



CALM & CRYSTAL CLEAR

Recording on the road.

Text: Rick O'Neil

► I was hunting through the Festival Records master tape archive the other day, scouring it for all the Johnny O'Keefe masters for what will soon become the 'ultimate', most complete, best-sounding and hopefully *final* JO'K release. The record company has set this as its mission statement: "It has to be the 'ultimate' most complete, best-sounding..." They've thrown me the keys to the tape lockup and said: "Call us in a couple of months when you know what's what."

I don't want to talk too much about Johnny O'Keefe here; I'm just using him to raise the concept of the 'mission statement'. It sounds like some kind of new age business consultant tag line, I know, or maybe something JFK might have used in his '60s space-race speech, but the concept is simple: decide what it is you want to achieve, write it down as a goal for all the world to see and then use it as the key inspiration in your endeavours to make the 'mission' a success.

While I was sifting through the JO'K archives, I decided to look up and read a document (or, more accurately, several hand-written books) that held an account of every single recording session that occurred in Festival Studios. These books – which I, and every other studio guy who ever worked for Festival, filled out when the sessions were completed – basically list the date, the artist and the songs recorded. Sometimes – if you were diligent – even the amount of tape stock you used and whether the union session cards were filled in was documented. I had to laugh when I stumbled across my own decades-old handwriting – it seems 'diligence' was not always my strong point.

The guy whose listings *were* diligent, however, was Mark Thomas. Mark was the longest serving house engineer at Festival, who died by his own hand several years ago. It was an interesting read to see and recall some of the sessions he'd done, and some of the things he'd diligently documented for posterity.

One listing in the books was from 1989, for the start of a session entitled: 'Neil Murray Solo Album – Mission Statement'. This listing made me laugh because the album Neil Murray recorded at Festival was always called *Calm and Crystal Clear*, but I recall one day Mark Thomas coming down the hall and asking me: "Rick, what's a mission statement?" I have a real soft

spot in my heart for Mark, but the reality is Mark would never have been accepted into the JFK 'race to the moon' program. In fact, I'm not sure Mark would have known (or cared) that there *was* a moon! He was the type of guy who was into the task in front of him, and the task for that moment was the bit of paper he handed over to me.

It read something like this: "Neil Murray solo album 'mission statement', by Neil Murray. This album is to be recorded and released by Festival Records, produced by Mark Moffit and released before the end of 1989. I want to make the kind of album that, if it got stuck in your cassette player – unable to be ejected as you drove your Holden panel van from Sydney to Broome – you'd be happy to let it play over and over without ever wanting to throw the cassette player out the window. The album is to be titled 'Calm and Crystal Clear'."

I'm paraphrasing Neil's mission statement here of course – it was a long time ago and I only saw it once – but after I explained to Mark that 'mission statement' was not the album title, I was left with an indelible image of a cassette stuck in a car on cycle for years... and Mark Thomas' "something's not quite right here" face, as he headed back to the studio. I thought the idea of actually planning for an (as yet) unrecorded album to fulfill a mission statement was a magic idea – I reckon Mark thought it was nuts.

Anyway, Neil books in for a month or two and makes the record with Mark Moffit and Mark Thomas; I can't recall the actual recording engineer, but Mark Thomas did most of the house duties – and when he was sick or missing I did half a dozen sessions as well.

I know at this point in the story there will be way too many 'Marks' on this session, so I'm just going to use the surname of each of the Marks involved, to keep things simple.

As the producer, it was Moffit who had the job of turning the mission statement into reality. I asked him about it one night and he said: "It's always much easier when you have a goal to work towards. Watch and learn... this is how you make 'real' records."

So I watched like a hawk, looking to see how a producer actually produces – how a 'mission statement' can be made to happen through

subtle, almost unseen, interactions between a producer and an artist working in harmony. Things happened between Moffit and Neil... unexplained things. Maybe it was a look, or a smile; most of the time while listening to a track and looking for the 'special stuff'. They both instinctively knew when the magic had come and gone. Me? I couldn't tell the magic from the mistakes.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

Months go by and the mission statement is *never* mentioned again. The record is finished, Moffit is off onto his next record and it's Friday morning. Thomas is in the studio cutting the analogue mixes together with a razor blade – getting them ready to cut to vinyl with me on Monday morning. Suddenly Neil decides the songs need sound effects between each track to capture the 'spirit', to make it a *real* 'journey'.

I look up from the microscope on the Neumann VMS 80 cutting lathe and there is Thomas with his 'something's not quite right' face on again.

"Have we got any sound effects records?" he asks. "Neil wants the sound of crows and blowflies between the songs!"

I dig around and find a BBC sound effects record and walk down the hall: "There's a crow on this one," I offer helpfully, as I plop the stylus down on the one and only crow call.

"Jeez," says Neil, "that's not a crow, that's an English Lark. We can't use that! And what about the blowflies; got any blowflies?"

"Nah, we don't have any of them," I respond, somewhat deflated.

"Well..." says Neil, "Fuck it, we'll just have to go out and record some!"

I look at Thomas and he's *really* wearing the 'not quite right' face now.

"I'm not sure how we're going to get a crow into the overdub booth," Thomas says unsurely as he trails off into silence, realising his mistake.

"I was talking to Mark Skarski about maybe going bush for a while to get some photos for the album cover; we can just record the stuff then," says Neil.

"Err... I'm supposed to be cutting the record on Monday," I interject.

"You need the noises by Monday? Okay fine," says Neil. "Thomas, what are you doing

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tomorrow?”

“Err... dunno,” says Thomas.

“I do,” says Neil. “You have a session in the back o’ Bourke recording blowflies! It’s really important; we can all go in my Holden panel van.”

“How far away is Bourke?” Thomas mumbles.

“Not too far,” smirks Neil, as he gives me a wink.

“Okay then, let’s do it!” says Thomas, perplexed.

I trot back down the hall and Neil and Thomas move off to find Skarski to tell him the good news.

ROAD TRIP!

Twenty minutes later I look up from the microscope and see the Thomas SNQR face again, Neil’s sure and steady grin and Skarski heading the posse with the leading question: “Hey Rick? What are you doing this weekend?”

Now, of course, by now it’s Friday afternoon, let’s not forget. I work in a studio, so it’s almost a given that I’m not going to be up to too much on the weekend, so I state the obvious: “Err... nothing much, why?”

“We need a driver’s license so we can rent a car, and we need a driver. Want to go for a drive?”

“What’s wrong with Neil’s car?” I ask, and slowly my sentence drops off into silence. I’d seen Neil’s car, and with the exception of AT’s editor, Andy Stewart, no man has ever owned a panel van that had been held together for so long by so little.

“Yeah, why not!” I said.

“Oh good!” said Thomas. “I already used your name; we just have to pick the car up.”

Now remember that ‘mission statement’ I was talking about earlier? Well, before we left, Neil thought it would be good for us city-dwelling studio boffin youngsters to get a ‘feel’ for his album.

“There’s just one cassette going in your rental car today,” he starts out, “*Mine!* It’ll help you get a sense of what the songs are all about.”

West out of Pyrmont we drive.

By about 8:30pm we’re in Blackheath and we stop for a burger. Thomas is looking a little excited, and I wonder if he really has any idea

where we’re going, so I send him into the service station for a map, just in case we lose Neil on the way somewhere down the road.

What I should have already mentioned was the rental car: Thomas turns up with a brand new Laser TX5 turbo that he’s somehow procured with my name and *without* a credit card.

Burgers downed, Skarski and Thomas swap cars and Neil and Skarski shoot off. “See you in Orange!” proclaims Neil.

“Orange?” mumbles Thomas. “What did he mean by that?”

“Err... Orange is the next stop,” I respond.

“Is that far?” he asks.

“Umm... not so you would notice,” I mutter.

“More than an hour?” he asks with an excited smile.

“Yep!”

Thomas seems satisfied with himself and pops Neil’s new album in the cassette deck. We drive off into the mountain fog, eyes peeled for Neil’s obscure tail lights. The first lyric on the first side of the album spills out of the stereo: “Are you travelling tonight...?”

Thomas and I don’t say a word for the first three songs. It was an interesting moment because it marked the start of a bond between us; an unspoken friendship we’d later share in the studio, or late at night out on the town – a mutual understanding. It was usually expressed with a ‘we both know exactly what’s going on, nothing needs to be said’ look, and it started in that car on that night, with that first side of the record.

Thomas had *never* driven across the mountains. He had no sense of distance, and just kept watching out for red tail-lights glowing in the distance, reporting in from time to time if I lost sight of them. He was good that way... eyes always on the job in front of him.

ORANGE ROUGHY

We pulled into Orange well after midnight. It wasn’t the quickest way to the back o’ Bourke, but Neil figured us city guys would get lost if we took the short cut, so he’d sent us 150 kilometres out of the way. “Besides,” he said, “you can always tell what the weather’s going to be like for the next day from the drive into Orange!”

So we fill up again on petrol and burgers and Neil lets us know the next stop: “Dubbo,” he says with a smile, adding, “Watch out for the roos beside the road.”

Skarski sticks his head in the car and asks if we’ve been listening to Neil’s album. Thomas, with unusual and remarkable clarity, says: “It sounds nothing like it did in the studio, out on the road the words have images... I’m living in the music!”

DRIVING THE POINT HOME

So, yeah, ‘long story Rick, but what’s the point?’ I hear you say. Well, you know how sometimes you’re listening to a song and you feel – and I mean really *feel* – the lyric? Well, what if your job as a record maker was to get so good at making records you could actually control just how often that happens? What if you knew a trick with a reverb or a hint of delay that could lock that image into the soundscape? What if it could go from the songwriter to the producer into the sound engineer and onto the hard disk with the exact same shared memory or vision?

Well, and here’s the thing: it *can*, it does, and in the wash-up that’s the real challenge in being a recording type. It’s your job to capture and trap the essence and the meaning of the artist’s work...

LATE NIGHTS/EARLY MORNINGS

Thomas looks at me, it’s about 4:30am and he’s still pretty excited...

“How far do you think Bourke is?” he asks.

“Dunno,” I respond blankly, as he looks it up on the map.

“Err... this map,” he says in a puzzled voice, fumbling with the roadmap for what appears to be the first time ever, “what am I looking for?”

“I dunno, Broken Hill?” I suggest flippantly.

“Okay, but I err... I thought we were heading for Bourke?” his voice dropping off into silence again. I glance over and check out his map – it’s a tourist map of Katoomba!

“I thought you were all joking about going bush. I thought the Blue Mountains was the bush!” So a few miles out of town we catch up to the fastest panel van on the planet and pull over for the night.

Morning comes way too quickly. Thomas has been up for ages, running around the truckstop

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with a reel-to-reel Nagra 1/4-inch tape recorder, one of those huge boom mics and the largest windsock you've ever seen. With headphones strapped to his head, he's zipping around, recording a whole heap of stuff.

FIRST TIMER

Have you ever looked at somebody, just knowing they were doing something for the first time? Thomas, it seemed, had missed the bit in recording school where people run around with headphones recording everything that moves, and a bunch of things that don't.

"Do you think I should use Dolby?" he asks.

"Does the Nagra even *have* Dolby?" I question.

"Err... no, it seems not," he replies, deflated. A few seconds pass... "Right, non-Dolby it is then!" he announces with a smirk. "I'll double the tape speed instead... That'll get rid of the hiss!" he adds triumphantly.

"Try backing off the gain in the mic pre a bit," I suggest nonchalantly. For a second he gives me the look that started between us the night before... then he's off again like a seven year old, recording every fly that zooms past.

Meanwhile Neil's up and he's not happy, complaining: "The weather's all wrong – it's too green... there won't be any roos dead on the road, no crows either. We'll have to keep going."

Meanwhile, Skarski's photographing everything in sight... and me? Well, I'm suddenly realising I'm 700km from home with no *real* understanding of where Neil is taking us, recording flies and looking for crows.

I had travelled a lot with my family as a kid, so there was nothing new about a road trip for me. But something was different – this was *my* time, it was Thomas's time, Skarski and Neil's time. We were 700km outside the inner city major

label recording studio and we were *still* making a record!

TOTAL RECALL

So, again I have to stop the tale for a minute. How many records are you going to make in your life; how many are you going to remember? What will you remember: drum edits, the guitar overdubs, the compressor settings? You will remember the defining moments in your life, and if you're really lucky you'll be able to share them with others. You'll be able to look at each other later down the line with the easy feeling that, for a time at least, you were 'in' a record – you were part of something, and, believe me, *that* is a sensation that makes a lifetime of bad pay worthwhile.

Back to the road, Neil is still unhappy with the kind of road kill on offer. "These roos are Western Greys," he moans. "We need big *Red* kangaroos; we need the dirt to be redder; there's been too much rain about. The crows are wrong, the flies are wrong – this will never work. Everybody will know we only went to Dubbo. We need to go bush! Come on fellas, pack up... we've got to head for Wilcannia!"

"Is that far?" offers Thomas.

"About five hours," I reply.

"Better be big fucking flies," he snaps, as his voice trails off into an unsure silence.

Around about Wilcannia the earth turns red. The dead roos were big and we stopped and recorded lots of flies, but no crows. Neil was despondent: "There's been too much rain. I could see that when we went through Orange..."

We made a few more stops on a few more road kills, but it was all wrong; no crows apparently.

"You need crows to get the good blowies to show up," murmurs Neil. Let's just say we end the day – tomorrow we'll cross the border into South Australia and head for 'the back of Bourke.'"

So we did. And when we 'arrived' – by stopping on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere – the land was dry, the dirt was red and Neil was happy because he'd seen some crows in the distance: "Let's just pull over here – we have a big drive home tomorrow."

Err... that's after we record those crows and the flies at daybreak. That's the magic time – daybreak, when all is quiet in the still of the morning.

I close my eyes for 20 seconds and the night disappears in a flash. Thomas is up early again, clearly very excited about a huge red roo out on the road, covered in flies. There are crows picking it to pieces, the Nagra tape machine is rolling, Neil is doing an Irish jig, Skarski is snapping shots, I'm as stiff as a board desperately in need of a can of coke and sure for the very first time in my life that, left to chance, fortune or the whims of others, my life would be very different.

"Okay Thomas," I say. "Stop mucking around, stick that windsock right into the kangaroo's stomach and the flies will be all over it in a shot.

That way you won't have to chase them all over the place. Back away and the crows will come back. Skarski, go and photograph Neil by that fence over there, then let's fuck off home. We are literally in the 'back of Bourke' and I have to be back at work in the morning!"

Well, at least that's what my inside voice said. I have no recollection of what my outside voice said.

I turn and look at Thomas. His once brand new grey windsock is covered in kangaroo guts and a blowie the size of an apple is hovering around it spraying maggots everywhere like a United Nations food drop. Thomas has made the 'blowflies to end all blowflies' recording and ruined the windsock in the process, as the crows fly into the soundscape and fly off again slowly. In 20 seconds, Thomas has the sounds that Neil needs for his record.

"Do you want to hear them, Neil?" says Thomas.

"Nah..." says Neil, "I trust you. Let's go home."

I make the impossible drive home, we drop the rental car back at 9pm and the rental guy looks at the trip meter on the car that he let out on Friday afternoon. "How many k's were on it when you got it?" he asks incredulously.

"Err... 16," I muttered.

"Well, there are 2800 on it now! Where did you go, the back of Bourke?"

"Yes!" says Thomas, beaming with pride.

Now that would be that, except that this is an audio magazine, not Rick's boring travel log, so I must tell you one last thing. After Thomas cut the crows into the record, and I the grooves in the vinyl, we were having major problems with the metal parts they use to stamp out the records in the production line. There was a strange noise in the groove on side two of the record and the quality control department was having a hell of a time trying to fix it. They repaired metal stamper after stamper, but still the problem persisted – maybe an impurity in the nickel.

I popped into the factory...

"What's up," I said to the quality control lady as I peered into the microscope at the grooves.

"It's the strangest thing," she mutters. We've tried everything to get rid of it, but nothing works. I have never heard anything like it; it sounds like a fly's buzzing around in the grooves! You know, one of those big ones you find out in the desert?"

"Umm... yep."

Mission accomplished – calm and crystal clear. ■

Rick O'Neil runs Turtlerock Mastering in Camperdown. He was sure he had a point here somewhere.