

From a Distant Shore

Songwriter Darlene Zschech lives in Australia, but her music has revitalized worship in thousands of churches on this side of the planet.

You've probably heard of her, although you may have mispronounced her last name. Darlene Zschech (pronounced "check") might not conjure up the face of the blue-eyed, blond-haired Australian beauty, but the chorus she wrote in 1993, "Shout to the Lord," should surely resonate as soon as you read the words: "Shout to the Lord / All the earth / Let us sing / Power and majesty / Praise to the King."

Zschech is the person behind this and many other worship songs currently popular the world over, including "The Potters Hand," "Worthy Is the Lamb," "All Things Are Possible" and "I Will Run to You." But what is crucial to remember is that she is first and foremost a worshiper—then a wife, mother, songwriter and worship leader.

Her love for her Lord shines through, and she knows this love is contagious. It's as if she wants to infect everyone around her.

"I owe Him so much more than my life," she says. "I'm eternally thankful. And whether on a platform or in my bedroom, I worship and honor Him the best I know how."

For Zschech, 38, music has always been an integral part of her life. She's been singing professionally since age 10 when she appeared on a weekly children's TV program in Australia called Happy Go Round.

“So I’ve sung every bad song there is as well as some good ones,” she notes with a smile.

Her childhood was full of joyful memories, as well as disappointments and heartaches. She grew up with loving parents, but their decision to divorce when she was 13 brought a tragedy to her family that she thought happened only to other people.

Her teenage years were bumpy, as she was riddled with guilt and anxiety, responses typical of children from broken homes, she says. However, through the trial Zschech found more than tragedy.

“The longing in my heart found its home the day I found Jesus at the age of 15,” she says.

When Zschech became a Christian, her life radically changed. “Everything in the natural sense remained the same, but my heart was completely changed. I can honestly say that from that day till this, Jesus takes my breath away,” she says.

“He has literally walked me through the valleys. Magnificent! I cannot praise Him enough for reaching down, like Psalm 18 describes, and rescuing me.”

Not long afterward, she started to want more.

“It wasn’t long after we were in church I really had an encounter with the Holy Spirit,” she says. “When you accept Christ you get the whole deal—Father, Son, Holy Ghost. You don’t get two out of three; you get the three.

“Without that real sort of encounter with the Holy Spirit there’s just no way that I would have the strength and that fire in my belly to get up and do what I do today,” she adds. “That ‘keeping’ power of God is amazing.”

The Servant’s Life

What the Holy Spirit helps her “do” is serve as worship pastor of the 15,000-member Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia. Zschech oversees the Worship and Creative Arts Department of the church.

In addition, she is worship leader for the Hillsong Television program, which reaches more than 125 countries, and associate director of Hillsong Conference, an annual music and leadership conference held by the church. Last year it drew 18,000 people from more than 70 countries.

She has written three books: *Worship* (Hillsong Music Australia), *Extravagant Worship* and *The Kiss of Heaven* (Bethany House). She is also a mother—she and husband Mark of 19 years have three daughters, Amy, 15, Chloe, 11, and Zoe, 3.

Adding to this list of titles is Zschech’s best-known role as an award-nominated songwriter and producer. “Shout to the Lord” is sung today by an estimated 25 million to 30 million churchgoers each week and has been recorded by more than 20 other artists. Hillsong Music Australia’s best-selling albums, for which Zschech is lead vocalist and producer, have reached gold status, selling more than 7 million copies.

Zschech says she really doesn’t think much about her far-

reaching influence.

"I don't understand it," she says. "I'm with my team most of the time. I travel a bit, but I'm with my church, my team, my family—that's where I concentrate my focus. I take the responsibility seriously. I don't treat that lightly. I just want to honor God. I didn't go out looking for it."

To help keep that focus, Zschech says she protects herself from getting too wrapped up in the business side of making music. She prefers not even to know how many CDs she's sold. She actually avoids conversations about that if she can.

"My husband is a great protector because he knows my heart," she says, adding: "Even when I started working at the church, I didn't want to be paid because I was like, 'What if my heart goes the wrong way?'"

She acknowledges having her own faults, while recognizing that in spite of them she has a role to fulfill.

"I'm imperfect just like humanity is so imperfect," she says. "And the Word says the heart is deceitful above all else. I get it wrong and have gotten it wrong so many times. I don't forget about the influence or my role for myself and my children. I really want to be better for Him."

Zschech maintains some barriers as a way to shield herself from the international recognition. One of them is to stay planted in her local church, serving and contributing to the music team. She says if anyone on her team wants to get an ego, even for a second, that "they'll just get it knocked out of 'em so quick."

“‘Get over yourself,’” is the team’s advice.

Having known many worship leaders who have had some sort of influence through their churches, she is saddened when they leave to do their own thing and end up with less-than-happy results.

“If God calls you, you better know God has called you, because it’s usually the church family that’s given you any sort of platform,” Zschech says. “If you leave your home base and believe your own mail and your own press, it’s only a matter of time before you implode, and then it’s really sad.”

She believes the primary pitfall of a Christian leader is self-admiration. That’s why she stresses the need to always maintain the heart of a servant.

“I think for every Christian leader your admiration is your worst enemy,” she says. “I think you need to be always getting your hands dirty, serving. You don’t graduate from a life of service. The price for us is higher.”

Zschech is careful not to assume more power than is given to her as a worship leader. She believes the amount of influence a worship leader has “depends on how much you’ve been given ... by your pastor.”

She explains: “My responsibility is to make sure that the integrity of worship in the body and in our local church is strong and their understanding of what they’re doing is always increasing.”

She notes that in fulfilling that responsibility she is “still serving” rather than leading.

“We worship for 20 minutes—mini-worship—but that’s what we’ve been given, that’s what we do,” she says. “Our church has learned we don’t need 20 minutes to warm up—we need 20 seconds because we’ve only got a little bit of time. It’s inspiring. You just do the best you can with what you’ve got.

“We don’t talk a lot. If we’ve been asked to or been given permission then we do, but if not, we don’t,” she adds. “When you serve another man’s vision and make it yours and then God gives you your own thing, the challenge is to continue to serve another man’s vision. It’s easy when you’ve got no vision of your own.”

Just a Simple Songsmith?

Even with more than 60 songs to her credit, Zschech says she is not really a prolific songwriter. Songs “develop” in her, she says, and often come out of her own personal experiences.

“Some people write cards, some people bottle up their feelings, some people write poetry. I write a song,” she says.

Some are recorded, but some are not—the decision being determined by Zschech’s personal view of the song.

“A lot of songs you don’t hear, and a few you do,” she adds. “I’m writing all the time, but some of them are not for the church, they’re just between me and the Lord.”

Zschech sees a difference between an artistic song and a worship song. Worship songs have to serve the congregation, she says.

“I think you want the congregation to sing, so you’ve got to write it so they’re able to sing it,” she points out. “And often it means as a writer you write as a servant not as an artist. And often I find that’s just a real easy difference in writing.

“I think there is always room for songs to reveal how you feel,” she admits. “But for the greater church, more and more they just need to be singing the Word because it’s the Word that holds life and truth that sets people free. You want to put the Word to music for them to help them live, not that you just express yourself—that’s not a good enough reason to inflict that on the congregation.”

Perhaps functioning more as an artist than as a worship leader, Zschech released her first solo project in October, *Kiss of Heaven* (INO Records). The songs on this album were not written specifically for church worship, yet there is a deep dimension of worship to them.

Zschech says she had wanted to do this album for a long time but that the time had not been right because other projects took priority.

“I didn’t really have a lot of time to work on it because we were working on our church album *Hope*,” she says. “And I just knew if I gave my first fruits again to the [church] and didn’t compromise on that at all, that God would honor my leftovers, what I had left, what He trusted me with.”

“Everything About You,” from her solo album, is a love song for her husband. Zschech says that for years he had been asking her to write a song for him. “You’ve written a song for the kids,” he told her. “You’ve written a song for your father. You’ve written a song for other people’s fathers. What about me?”

Though the song was written specifically for her husband and was not intended to be a general love song, Zschech says many people love it. “I’ve gotten some amazing feedback that it’s challenged people’s commitment to their spouses,” she says.

She voices a concern that the church does not do enough to celebrate long-term marriage commitments. Being a child of a broken home has resulted in her appreciating the finer points of a successful marriage.

“I’m, like, can’t we just celebrate the goodness of God? Without God we certainly wouldn’t be together. I love [my husband],” she says. “He’s cool. That’s pretty much inspiration for a song.”

Zschech says her husband wants another song. “I’m, like, ‘No, I’m going back to my first love—God.’”

Room for Everyone

Her love for God is what she wants to proclaim. But as a worship leader she wants to inspire and lead others to proclaim their love for Him too. It has encouraged her to see the changes in congregational worship that have occurred throughout the church during the last several years.

“I think in the last five years, the way we do church has changed,” she says. “The congregation is actually worshiping and not just listening or being entertained.

“Even people who used to just dabble in worship, you just can’t get away [with] that any more. It’s like either you are a worshiper or you’re not. I think it’s been a great journey, it’s been wonderful.”

She believes these changes have helped reshape the church, drawing it closer to a common goal of knowing and loving God from the heart. “I don’t think it’s songs or style—it’s heart, it’s spirit. There is room for all sorts of styles and sounds,” she says. “If you want to look at New Zealand through to Africa—every culture brings its own, and it’s all magnificent.

“So it’s always come back to the heart,” she notes. “I think the heart has been challenged in worship in the last five years.”

The word “unity” is specifically what comes to mind when Zschech thinks about what God is doing globally in His church.

“I see a great unity across the body of Christ,” she says. “God says Himself He commands blessing on unity. And if God commands blessing on unity, I just think, Man, what would that look like?

“It’s not our version of blessing, but His. What would that look like for the earth? Is it His glory, His goodness? Possibly. My desire is to see more signs and wonders, healing, reconciliation. Hard hearts would be changed. As hearts are

changed, we are changed.

“People preach gloom and doom over the church, but I see exactly the opposite,” she adds. “I see it rising strong, glorious, unified. Not perfect—very imperfect. But that’s why we need God.”

Zschech sees some good coming from the United States pertaining to worshiping God, but she also talks about what she sees wrong with America.

“I’ve seen it change a lot. I don’t want to point the finger because in a lot of ways you have also pushed the bar so high on so many other levels.

“I just think for a long time the church [in America] has gotten caught in the wrong things,” she says. “Sort of a hierarchical system ... religious thinking, who’s allowed to do this or what you’re allowed to wear—all those things that stand in the way.”

Religious approaches to God that exclude the majority of believers are “really sad,” she says, and overlook the key biblical tenet that worship in the kingdom of God is inclusive but never exclusive. Music artists or worship leaders who consider themselves or what they do as exclusive have missed the point, she notes.

“As artists, you are gifted and talented, and there is an exclusivity about what you do. But when it comes to worship, it’s about the Lord and it’s inclusive—every man, woman and child. It’s, ‘Shout to God, all the earth.’

“And so when it becomes just for the chosen few, [you’ve] probably got to relook at why you’re doing what you’re doing and whether it is serving the purpose well. I just think if we just get captivated by Jesus it’s amazing how things fall into place.”

One approach that can hold people back, she says, is the long-held debate of whether or not women should be in roles of leadership. Zschech adds, however, that she herself has hardly encountered any resistance to her role as a prominent female worship leader.

“I just think, If you don’t like it, don’t listen. ... Find a guy and let him lead you.

“Actually, ... I think if it’s a problem for you, listen to Ron Kenoly, listen to Alvin Slaughter, listen to Delirious,” she adds. “There are a million guys out there doing a finer job than I ever will. Go for it—just worship God. Don’t let a silly thing like is it male or female keep you outside of encountering Christ. That would really be a shame.”

When it comes to encountering Christ, Zschech just wants everyone to know that “the kind of walk that I’m walking is so available to everybody.”

“I’m just a very ordinary person. I’m not a special anything,” she says. “It’s hard work—what we do is hard work—but there is also favor, just great favor. It makes it so much easier—no striving—a different way to live.

“Trust God. It’s the hardest lesson in life—let yourself fall into the hands of God.”

A From Down Under

Christian music from Australia—with its raw, youthful edge— is topping charts around the world.

When Rebecca St. James and the Newsboys finished their 34-city tour in April, they were considered some of America's most influential contemporary Christian musicians. But these recording artists are Aussies!

The Australian origins of these acclaimed acts and of other international artists, including Darlene Zschech and Paul Colman, point to a thriving Christian music scene Down Under. Its strength came to light last December when singer Guy Sebastian won the Australian Idol contest. A committed Christian, Sebastian honed his talent at Adelaide's Paradise Community Church, whose Planet Shakers conferences have expanded into a national youth forum for Christian music.

The edgy sound of Australia's youth culture has been a major shaper of the country's praise and worship genre. "The music here has a touch of rawness about it," says Wes Jay of Woodlands Media, which specializes in promoting and nurturing Christian acts.

Other influences, Jay believes, are an inclination to improvise and a willingness to engage audiences. He cites a defining moment for the Paul Colman Trio when the sound system failed at Nashville's Roman Auditorium during a Gospel Music Week.

The trio "immediately engaged the audience," Jay says, "and

they got everybody singing along. [They] won the hearts of America because they said, 'Even in our difficulties here we're going to still minister to you. ... We're going to create a sense of community and involve you.'"

Australians cut straight to the heart. Carl Laurens, creative ministries director at Waverley Christian Fellowship, Melbourne's largest church, believes homegrown praise and worship songs grew out of this attitude.

"There was a genuineness about our worship that hadn't been tainted by [its] marketability, so I think we've got to be careful that that doesn't creep in," he warns.

Exploiting their cross-cultural appeal, Australian Pentecostals have established music-focused churches in places as diverse as Tokyo, Ukraine and London. Last summer Assemblies of God youth teams traveled to Japan—notorious for its resistance to the gospel—to present outreach concerts in Tokyo and Osaka. The events yielded more than 300 conversions, a harvest that staggered experienced missionaries.

One of Australia's best-established Christian singers also has an overseas focus, yet it is not only in the big-arena music scene. In 1996 the Gospel Music Association of America voted Steve Grace as International Artist of the Year, an apt title in the light of his close involvement with Samaritan's Purse. Apart from playing at Franklin Graham's crusades, Grace, a son of missionaries, has linked with Operation Christmas Child to visit Malaysia and the Solomon Islands to deliver thousands of gift-filled shoeboxes.

In songs such as "Saints of Sudan" and "Christmas in Kosovo,"

Grace draws attention to people in need. "I'm just making people aware that we can bring about great historic change in nations that are either war-torn or in desperate situations," he told Charisma.

Instrumental band Rivertribe offers a different international dimension, blending indigenous instruments from around the world to recreate a spiritual element the band believes is missing from both secular and church life. Originally Melbourne buskers with a sound based around the aboriginal didgeridoo, they craft a multicultural style they hope will be widely relevant and touch hearts in a way that songs with words cannot.

Although Rivertribe is gaining popularity in the United States and other artists such as Roma Waterman, Alabaster Box and Nathan Taske, are not far behind, a legion of unknowns is waiting to be discovered. Very few find success in the small Australian market, but Jay believes this has its positive side: "Australian Christian music is genuine, it is the real deal."

Even within its own genre the chances of success are slim. "There are literally hundreds and hundreds of acts," Jay says. "There are 160 new Christian albums made by Aussies each year, and out of those about 10 will rise to the top."

Mark Conner, Waverley Christian Fellowship's senior pastor, spent a few years in the United States and played keyboards for Ron Kenoly and Marty Nystrom. He identifies a different measure for success in the Christian music business.

"One thing that is a strength is that many of the worship

songs coming out of Australia are birthed out of local churches and ministries that God is already blessing,” Conner says. “They are songs that have emerged out of what God is doing—songs that have already been proven to release people to touch God in worship that are then recorded for the benefit of others.”

In other words, Christian music from Down Under is not just about marketing and the almighty dollar. That could be Aussie music’s biggest contribution.

Adrian Brookes

Aussie Women Lead the Way

In Australia, women in Pentecostal and charismatic churches are enjoying a new day of opportunity.

Australia was the first nation in the world to grant women the right to vote and run for office. Among the notably few voices opposing that 1902 decision were 34 South Australian women who said they could not participate in the political process. “The energies of women are engrossed by their present duties and interests from which men cannot relieve them,” the women said.

Worship leader Darlene Zschech still runs into remnants of those attitudes. “The only negative comments I’ve ever received have been from women,” she says, noting that opposition is usually “in regards to being a working mother, rather than a woman in leadership.”

Zschech, who is worship pastor at Hillsong Church in Sydney, believes women’s influence in Australia’s Pentecostal and charismatic churches is strong. And, she adds, men are

consistently supportive of women in ministry.

Her experience seems typical at all levels. Sharing the high profile is former tennis champion Margaret Court, now senior pastor of Victory Life Church in Perth. The winner of 64 Grand Slam titles emphasizes that ministry is “a gift on people’s lives, it’s not appointed by man.”

Court believes women leaders are readily accepted in Australia. “People know the gift and the call and the grace that is upon our work, and I don’t believe that they can question it,” she says.

Others, without Court’s profile, share a similar experience. Penny Webb, an associate pastor at Perth’s 3,000-strong Riverview Church, believes that though Zschech and Court are inspirational, women have been the backbone of many church activities.

“Women are involved in ministry based on their giftings, their constancy, their capacity to do the job,” she says of Riverview. “When it comes to even our teaching team ... there are just as many women that actually teach in our weekend services as men.”

Though Webb regards Australia’s reputed male chauvinism as a myth, she concedes that Riverview may be ahead of the trend toward acceptance of women in the pulpit. For instance, the Assemblies of God (AG), Australia’s largest Pentecostal denomination, shows a marked disparity between policy and practice.

“The Assemblies of God in Australia has always taken a

position of supporting women in leadership," says Keith Ainge, the AG's national ministries director. "The first national conference, which was in the 1930s, formally made a statement that supported women in ministry."

Ainge readily admits, however, that the statistics do not reflect this. As of September, 2,408 people held AG credentials, but only 503, or percent, were women.

The gender disparity of senior ministers is still greater. Of 1,010 AG senior pastors only 35, or percent, were women. The number of female credential holders had, however, increased from 464 in 2002 to 503 in 2003.

Ainge was instrumental in encouraging Melbourne pastor Melinda Dwight into leadership, first of all as senior minister of Burwood Christian Life Center and then as a member of the AG's Victorian State Executive. Dwight's reluctance in taking the state executive post may reflect other women's attitudes.

"I assumed that I was putting my name forward because God was teaching me a lesson about humility," she says, "so I totally planned for how to handle rejection and public humiliation. It was a great surprise to me when people voted me for that position."

Despite widespread approval of her leadership Dwight remains the country's only female state executive member and still sees obstacles for women. "I think there are challenges in terms of perceptions within the church," she says. "Women senior pastors are a very small group, so having support in those sorts of things is not quite there."

Though neglect may be more significant than visible opposition, Jim Reiher, a lecturer at Melbourne's Tabor College, points out there is still plenty of opportunity for covert resistance. "I did a survey [in 1999] and found about one in three leaders in the AG in Victoria don't really want women to be senior pastors," he says.

But Webb is upbeat and optimistic about the future role of women in Australia's church. As a mother of three, she admits women's maternal role can be restrictive. But she challenges other aspiring women leaders to learn how to balance responsibilities.

"This is the juggling we have to do as mothers in ministry," Webb said on a cell phone while picking her child up from school. "But I love it. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Adrian Brookes

Leigh DeVore is an assistant editor for Charisma. She interviewed Darlene Zschech in September.