

FEATURE:

NASH-VILLE



Nash Chambers works on music for the love of it. The only ambition he seems to have is to make great music, and he does it well.

Text: Mark O'Connor



▶ One fine morning earlier this year I took the F3 out of Sydney and headed north, following the motorway up through the sandstone cliffs and terraces of the Hawkesbury River while pondering two things: the acoustic properties of a shipping container, and landscape. Not the dramatic contours of my immediate surroundings, but rather the vast, empty silence of a more remote location – the Nullarbor Plain.

Specifically, I wondered how a kid who had grown up roaming the Nullarbor – “the middle of nowhere, no roads, no nothing” – shooting foxes, could one day go on to become a successful record producer, sound engineer, record label boss and artist manager.

If his directions proved reliable I hoped to rendezvous with him before lunchtime and find the answer to this and other mysteries.

The grab bag of CDs on the seat beside me provided an eclectic soundtrack to these ruminations – albums by Kasey Chambers, Troy Cassar-Daley, Archie Roach, Jimmy Barnes, Shane Nicholson and, of particular interest, the recent *Rattlin' Bones* album from now husband and wife team, Chambers & Nicholson, which recently debuted at No.1 on the national charts. For the most part, this was country music. These records had seen the Nullarbor kid four times awarded *Producer of the Year* by the Country Music Association of Australia. Some of it may be pop rock, but however pigeonholed, in whatever category the dozen or so ARIAs awarded to this body of work, the producer of these records would call all of it “roots” music.

A right hand turn off the freeway would take me into the country music enclave of the NSW Central Coast, home to the highest concentration of Australia's country musicians and artists. Instead, I exit left as instructed, and head west toward the tiny hamlet of Peats Ridge, after which mobile phone coverage ceases as promised. From there I make my winding way down into the Lower Hunter Valley, past citrus orchards and horse stud farms, until somewhere up a dirt road, in an otherwise picturesque setting of rolling rural acreage I encounter the incongruous subject of my earlier contemplation – the shipping container.

It rests as though marooned beside a large green shed where smoke drifts from a chimney. Out front is a muddy 4WD ute and a five-metre fishing boat on a trailer. I have arrived at Foggy Mountain Studios, the latest incarnation, albeit still a work in progress, of what was once 'Beach House' – the music production facility and music business hub of producer, Nash Chambers. Brother of Kasey. Producer, front of house engineer and manager for same. Label boss of Essence music. Fisherman.

I meet Nash – a man of plain speaking and unadorned delivery (consistent, it occurs to me, with his production style) – and his family in the big green shed, which for now serves as the family home but which, as is apparent from the timber vocal booth located in the main bedroom, has been built as a studio.

The actual studio hardware, outboard gear and console, has been compressed and compacted into – as you may have guessed by now – the shipping container. Not in storage, but set up and fully operational.



With tea made, we adjourn to the container where we spend the next several hours in a conversation that ranges far, but begins with the questions that had occupied my thoughts on the journey here, one of which had occurred to Nash himself. “I’ve been on tour in America and ended up in Times Square in New York City and thought to myself, ‘I used to be out on the Nullarbor. How did I get here?’”

But first – why a shipping container?

SELF CONTAINED

It was while living in a rented beach house in far North Queensland last year, “catching Barramundi from the front doorstep,” as Nash puts it, that the idea for the shipping container was hatched. “By the end of 2006 we’d had an amazing run with Kasey’s career, but we were burned out and needed a break. So I packed up the family and went up to the Daintree for six months. I flew down for a couple of projects, including working on a record for Archie Roach with Shane Howard, but it was essentially time out to recharge the batteries. That’s where I started building this. I bought the container up there and lined the inside of it. I had my mate Worm down here going back to triple check the measurements on the desk time and time again... ‘Are you sure it’ll fit?’. Turns out we had three centimetres to spare! We got it in through the double doors at the front of the container, using dollies.”

With his entire audio arsenal somehow crammed into this relatively confined space, it’s surprisingly comfortable. The centerpiece is the desk.

“It’s an early ’70s vintage API console with all the

original 550A EQs, which are highly sought after. I sourced it in LA through [Mixmasters’] Mick Wordley. It has GML Automation which I had installed when I got it. I’ve got a rack of API pre’s that I cart around with me too; I’m a bit of an API fan.”

Nash confesses that technically the container is by no means ideal, and there are obvious physical constraints in terms of recording. “But I really like it. I love cool, funky places. I just wanted something small that I could move around, maybe even set up for mobile recording, put it on the back of a truck and drive it to a music festival or something. I just wanted to do it. I gave it a go and it’s been great. I like trying different things. I get a bit bored with just the standard whatever.”

BEACH HOUSE

This experimental approach to things emerges as a recurring motif in our conversation, with a work ethic that involves “taking an educated guess” or “just keep doing things ‘til it sounds okay.”

Nash’s container is the latest in a series of makeshift studios that have been variously credited on albums as ‘Beach House’, a title which refers to “basically wherever me and my gear were set up at the time. Having finally moved away from the coast, I’ve changed the name to Foggy Mountain.” Chambers left the Central Coast and bought the 100-acre property here last November after returning from his FNQ sabbatical.

“I think environment’s one of the most important things to making a good record. Kasey’s first album, *The Captain* was recorded in a friend’s house on

Norfolk Island. We loved the place and the people but it was also the isolation that drew us there. For me, it’s very hard to drive through two hours of traffic, walk into a studio with black walls and go, ‘right, now be creative!’ It was the same with Jimmy’s album. (Nash recently produced Jimmy Barnes’ *Out In The Blue* album at Barnes’ Sydney home.) It was in his house; obviously a good environment for him. We could have gone down the road to 301 but it wouldn’t have been the same. We’d stop and Jane would cook us beautiful Thai dinners and Sam Neill would pop in or Diesel was always hanging ‘round. It was a good vibe. I don’t like cities, never have. I grew up on the Nullarbor so I figure I’ve come a long way as it is.”

For the first 10 years of Nash’s life the Chambers’ family spent six months of the year fox shooting out on the Nullarbor Plain. They lived out of a Toyota Landcruiser troop carrier with bunks in the back and a box trailer behind. “At the time we didn’t know any different, we were kids, but it was an amazing way to grow up.”

In the summer season the family would return to a small fishing town on the South Australian coast where his father was a fisherman. “All our family were crayfishermen. This was back before crayfish were worth anything. After dad got out of the crayfish business and into the music game they became big money. So while the rest of the family made plenty of money, we became bum musicians! But we had a lot more fun and saw a lot more of the country than they did. If dad had kept his cray license, we wouldn’t be doing what we do.”

It was while living on the Nullarbor that he and

Shane Nicholson's new album, *Familiar Ghosts* was mixed by Nash Chambers at Foggy Mountain Studios.



“I’m conscious of not using the same gear, the same techniques, same vocal chain. I don’t want to make the same record I made last time.”

sister Kasey got into music through father Bill Chambers, sitting round the campfire singing old country songs. There was little else to do for entertainment. “Dad was a music fanatic. He grew up on country music, but with a lot of Jackson Browne and other stuff as well. Jim Croce’s *Operator* is one of the first songs I can remember dad singing. Jackson Browne is still one of my favourite artists. In fact, I struggle to find a lot of new music that can compete with those records.” More on that later...

TWO ADATS & A MACKIE

When the Nullarbor chapter ended the family formed the Dead Ringer Band and began touring around, with Nash playing drums. As the band developed they ventured into the studio but a series of frustrating experiences drove them to buy some gear of their own and set up a studio in two tiny rooms beneath their house on the NSW Central Coast, where they had by then based themselves.

That first studio consisted of two ADATS and a Mackie desk, bankrolled by his crayfisherman uncle. Starting out, Nash barely knew how to plug it in. “We had no idea. Dad and I argued for the first couple of years because neither of us knew what we were doing! It was just trial and error. But I’m one for always giving something a go. I bought an old Telefunken V72 valve preamp which I think I’ve still got somewhere, and an Audio-Technica 4033 microphone. I just made sure I bought really good gear. I’d wait and save until I could buy an 1176 – and I’ve still got that 1176. Early recordings were mostly of the Dead Ringer Band with a lot of low budget bits and pieces for other people. Admittedly, a lot of it wasn’t great and you often look back and cringe. But it was a great place to learn. *The Captain* was probably my first serious recording with a reasonable budget, signed to a major label – my first shot at something.”

The Captain went triple platinum. It’s follow up, *Barricades and Brickwalls* went seven-times platinum!

THE CURRENT SETUP

The studio setup in the container is a far cry from the two ADAT 16-track setup that they flew to Norfolk Island.

“I’m using Adam S3A monitors, which I’ve only just gotten onto in the last year. I’ve found that I can listen to these loud after four or five days of tracking and still feel fresh, ears-wise. I used to use Dynaudios but found that, especially up loud, even after one day I had to get out of there. These don’t tire my ears out.

I don’t know much about the technical specs of things – they either work and sound good or they don’t. They’re like a car: I’ll check the oil and water but that’s about it, I’m not too keen on lifting the bonnet. If they don’t work I take them to somebody to fix.”

Nash speaks of two indispensable items in the audio arsenal: “If I had to have one compressor I’d probably have an [ELI] Distressor, just for the variety of sounds. You can get just a really great clean vocal thing or stick them on a snare or guitar and use a couple of distortion buttons. Just changing the attack or release can change the sound. And I love the Sansamp.” He points to a rack of four of them. “They just create a f**ked up depth to things. You can get really creative. Because I don’t play an instrument, in this world this is where I get to play. And yet, with all this gear, you can enhance a performance but I still believe it’s what you put down that counts most. Going down it’s gotta be 90% there. As the old saying goes, ‘you can’t polish a turd.’”

PUTTING IT DOWN

“For me it’s very much about the group of songs, and the musicians. I rely heavily on musicians. I can’t write music and I don’t want to, and don’t try to, which I think affords me a better perspective on the song. And while I can get through a song on most instruments I can’t really play anything very well, and I kind of like that too. While I can understand things from the bass player or drummer’s perspective, I don’t ever want to get too focused on that – I’d rather look at the whole. I’m not a big fan of hot licks.

“I virtually don’t do any pre-production. I just make sure I’ve got the songs, and the right musicians, most of whom I might have worked with before, so I know their talents and capabilities. Once we’re in, that first five or six days of tracking is it.

“I like demos to be just acoustic guitar and vocals so I can hear the songs. Sometimes I’ll hear a song and end up with a list of ideas. Often those things don’t work but as they say, nothing ventured nothing gained. You’ve got to give it a go. For some songs I’ll have no ideas and in that situation I’m just keen to see where it goes when we play it. My strength is in other people. I don’t want to tell Mark Punch how to play the guitar. I’m happy to direct him but I want him to give me his first impression. Also, it’s very much a mood thing – I don’t just choose players that can play, they also have to be compatible. For every record it’s a struggle between trying not to go back over old ground by using the same players every time, and lacking confidence in the people you’ve chosen, or what you’re going to get out of them. These days I’m not so concerned about it – providing they’re competent musicians, I’m pretty confident I’ll get something out of them. But I’m conscious of not using the same gear, the same techniques, same vocal chain. I don’t want to make the same record I made last time.”

RATTLIN’ BONES

The *Rattlin’ Bones* project was Nash’s idea. It was he who suggested that Kasey Chambers and Shane Nicholson – already husband and wife – pool their artistic resources. “Obviously I’d worked with Kasey and Shane separately as solo artists. Musically I’m a big fan of them both and they’re big fans of each other. Kasey had sung on a track on Shane’s first solo album. There was a chemistry between them you couldn’t match. Rather than a record where each of the two artists guests on each other’s songs, it was conceived that they make a record together from the ground up as one act, writing and singing the songs together. That way the two voices would

be intertwined with each other, so to speak, so that half the time you couldn’t tell who’s singing what.”

Nash cites Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons as having been an influence on the two and a reference point.

Nash co-produced *Rattlin’ Bones* with Shane, as he had done his two previous solo albums. “Shane’s a really talented guy, not just as a writer and singer, but he has a great musical brain on him. I think he was a bit unsure of me initially because I was supposedly a country dude, and we had some very intense moments and nearly didn’t get through it at times. But I think we have quite a good push-pull thing. For every project you try and work out what your job is, and with Shane it was trying to get him not to labour over things. In the past he’s tended to be overly obsessive. He has lots of ideas and wants to get it perfect. Saying that, he has a very different approach to things now.

“With *Rattlin’ Bones* it was pretty much all live tracks. We went down to Barney’s place the day after Christmas and spent seven or eight days there and that was pretty much it. We set things up in different rooms but left the doors open, not guarding against spill – in fact, quite the opposite, because it was very much about getting the overtones from everything else. For one or two of the songs we set the whole band up in the same room in a circle and just did it live. Shane was playing guitar most of the time and did a lot of the drums and stuff too, so we had Kasey singing both their parts as a guide vocal while the track was going down. Then we recorded their vocals live with the two of them set up in a room together, with two [Neumann] U67s so I had control over each vocal. Usually we captured the performances in one or two takes. I think we had a drum kit on one song, *Sweetest Waste Of Time*, which I think was kick and rimshot – and that was it. We didn’t want to use anything conventional.”

Nash proceeds then to take down a mangled piece of tin hanging on the wall. “In fact this was one of the snares on the record (laughs). It used to be Barney’s rubbish bin. We didn’t get too involved with overdubs on *Rattlin’ Bones* – we might have overdubbed a fiddle or something. Then I just came back here, cleaned it up a little bit and mixed it here in the container. It was a really quick process. But you spend two weeks making a record and then you’ve got 10 months of bullshit promoting it, trying to sell it!”

THE BUSINESS

Nash Chambers is not happy with the music industry, and the way a lot of music is made. He believes we live in a time of mediocrity, and that saddens him.

“I manage Kasey and I’ve had my own record label, *Essence*, so the majority of my time these days is taken up with the business side of things. The infrastructure’s just not there anymore to develop people. We’re in a very mediocre period and, to me, it seems like it’s getting worse. There’s almost no A&R anymore. Record companies simply cannot afford to develop artists like they used to.

“Shane Nicholson and I were talking recently and we were saying how it used to be such an amazing

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To be true to your art
form you need to know
where it’s come from
and what it’s based on.
”



Nash’s gear is quality stuff: API, UA, Apogee, Lexicon... and he does like a Sans Amp or four. But choosing snares is where things get interesting.



“
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”

thing to have a record deal. You generally had to be someone pretty special to get signed – it was a really big thing, especially signing to a major. Now with the advent of things like ProTools, while it's a great thing, it's almost too accessible, too easy. It's really taken something away. There's no quality control anymore.

“If you look at the industry now, especially in this country, most serious artists are distancing themselves from the majors, signing to smaller labels and utilising major label resources. The majors to me are like shareholder companies, that's how they operate now, and unless the numbers are ticking over for their shareholders, it's not happening. We've just moved from a major label over to Liberation, though I've got nothing but great things to say about our experiences with EMI.

“Record labels are there to *sell* music. It used to be that making a great record was enough. Now it's become; ‘Well you've made a great record but what else have you got? We need bonus songs for iTunes, Bigpond's got another competition so they need a bonus track as well, and the Daily Telegraph'll do a front page thing but we've gotta give them a free download.’

“Budgets are smaller now and I couldn't make the record for a new artist that I used to. And if the first record doesn't happen he'll probably get dropped by the label. He may not hit his stride until his third record, but that'll probably be recorded in his bedroom. So he won't have had that coaching or that A&R, and that opportunity for development. And unless it sells a million copies who f**king cares if you make *Running On Empty*. It's not about heritage and culture and the whole music thing anymore.

“The individual song thing is a big issue for me. I struggle with the fact that someone can get on the internet and skip through tracks, hear 10 seconds of a song and say ‘I like this one, I don't like that one.’ I don't make songs, I make records. It's a story in 12 songs. The big dreary ballad at the end of the album isn't going to get a look in. It'll be the catchy pop thing every time. Whereas my favourite records are often those where it's not until the tenth listen that the penny drops. You can go into HMV now and they'll burn you a compilation of the songs you like. There's more music available now than ever, and yet there's almost nothing to make the hair stand up on the back of your neck. There's no meat and potatoes left anymore, it's all fast food. That's not heritage, that's not what you can hand down to the next generation. There's no foundation to base things on. Most young country music artists wouldn't have a clue who Hank Williams was, for instance. To be true to your art form you need to know where it's come from and what it's based on.

“It's not *special*, what we do anymore. I mean, it *is* to me, especially to the standard that it should be done. But in today's world everything's on a computer, and we're all like kids in a lollyshop – we have no boundaries. That's the way I view ProTools. I heard someone saying recently that, to do a mix, you put everything on it and then start taking things off. For me, you put nothing on it and then ask ‘what does it need?’

“To me ProTools is just a great editing two-inch machine. It's great for editing and some of the plug-ins are good, but I'd still rather sit in front of an old desk with some outboard gear. Nowadays the younger generation would rather see that LA2A (he points to the real thing) on a computer screen. Over the years I've bought *this* stuff rather than that stuff (the computer) – and I'm *still* paying it off – whereas a lot of people will spend their money on plug-ins and mix it all in the box. But it's not ultimately about the sound quality of an API versus mixing in a box, or about whether you record to tape or not – it's about your approach, how you go in. Even with Jimmy's record we discussed recording to tape. Though we used ProTools I suggested that we approach it *like* we were recording to tape. And that means not looking at the computer screen. When we're tracking I like having an assistant. I love engineering and producing and I don't want to look at the f**king computer.

“There's something about the whole visual thing that's taken a lot of music out of what we do, watching music rather than listening to it. What does it *look* like? Who f**king cares! It shouldn't be like that. And to just mix in the box – there are guys that can do it but overall it doesn't sound wonderful. I love analogue consoles because there's nothing like sitting at a desk and grabbing a fader. It's not just what it does and what it sounds like – it's the fact of it. It's about having something that puts you in a mindset that forces you to be creative in a certain way. That was partly why we took the desk down to Jimmy's place. We toyed with mixing the album at 301 or sending it overseas to someone like Tchad Blake (of whom I'm a huge fan). But Jimmy wanted me to mix it, and I just can't sit there with a f**king mouse moving digital faders and EQs – it just doesn't make sense in my brain.”

LESS IS MORE

In the decade since *The Captain* got the ball rolling in 1999, Nash appears to have done relatively few projects, instead preferring to record multiple albums and develop ongoing relationships with a small, focused group of artists – sister Kasey, Troy Cassar-Daley and Shane Nicholson.

“I want to work with great people. I'd rather look back at 10 great artists I got to work with on great albums than look back at a 100 No.1s. I've had No.1s and won ARIAs and it's nice to get a pat on the back, but it doesn't make me feel warm and fuzzy or put the hairs up on the back of my neck like when I hear Kasey or Shane sing *One More Year* (from *Ratlin' Bones*), which is incredible.”

BACK TO THE BIG SMOKE

Late afternoon shadows fall across Nash's 100 acres as I make ready to leave Foggy Mountain Studios. I observe a handful of white ducks making slow ripples on the surface of a small dam near the house, and remark upon the tranquility of the scene. “Yeah, we've actually been losing a few of them to foxes.”

I pull out onto the dirt road home musing that those foxes may just have picked on the wrong record producer!

POSTSCRIPT

When I spoke briefly with Chambers again recently he seemed understandably upbeat. *Ratlin' Bones* won Best Country Album at this year's ARIAs, he's mixed Shane Nicholson's new solo album *Familiar Ghosts*, and is now out on tour with him doing FOH.

Foggy Mountain studios has finally moved out of the container and into the shed, where he's just finished tracking a new album for his father, Bill Chambers. The family has had to move up one end of the house, but he's just cleared a site 50 yards from the shed where they'll soon build another house.

Perhaps more significantly he's been doing some work A&Ring and developing artists for Liberation. He's just wrapped up sessions at Sing Sing for new alt country artist, Matt Joe Gow, and is about to start work with Ella and Jessie Hooper's new band, The Verses – “a lot more rootsy than their previous incarnation, Killing Heidi.” He's even been reworking a track from urban trio Bliss 'n' Eso and is looking forward to recording another album with Jimmy Barnes early next year.

I observe that there seems to have been a ‘branching out’ since his time up north, with a more diverse palette of work coming his way.

“I'm actively seeking more of that these days. I guess I have a different approach now. I like recording different things, different sounds, different ways. Trash cans! Whatever gives a record character.

“Part of the reason for our break, both Kasey and me, was to get re-inspired. You can only do the same thing over and over for so long. I just needed to get out. It wasn't just the recording side. It was the business side as well. The industry is so different now, and while things aren't necessarily in good shape, especially economically, it's a great time to record in the sense that anything goes and anything's possible.” ■