



# Difficult Woman

**R**enee Geyer's new album, *Difficult Woman*, is the cause for bubbly enthusiasm one doesn't usually associate with the notoriously "difficult" Australian singer.

Working with Paul Kelly, which was a dream come true, Renee was asked to record Kelly's song 'Foggy Highway' for the ABC. She came home one night to an answerphone message from Paul Kelly in Los Angeles.

"He's very shy," says Renee. "He sounded like he'd had a couple of drinks. He was in awe of the rendition. I sat on my bed for an hour playing the message over and over again. 'When you get there give me a call,' he said."

Both Geyer and Kelly were recording for Melbourne's Mushroom Records in the 80s, but they met to collaborate in Los Angeles.

"I wouldn't have had the guts to ask him before I lived in LA," explains Renee.

One of the songs Kelly wrote for Geyer is the title track 'Difficult Woman'.

"It relates to a lot of women," says the singer. "It's more 'a complicated woman', but people have always had that perception of me."

You wouldn't describe your music career as 'easy'?

"I've had a ball — it's been very easy! It's the nature of the beast. If you're going to be a musician, you're in for a rough ride. I've been doing the same thing all the time, I just haven't been visible. I've been 'out' in my mental condition, but not in a musical sense. It's been colourful. I've only just started to come into my own as an artist."

Looking back at her recordings, Renee says: "In retrospect, I'm proud of my work. I've never been lucky picking songs. I've sung some stupid songs, rubbishy songs." Renee quotes a reviewer: "She is so great she can even sing the telephone book." On some of those albums, I did. So many times I've had to throw an album together because it's time to do the album, then do the tour."

Renee is a frequent flier to New Zealand to sing jingles for advertising man Murray Grindlay. Renee sings TV adverts for Baileys, Telecom, Lotto and Captain Morgan. At times Kiwis have complained

about the work going to a foreign singer.

"I get asked to do it. I'm flattered to be asked. I'm not going to refuse and say: 'You should hire New Zealand people.' In Australia there's more of a stigma about singing jingles."

Naming her favourite singers Renee lists: "Billie Holiday, in modern popular singing we all owe a lot to her, Aretha [Franklin], Gladys Knight and, in terms of men, Ray Charles, Levi Stubbs [Four Tops], Donny Hathaway, Dennis Edwards — men and women, but I'd have to say, mainly black, except Dusty Springfield, George Jones and Patsy Cline. And Lulu, basically for one song, 'To Sir With Love', I think one of the most soulful songs ever written."

Whether it's soul or country, Renee says: "I go for more earthy versions of all those things."

One of the Paul Kelly tracks Renee has recorded is 'Careless'.

"I remember stopping the car when I heard 'Careless' nine years ago, before I went to the USA. I've always been a big fan of Paul's music."

It's bizarre it should take Kelly and Geyer so many years to meet and work together.

A few years ago, if your phone interview was cut off, you wouldn't hear from Renee again, this time when we're cut off, Renee rings back promptly — excusing her own good manners by saying: "I have a lot to say about this album because it means a lot to me."

For Renee, 'Foggy Highway' and the sessions that followed were a breakthrough. "It was an amazingly different thing for me to have done. It was a register of my voice I hadn't used much before."

The recording *Difficult Woman* speaks for itself. Renee continues to assert her position as one of the world's finest singers, and delight new and old fans.

Renee has good memories of her New Zealand hits and tours.

"If it wasn't for the Maori people in the North Island, I don't know where I'd be."

She thinks of Aotearoa when she gets her royalties from Mushroom Records.

"New Zealand is the bigger figure."

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