



▶▶ Geoff steps into the studio again to record his first solo album.



SINGER GEOFF SEWELL REVEALS WHY HE GAVE IT ALL AWAY TO HELP HIS SICK DAUGHTER

Amici Forever star tells

MY DAUGHTER'S AUTISM BATTLE

Destined to sing, New Zealand-born tenor Geoff Sewell was enjoying the success he'd always dreamt of when he decided to quit his chart-topping pop-opera band, Amici Forever, in January 2006.

But few were aware that the seemingly perfect world of the performer with the movie-star looks had just collapsed. Sienna, now 5, the elder daughter of Geoff and his wife Simone, had been diagnosed with autism.

For Geoff, who had realised long before just how precious life is, there was never any question where his priorities lay.

"When people ask me was it a hard decision to make - it wasn't," he says. "Your priority is your family. If anything happens to your children, that's where your focus is."

Geoff and Simone were devastated by the dire predictions of medical experts, who warned the couple that their daughter may never even be able to tell them she loved them.

"For four or five hours after that diagnosis, we walked around

a park in London and both of us just bawled," Geoff recalls.

"When you first get that diagnosis, it's like that child whom you knew and had all these aspirations and dreams

for is just gone. Both Simone and I went through different stages [of grief] at different times.

"But we thought, 'If Sienna is going to have the best shot, let's both fight this together.'

We both thought, 'We are going to beat this.'"

'FOR FOUR OR FIVE HOURS WE JUST WALKED AROUND A PARK AND BAWLED'

TELLTALE SIGNS

Looking back, Geoff and Simone, who have a younger daughter, Olivia, 2, recall there were "telltale signs" something wasn't quite right before Sienna's condition was diagnosed.

"Often, we were going, 'Sienna's not talking at the moment and her eye contact is not that good, and she's doing this funny hand-flapping in front of her face,'" he says.

"But when we asked different people or our own family, they always said, 'Don't worry, she's just slow at developing.' The irony is, with our second ▶▶



▶▶ When his daughter's wellbeing was at stake, Geoff didn't hesitate to quit Amici Forever (left).



▶▶ Lovely little Sienna is coming along in leaps and bounds.



child Olivia we were scrutinising every step of the way, because we knew the milestones and, thank God, she's all right."

COMING TO TERMS

This wasn't the first time Geoff had cause to re-evaluate his life. He was 21 and working as a chartered accountant when tragedy struck the family. His sister Julie died when she was just 22, after suffering a severe asthma attack.

"Losing a sibling is just one of the most excruciating things," Geoff muses. "It can make you go one of two ways - 'Why me?' or 'What doesn't kill me makes me stronger.'

"At that time, I thought, 'If my sister can be ripped away from me like that, then life is short.' I realised that what I was doing at the time, I was not really loving, so why not do something I love and get out there and really have a blast? I've always loved singing."

Geoff's wife Simone, whom he met on their first day at university, was right behind him every step of the way.

"It's been an amazing journey with Simone, as well. We actually hated each other when we first met, for about six months," he laughs. "But fortunately we stayed together, and we've been married for nearly 10 years now. She's incredible."

'IT'S BEEN A TOUGH TWO YEARS. TO SAY IT WASN'T WOULD BE LYING'

After studying at the Boston Conservatory of Music, Geoff and Simone headed to London, where they established what is now a multi million-dollar international entertainment business, Incognito Artists.

"In this industry, there are so many temptations out there, so we thought, 'Let's design a job where we're together all the time,'" Geoff says.

Meanwhile, two years after the diagnosis, little Sienna continues to astound those around her with her progress.

"It's been a tough two years, and to say it wasn't would be lying," Geoff says, candidly. "On this road, you take two steps forward and one step back - sometimes three steps back.

"We've used ABA [applied behaviour analysis] therapy with Sienna and changed her diet,

making it gluten- and dairy-free. The day we took the milk bottle off her, the next day she said her first word. You think, 'How can that happen?' It's amazing.

"Sienna's talking now, she's looking at us and she says 'I love you'. She gives us hugs and is affectionate. These are the things we were told would probably never happen. We were told, 'Don't get your hopes up.'"

Overjoyed with Sienna's progress, Geoff recently returned to the studio and recorded his debut solo album, the aptly titled *Believe*.

"When I left Amici, people said don't give up. But I was never going to give up. I just had to regroup for a couple of years.

INSPIRING OTHERS

"This album is testimony to the fact that we believe in our daughter and we believe in the power of the dream."

Included on *Believe* is *Sienna's Song*, penned by Simone as a heartfelt tribute to her little girl. Proceeds of the song will go to families affected by autism.

"We thought, 'Let's write a song for all those mums and dads out there to give them hope,'" Geoff says.

"Simone wrote this beautiful song and the music is just so hauntingly lovely."

BY JACKIE BRYGEL

▶▶ *Believe* by Geoff Sewell is out now through SonyBMG.