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Kasey Chambers : vocal style and cultural identity

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**20TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL COUNTRY MUSIC
CONFERENCE NASHVILLE TN**

KASEY CHAMBERS: VOCAL STYLE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

LEIGH CARRIAGE

‘You know things are going to hell when the freshest young voice in American roots music is an Australian.’

Rolling Stone (Sheffield, 2001: 73)

Kasey Chambers is redefining the image and sound of alternative country music. Her style is challenging notions of cultural musical identity and the vocal characteristics that are associated with a particular environment. The ways in which Chambers approaches Country Music and the connection to the development of cultural identity is reflected in her music. **The connection of what?**

In this paper I will touch on the phenomenon of her broad Australian-speaking accent and her American accented singing voice. The success of Chambers’ sound raises vital issues about the national character in Australian popular music. It is an interesting representation of the globalisation of international music culture that an Australian singer is being so highly regarded in the North American press as representing the latest (re-) incarnation of American roots/country music.

In order to understand and comment comprehensively on the implications of foreign sources, cultural influences and their combined impact on new practices, in particular with Chambers, a thorough analysis must include music and industry marketing, musical fashion and tastes, lyrics and musical style, instrumentation, arranging and orchestration.

My interest and expertise is in the vocal area, therefore I am approaching this paper from the perspective of a vocal lecturer as well as from an industry perspective. I will be focusing on a more specific analysis of Chambers’ vocal style, examining her vocal characteristics, sound production, vocal qualities and enunciation, and investigating why this voice and her music appeal to so many here and in Australia.

A secondary theme of the paper is Chambers’ vocal style in relation to cultural identity. The consensus amongst colleagues of mine who research country music is that analytical studies of the music itself cannot be separated from an examination of the cultural aspects. Phil Hayward’s book, “Heartlands,” gives particular focus to this.

While I discuss aspects of authenticity in terms of Chambers’ vocal style, it’s taken for granted that any notion of authenticity can be contested in a cultural context, however this is not the focus of this paper.

Of particular relevance to cultural identity with regard to Chambers are the influences in her formative years as a child growing up in the Nullarbor desert in Australia, and the unusual lifestyle of her family. The land, the wide-open spaces and the relative isolation are all components that shape and characterise her voice and her music.

A united musical family with nomadic hippie tendencies, the Chambers family spent their evenings singing around the campfire, set against the backdrop of the beautiful Australian desert - the Nullarbor Plain. In the words of John Lomax III, writer of the book 'Red Desert Sky,' it was "an environment appropriate for the cultivation of a 'high lonesome' sound."

Chambers' main influences were derived from American country music. The country music capital of Nashville is at the heart of this sound. It is a natural progression, in the passing down of oral traditions, for mimicking of role models to occur, and this is apparent in Chambers' vocal style, her major influences being American artists, not Australian. Raised on timeless country classics, Chambers' self-confessed early influences were firstly her father and then such artists as Lucinda Williams, Emmylou Harris, Iris DeMent, Gram Parsons, Johnny Cash, and Hank Williams.

Quote: Out there "there wasn't any TV or radio, so it was only the tapes that my Dad bought" played as they drove in their 4-wheel drive. "My Dad gave me the impression that everybody listened to that type of music."

"The first time I was here (Nashville) I didn't really know what to expect," admits Chambers. "The type of music I'd been hearing that was coming out of Nashville in the '90's was really my type of thing." Josh Wardrop/ Staff Writer 26.2.03

More about cultural identity later?

STYLE ANALYSIS

In analysing any genre I would use these technical criteria: rhythm, melody and harmony, then more specifically register, and vocal qualities such as twang, belt, speech, glottal, techniques like cracks and cries, and melismas and ornamentations such as yodels.

Subjective responses have tended to identify two aspects of Chambers' vocal technique and praise these as special aspects of her voice. The "catch" in her voice has received regular mention. Her voice has been referred to as "notched with an unmistakable catch," (Gendron, 2001: np) that has been identified as a "million dollar attribute" by prominent Nashville critic Chet Flippo (2001: np). This vocal attribute functions rather like the (metaphorical) 'lump in the throat' of speech, when emotions affect breathing and muscular control so as to disrupt normal delivery. Used by singers such as Chambers, this conveys a sense of an impassioned (rather than dispassionate) delivery.

The second commonly remarked upon aspect is the 'girlish' nature of her voice. Writers have identified it as a "baby-soft voice" that also "purrs" (Clark, 2002: np,) a characterisation that appears premised on aspects such as the timbre of her upper register and breathy tones.

Chambers mixes up her girly sound with cries, yodels and falsetto qualities, but still produces a very twangy speech sound overall. Her rhythms are straight and consistent, somewhat predictable with very little syncopation.

NEED TO SET UP TRACK BASED ANALYSIS HERE.

Chambers has a thin, reedy sound with nasal twang quality. In the track 'Am I the Only One,' Chambers sings in speech quality incorporating more aspirate/breathy qualities than belt. Slightly less of the edgy, bright, twang sound is present, which in

turn reduces the intensity and gives the track a more subtle and laid-back feel. On this track Chambers' delivery uses devices such as scooping, bending, falling-off notes and accenting words for effect.

Typically, the 'crack' or 'catch' in the voice manifests as a vocal break, a sort of hiccup that imitates a cry. In Chambers' work, this appears at the beginning of words; listen, for instance, in "Runaway Train," to the lyrics "we won't _take_ money" – the beginning of the word "take" has a combination of glottal attack and breath-support accent that causes an audible bump in the music.

On "Not Pretty Enough," the first few text lines are sung rather lyrically, but the second phrase, "is my heart too broken," employs a catch on "heart." Further into the song, she switches registers audibly - "don't I make you laugh" is sung entirely in a breathy head voice – a differentiation of vocal register that is very striking.

How this sound works for Chambers' repertoire is as a device for emotional intensity. It also gives her a unique and recognizable sound, which is an essential attribute of an alt country artist –she *cannot* sound like anyone else, or else the ability to project an authentic narrative is hindered.

Chambers shows great dexterity and enjoyment in the Hank Williams homage "A Little Bit Lonesome," inserting country blues notes, slurring semitones from minor thirds to major and performing yodels within the chorus on the word 'Lonesome' that start on the 3rd, rise to the tonic and fall back down to the 3rd 2nd (or the 2nd 3rd) and to the tonic an octave lower.

'We were cooking sausage rolls and listening to Hank all day,' Chambers recalls. 'The next Day I was into Hank mode so I wrote 'A Little bit Lonesome'

Following on from the covers orientation of the DRB's *Hopeville* album and the subtler infusions of roots/country traditions on *The Captain and Barricades & Brickwalls* firmly identifies Chambers as an artist and skilled in contemporary roots/country songwriting and performance of the kind established as a niche market in North America and fashionable with **aficionados** overseas.

Chambers' interpretation of *Hopeville* is jam-packed with a variety of vocal qualities, colours and techniques. She cracks at the start of almost every phrase; she growls with an aspirated quality and blends in percussive scrapes and cries. What also grabs the ear is how Chambers' onomatopoeic interpretation affects so much of the lyrics. Chambers displays an array of very controlled and pitch-accurate yodels, some of which have leaps of an octave or slip in and out at rapid speeds.

REGISTER

Over the period 1992-1998 Chambers' vocal style developed in various ways. In terms of technique, the most obvious aspects are her increased breath control, allowing longer phrases, improved clarity of diction (particularly important in fast tempo songs) and her greater finesse of ornamentations (such as yodels, cries, belt, long melismas and long notes). Her upper register has extended significantly (as can be observed by her increasing use of higher keys) allowing her greater control over intonation and the ability to easily maintain vowels unobstructed by consonants. Her larynx position has increasingly shifted from the neutral position evident on early DRB recordings, where she often sings using a speech quality, to a higher larynx position with thin vocal folds, facilitating more frequent use of twangs, cries and belts.

Play excerpts of: 1991-97 including Slim and KC in the chorus 'Looking Forward Looking back' Play 'If I could'

As a vocal practitioner her selection of certain keys is interesting as it reflects her preference for keys that place her voice right in her passagio (an area camouflaged or avoided altogether)

Chambers regularly uses nasal twang qualityⁱⁱ but her approach to the duet with Slim Dusty is quite different, reducing the use of twang and including more use of head voice and other changes in her vocal technique, revealing more of her velvet vocal vocabulary. Slim Dusty is an Australian country music icon. His singing style is predominately in speech quality. He takes such a very minimal approach that some phrases are at times almost spoken. The key has been well selected to keep the register well within his speech area.

Chambers' register has a main transition around G to B below middle C, and within the transition area her tendency is to flip to other qualities. Usually she would use a brighter more nasal twang quality mixed with belt quality, or use a crack or yodel effect to utilise the transition of her register.

Eleven of the twelve tracks on *The Captain* are in 4/4 time, with *These Pines* being the exception due to its three feel (6/8). Many of the songs share common or close keys; five of the tracks are in B and three in Bb, with the remaining three in C, D and E. This aggregation around B and Bb major combined with her preferred range indicate Chambers' songwriting melodically pivots from the tonic down to the fifth and up to the octave. As a result the ranges of many songs on the album are similar to one another and harmonically these songs flow into one another, giving the overall album a secure and comfortable feel. Despite the close key range and melodic similarity of the album, the varied nature and themes of songs on the album produces a variety of styles and approaches.

Barricades and Brickwalls retains a similar orientation towards the B Keys including the title track in Bb minor and Australian number one hit single Not Pretty Enough in B Major.

ACCENT

One aspect common to Chambers' covers of songs by US country songwriters referred to above is her adaptation of intonation and pronunciation patterns from the originals (and from the genre more generally.) In her covers of US songs there is minimal evidence of any attempt to adapt the delivery to Chambers' own Australian-accented speaking voice and/or to 'Australianise' other aspects of the songs' delivery.

This is far from surprising, in the context of Australian country music, where covers of US material routinely reproduce vocal stresses and intonations present in the recorded originals and where, more generally, particular forms of US country music intonation and pronunciation are standard (and therefore unremarkable.) But for an artist who has been so widely acclaimed as a distinct Australian 'voice' in country music, this aspect merits comment. As Australian members of audiences for Kasey Chambers' concerts will have experienced, particularly since the late 1990s, there has been a marked difference between her singing accent and intonation patterns and those that mark her onstage announcements and repartee with band members and audience. It can come as a surprising jolt, after enjoying a song and not even noticing the American accent, to hear the singer speak with a deep Australian accent.

In these casual spoken communications (and in radio and TV interviews) she speaks in her 'natural' Australian accent - i.e. the one she acquired through growing up with her family, interacting with wider society and the media (etc.) Here - particularly in association with her warmth, humour and down-to-earthiness - she appears as unaffectedly and quintessentially (Anglo-) 'Australian' as Slim Dusty.

Analysis of Chambers' recorded vocal performances in the 1990s reveals an increasing use of intonation and pronunciation patterns that resemble those used in US country music and US popular music more generally. The most obvious of these are the use of hard 'r' sounds, the narrowing of some vowels and the elongation and lean within words, especially on the 'a' vowel. These produce further effects, such as a move from the slightly slurred, lazy Australianised diction of her early songs to a more marked drawl.

The process of vocal development discussed in this section can be understood to represent a fairly classic musical path where a young performer develops a distinct voice through exploring and learning the vocal techniques of previous performers and experimenting with styles. In the case of Chambers' particular interests and musical background, these performers were (nearly exclusively) North American artists from either mid-20th Century country traditions or newer country roots performers allied to that tradition.

ADD MORE QUOTES

"One reason for Kasey's success in the US is simply the sound of her voice. She has a completely unique sound, even though you can sit back and hear the influences - Emmlou, Iris, Tammy Wynette, Dolly Parton, Jann Brown - Kasey still sounds like no one else." (p.c. August 2002)

"I went through a typical rebellious teenage phase where I basically listened to whatever my Dad hated," Chambers says. "But I always came back to country because of the passion... the heart and soul of the music. It reminds me of my roots."

On the track 'Strong Enough to Bend' Chambers' switches out of her regular vocal persona that serves to highlight the constructed nature of her persona. Reference to her earliest recordings with DRB is illuminating in this regard. Diamantina Drover, a track on the DRB's first EP, *A Matter Of Time*, recorded (in their lounge room) when she was sixteen, is particularly notable (for the present discussion.) Showing a powerful vocal quality from an early age, Chambers sings the song in a style appropriate to a standard bush band performance, mixing elements, accents and timbres from English, Irish and Australian folk music traditions. She enunciates words such as "can't" and "last" with an English inflection ('carn't' and 'larst') and later intermingles these with more drawn-out, typically Australian vowel sounds such as "stand," "rain" and "away." Throughout the track she retains a speech-like voice until the lowest note of the song, F natural, pushes her unusually low in her range, producing an aspirated quality.

...alternative voice(s) to that which has come to define her style... in the late 1990s and early 2000s. **Where does this belong?**

Chambers can be seen to have learnt and adopted a vocal style closely similar to that of those US roots/country singers she cites as influences, and who's own vocal styles and personas are seen as 'authentic' and 'honest' by devotees of the genre. Together with her chosen singing voice, the sincerity and down-to-earth personality she projects on-stage - via her Australian-accented speaking voice, humour, dress, appearance and behaviour - gives her professional personality an aura of honesty

and authenticity that is not compromised by her adoption of a singing accent that originates from outside Australia.

CULTURAL IDENTITY (CONVERSATION WITH BILL CHAMBERS)

Incomplete. The covers of the '50's country music in Australia brought the problem to the fore what was authentic and what was not. With global communication and the massed export of American culture, those lines are blurry and cultural identity is much less clearly defined.

ELABORATE ON THIS THEME.

Lyrics:

I have observed that the Americanisms in her singing accent and techniques stand alongside her use lyrical vocabulary setting up a new imagery. For example 'sidewalks' 'freight train'

In relation to many critics feedback on Chambers

REWRITE:

Chambers' highly accomplished fusion and reinvigoration of classic country musical strands has been one key element in her US profile; the other has been the particular promotion and 'mythologisation' of her geographical and family roots. The reference to a 'mythology' does not imply any falsification of the origins of that mythology. Rather, it identifies the manner in which a set of ideas, impressions and associations have come to occupy a prominent place in her promotion and perception in the US that allows her Australianness to be accommodated within broader US/country myths (rather than excluding her from their symbolic order.)

Leading to her roots Chambers is cautious to retain her sense of artistic integrity and control with her recordings and has been prepared to forego an American release rather than compromise by bringing in a name producer and session musicians. She has stuck with the same studio team: Nash produces, Bill (her father) plays Dobro and slide and her regular touring band backs her up. Asylum/Warner music in America and EMI in Australia has been prepared to release it, without additional production.

As Nash says 'Country music is supposed to be the most organic, for-the-people music, yet it's become the most clinical, boring music ever. Even Pop music's got more soul than most of Nashville stuff these days.' 'Nashville wastes so much money, they get a record and tell you, "we'll get you another producer and we'll rewrite the songs." In the end it all sounds the same.'

RELATE THIS TO CHAMBERS' REPRESENTING HER ROOTS HONESTLY

Conclusion:

Taking up and experimenting with the techniques heard in the last track, Kasey has produced a style that allows her music to reach crossover audiences in the global circuits of country music — a hybrid, travelling voice.

Delivering her music with a compelling sound and passionate performances on her recordings, Kasey's short phrasing adds to the spoken honest and hearty appeal. As Robert Christgate from the Village Voice New York states: 'If the voice doesn't get you - you're not me, and you're also not a whole bunch of other people.'

Chambers represents interesting phenomena in terms of Australian/American vocalisation and affectation. Questions of locality, source and background are inherent within the subtext and production of her sound. Her solo success has proven so interesting that Nashville music writer John Lomax III has written a book about the family's odyssey. Will there be a film next? Her story is unique, a family isolated and living in the great expanse of the Australian desert whilst listening to the sound of American country music. These are the intrinsic ingredients that are necessary to the development of the sound that is Kasey Chambers.

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ⁱ Chet Flippo quoted on <<http://www.kaseychambers.com/biography.asp>>

ⁱⁱ Twang requires great vocal effort and can lead to laryngeal constriction. This may not be just the result of her influences but also the result of her exposure and adaptation to live performance situations with poor amplification.