talked about the idea to a few people in the industry and everyone was incredibly supportive, so I embarked on this huge journey which, when I think about it now, was really crazy!"

You've been working on this book for about four years now, what did you find were some of your biggest hurdles and have you come out of the whole experience having learnt some important lessons?

"A few of the songwriters are of such a stature that you have to go through their 'people', and occasionally when I had to go through various people - whether it was personal assistants, publicists or managers (and I'm talking about major international songwriters) - there were stumbling blocks. For example, Nick Cave's personal assistant was a really sweet girl but she did everything in her power to dissuade me from interviewing him. When I finally did get to Nick the first thing he said to me was, 'Is this like that American book *Songwriters On Songwriting*?' and I said, 'Exactly!' and he said, 'I thought so and I really wanted to do this interview, I always wanted to do it.' But generally I approached most of the songwriters directly because I knew them through my work at APRA or people knew who I was. Other times I just had the confidence to approach people I didn't know, and all were very receptive to it. There were a few key people I just couldn't get to no matter what I tried. But if I learned one lesson it is not to take 'No' for an answer!"

Did your musical experiences as a teenager contribute to your yearning to dig deeper into the psyches of your idols?

"Completely. There were plenty of songwriters I interviewed whose music I hadn't necessary been a fan of when I was younger but I knew they

deserved my respect, then there were others whose music I absolutely lived and breathed. I went to those interviews with perhaps a greater depth of knowledge about individual songs - for instance, I didn't have to do research for Little River Band (Glenn Shorrock and Graeham Goble) or Sherbet (Garth Porter). Having said that, I still sat down and listened to all their work in chronological order to prepare for the interviews, because when I was 16 years old I wasn't listening to how songs were crafted, I was just enjoying the whole experience. So to look back at what might have inspired those songs and then fashion intelligent and provocative questions still required some work. However, part of the joy was actually experiencing the music of songwriters whose work I had not been a fan of or had avoided for whatever reason - Nick Cave is a classic. Then there were others, such as Midnight Oil or Mental As Anything, who I hadn't realised had made such a great impression on me. Of course I would hear their songs on the radio, but I never realised how much their music was embedded in my subconscious. I've loved music since I could turn on a radio, so without a doubt all my experiences of being a music fan went into the creation of this book."

Do you think the recent inaugural Hall of Fame awards will add focus to Australia's musical icons and in turn increase interest in your book?

"I think the timing is really good. There was a really interesting piece Bernard Zuel wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald after the Hall of Fame awards, about there finally being an increased respect for our past, which I guess started with Long Way To The Top. Australia has always been a little bit embarrassed about our cultural past, and as I say in Garth Porter's chapter, time has smiled quite fondly on Sherbet. I think Howzat! is one of the greatest pop songs of the 70s.

There is definitely a historical focus in my book because I was more interested in talking to more established songwriters than younger songwriters who perhaps haven't had enough time to think

about how they craft songs, since they're still in the early throes of success and exploring ways to do it. I was interested in longevity.

So yes, the Hall of Fame in its new format (and I hope it's done like that every year) is a fabulous thing to honour the living history of our music.

All the songwriters in my book are still working songwriters. They might not have the same level of commercial success now that they once did but they all believe they're writing better songs than ever - yet radio won't play them. Unless you want to go to an RSL club you won't get to hear these artists much and even then the audience only wants the greatest hits. So

there's a recurring theme throughout the book, right through to songwriters who were big in the 80s, about

appreciating their work today when they really believe they're writing better songs than ever. James Reyne will always be best known for Reckless but, as he says, the songs he writes now are probably much better."

It is quite a unique book in that it's like a 'one stop shop' for any Australia music fan. How did you narrow down the list to just forty-five? I know you unfortunately missed out on Slim Dusty...

"I literally just missed out on Slim because he passed away but I spoke to [his wife] Joy McKean who is every bit as important as a songwriter and such a wonderful person. When I originally drew up my list there were over a hundred names but then I whittled it down to sixty-two and that's what I took with my book proposal to publishers. I got the deal on the basis of that but because of the desired length and depth of interviews, as I progressed it became clear that it was impossible. As it is, my publisher went a hundred pages over what they'd originally planned. It really came down to who I thought were the essentials. I know that

people will have some ideas about who's been left out. It's like when I did the publicity for the 10 Best Australian Songs for APRA's 75th anniversary and everyone had an opinion about what song should be there. If this goes well and we do an expanded edition down the track, I could immediately think of ten more people to interview. But yes, I do think it is a 'one stop shop' and most of the key players in Australian music over the last half-century are in there. And I'll take it on the chin if anyone has criticism about who's been left out."

How did the idea of a double CD compilation (also called Songwriters Speak and featuring various tracks from interviewees) come about? Did somebody from FMR approach you or did you shop the idea around the various record companies?

"Dean McLachlan asked me if FMR could do it. When I was looking for research material for the book, I went to all the record companies that had product that could help me and since so many artists were involved with FMR over the years I requested a lot of music from them. In the process of this happening Dean said, 'Can we please do this as a compilation? This is an incredible project!' These days, CD compilations tied in with books and TV shows happen all the time but this one is different because Dean let me choose the tracklisting, and I wanted the focus to be the songwriters. So you do have some of the classic hits in there but you also have a lot of album cuts and particular favourites of songwriters that I spoke to. There was no way I was going to choose Eagle Rock to represent Ross Wilson. Too predictable! When I asked him what his favourite song was it was actually Cool World (one of his Mondo Rock songs). And there are even a couple of songs by overseas artists that were written by Australians. How often will you have Slim Dusty, Nick Cave, Cliff Richard, Silverchair and Sherbet all on the same CD? That's pretty wild. It was fun putting it all together."

Songwriters Speak: Conversations about creating music is published by Limelight Press. More info at www.songwritersspeak.com

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Debbie Kruger, with (L-R) members of Midnight Oil; Rolf Harris; Martin Plaza and Greedy Smith from Mental As Anything

