

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*Emmylou Harris  
with Buddy Miller and Kasey Chambers*

Thebarton Theatre

Emmylou Harris is surely one of the true Daughters of the American Revolution. And she has been at the centre of not just one, but several, musical insurrections. The first was in the early seventies when she teamed up with Gram Parsons, Chris Hillman and others of their Burrito brethren to make what soon came to be called country rock. After Parsons' death, it was Emmylou Harris who avenged the grievous angel with her debut treasure *Pieces of the Sky*. The rest is history - The Byrds, Linda Ronstadt, the Allmans, Doobies and well, yes, the Eagles. Nashville acquired a permanent chic and for twenty years Emmylou Harris gathered eminence measured out in Grammys and Grand Ol' Opry awards. That would have all been fine and dandy enough, but then, in 1995, she took to her career with a *Wrecking Ball*.

Teaming up with producer Daniel Lanois, she co-wrote new material and gathered an assortment of songs from Neil Young, Hendrix, Dylan, Anna McGarrigle, Steve Earle, Lucinda Williams and Gillian Welch. The *Wrecking Ball* album was faithfully Emmylou, the shimmering voice sounding better than ever, but the mix was new. Swirling layers of grungy but sweetly melancholic guitar replaced that old Nashville twang, the drumming was more limber, and the vocal harmonies sounded as though Phil Spector had taken over air traffic control. It was, and is, an intriguing, haunting sound and it opened up the country idiom for all kinds of new experimentation.

It is very fitting, then, that Emmylou Harris is touring with innovators such as guitarist Buddy Miller and rising Australian singer Kasey Chambers. In fact, it is Buddy Miller, mainstay of Harris's band Spyboy, who opens the proceedings with a short set drawn from albums which tell it all - *Poison Love, Cruel Moon, Your Love and Other Lies*. Nobody gets out alive in country music. In his denim shirt, his grey tufty hair sticking out from under his trucker's cap, Buddy Miller is as down to earth as he is distinctive. He has been called the Richard Thompson of country music and the tag fits.

Kasey Chambers follows, accompanied by father Bill, and Adelaide guitarist Kim Walton. Dressed in red crushed velvet, her hair in a punky thatch, Chambers is the new wave of country music. Her vocals have the assurance of a singer steeped in the sounds from an early age, a junior Dolly Parton with even that touch of helium in the upper register. Chambers starts from the heartbreak repertoire - *Cry like a Baby* and *The Flower* and then the band hits the pedal with *Barricades* and *Brick Walls*, the title song from her forthcoming album, and a full-tilt *Freight Train*. The set closes with *The Captain*, of course, and *We're All Gonna Die Some Day*. Well, some day. But before that happens, the talented Kasey Chambers is heading for some serious success .

Spyboy takes the stage and Emmylou joins them. She is still a striking figure - belle of the wrecking ball - in her calf-length rhinestone boots and black ruffle skirt. Toting an ornately decorated Gibson she opens with *The Pearl*, one of her new songs from last year's *Red Dirt Girl*. The guitar lines from Buddy Miller are restrained, the drumming from the flamboyant Brady Blade is so thoughtful to be almost pedantic. Harris sings her hallelujah chorus in that distinctively clear voice but - and maybe it is because they are still fiddling with the levels- her performance is just a little weary. When she played in this same venue back in May 1996 the Spyboy adventure had barely begun and everything sounded minty new. Certainly it was one of those mythic events which defy comparison. This time the music, lovely and conscientiously performed though it is, has lost a little of its intensity.

The Lanois song, *Where Will I Be*, helps to consolidate the band and then things lift quite a few notches with the Gillian Welch classic, *Orphan Girl*. Though a recent work, it is splendid distillation of the primitive glory of American mountain music and while the vocal is mixed down a touch and the tunings are more orthodox than they used to be, Harris' bell-like voice has all the arcs and curves of Appalachian lament.

The *Red Dirt Girl* is less of a singular joy than the orphan one, despite some tasty pickings from Buddy Miller. It is simply not as good a song and the instrumental decoration can't quite conceal that. I have warmed a lot to the new album and the singer's commitment to composition is courageous, but neither *My Baby Needs a Shepherd* -sung in duet with Kasey Chambers- or *Bang the Drum Slowly*, sung solo, really holds a candle to the early

career tear-jerker *Love Hurts* or Harris's reading of the traditional song, *Green Pastures*. And the clunky Patty Griffin tune, *One Big Love* fares poorly alongside the fetching harmonics of Anna McGarrigle's *Going Back to Harlan*.

*I Don't Want to Talk About It Now* is a more upbeat original which has Brady Blade adding some choppy cross-rhythms and Miller discreetly reaching into his effects bag for some wah wah funk. The Spyboy band is terrific - and they particularly like the chance to bang the can a bit - as they do on Rodney Crowell's *I Aint Living Long Like This* and the *Wrecking Ball* highlight *Deeper Well* which has Harris' almost throaty vocal riding above a no-prisoners contest between Miller and drummer Blade. Buddy Miller is a huge part of the success of the night, his versatility on every kind of electric shortneck, eight-string, twelve string, mando-whatsit, is astonishing and his playing is never self-serving or obvious.

There are few returns to the early catalogue - *Hickory Wind* is one, the Burritos' *Wheels* another. Surprisingly it is the country rockers that seem to engage Harris most - *Born to Run* has an energy that the Leonard Cohen-ish *Michaelangelo* never quite manages. *The Maker*, rolling on bass lines from Tony Hall and more Miller fills, has Emmylou Harris in memorably plaintive voice but, in the extended version, things start to get rhetorical with the obligatory drum and bass solos, adept though they are, taking us too far out of the territory.

Fortunately, to re-orient, Emmylou Harris takes her bearings from *Boulder to Birmingham*, as sweet a piece of prairie and sky as you could hope to hear. The Spyboy trip has surely been a demanding one and the absence of *a capella* items suggests the singer is guarding her voice more than before. She didn't sing *Calling My Children Home* or the beautiful Jess Winchester tune, *My Songbird*. But Emmylou Harris still has the voice of nightingale and with friends like Spyboy she is still ahead of the parade.

