

'Fireflies in a jar' - an interview with Megan Washington

By Megan Spencer

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There are those among us whose minds work differently when it comes to storytelling. Rather than sit down and 'tell a story', they sit down and and 'tell a song'.

These people are 'hardwired' for song. When stories start spinning in their heads and hearts, poetry spills out (not prose) which, coupled with music, become 'lyrics'. Spontaneously and simultaneously music generates from within their imaginations to accompany each word. Melody and rhythm entwine themselves around phrases, until they fuse to form verses, choruses, repeat; and then become... song.

Megan Washington aka 'Washington' is one of these enviable 'right-brained people', a latter-day songstress or "chanteuse" as she is often referred to, not only in the media but by herself as well. (On Washington's MySpace under 'About Me' you will find, "Chanteuse: noun (literary): a female singer, especially one who sings on the stage in a theatre or bar, where elegant people fall about in frantic and frenzied splendour.")

Since emerging onto the national stage just over 12 months ago, people have been swooning over the sound of Washington's voice and music. But it is her songwriting that leaves its mark; strong, poetic, narrative, with a distinct emotional tone. It smacks of a discipline in advance of her 24 years and defines her presence within the Australian musical landscape.

"Songwriting for me sits somewhere between therapy, memory and fantasy," says Megan, fresh from her first stint at Splendour In The Grass, where she got to belt out songs from her just-released debut album, 'I Believe You Liar'. For Megan songwriting "comes from someplace very innate; somewhere that is very quiet and still. It's a craft, something that you have to work on to get better at, and that usually means a lot of solitary hours."

Her dedication has paid off with a rare accolade previously afforded only to Silverchair, Missy

Higgins and Eskimo Joe in Australia; music publisher AMPD* have released the songbook of 'I Believe You Liar' to coincide with the release of the CD. Usually songbooks come *after* the success of an album. CD and book "dual-releases" as such, are rare. AMPD have taken this unusual step however, such is their belief in Megan's talent as a contemporary local artist.

A happy accident as it turned out for Catherine Gerrard, Executive Director of Publishing & Copyright at AMPD, who was a fan of Megan Washington's even before she had anything to do with the songbook. She remembers the first time she heard a Washington song. "...It was 'Clementine'. I thought it was fantastic and immediately found out more about Washington. I wanted to print the song straightaway! At that time, Washington had been signed to Albert Music, but AMPD did not yet represent Albert Music. So, it was an exciting time - at the beginning of this year - to sign the deal with Albert Music and therefore be in a position to publish Washington's sheet music."

For budding songwriters songbooks provide great insight into music. Catherine says the core market is "People who play music or want to learn to play music. Sometimes it is adults who used to learn as a child, and want something fun to play. Other times a songbook can be part of a student's learning repertoire. Fans of the artist also love to have the songbook - even if they can't read music!"

Full circle for Washington, who "definitely" used songbooks in her music education growing up - and beyond. "I remember what it was like to not be able to work songs out. That's a really important part of your development as a musician - being able to connect what you hear and what you play. I had a Ben Folds 5 songbook, a bunch of Alan Menken songbooks, I also had a George songbook for 'Polyserena'. Actually my old housemate and I bought a 'Disney Duets' songbook just a couple of months ago. We wanted to learn to play 'Under The Sea'. Four hands on the piano sounds so cool and funny."

While it's easy to define a bad song, defining a good song is more elusive. Not for Washington. She says a good song is "the alchemy between lyrics, colour and harmony. Three separate elements combining to create something greater than themselves. Have you ever read the lyrics to a song you love, only to find that the lyrics alone aren't that amazing? I have. Fuck, some of my own lyrics aren't that amazing, that's for sure. But that's okay because sometimes the perfect word is a wrong word that only works because of its musical context. That's the brilliant thing about songwriting, it's never perfect."

"From time to time some holy song will come to you from nowhere and just download itself into your brain," Megan reflects, "but I need to be constantly working at writing in order to be ready for those songs when they come. Ready to catch them and trap them in my voice recorder... Like fireflies in a jar."

But being a good songwriter means never straying far from it; it's not just some magical gift that is handed to you. You have to respect the master - or mistress - and keep working and learning. She admires Rufus Wainwright, Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson as songwriters; "I am inspired by their faithfulness to their own truth. That's rarer than anything."

Rare.. a word you're sure to hear more of around Megan Washington, 'song-teller'....

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