

nz musician

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FREE TO GO!

DON McGLASHAN
CONNAN MOCKASIN

THE MINT CHICKS

RHIAN SHEEHAN

SOLA ROSA

DELGIRL

ZANE LOWE

CLINT MURPHY

&

GREG HAVER



Global Studio Roaming

One is a reserved Kiwi engineer/mixer/ drummer with a growing reputation here and overseas. The other has the kind of non-stop mouth you might expect from an award-winning Welsh producer/mixer/engineer/drummer in demand from all round the globe – though certainly not the attitude. Clint Murphy and Greg Haver make a studio tag team of engineer + producer that already has a number of claims to success, including album production for a Spice Girl and the biggest local singles in three of the last five years; The Feelers' *Stand Up* plus *Maybe* and *One Day* from Opshop. **Richard Thorne** talked to the pair at Roundhead Studio in Auckland (where the Kiwi engineer was mixing tracks for an Irish band the Welsh producer had recorded in England), just ahead of Haver's marriage to a New Zealand bride and Murphy's departure to base himself in England for the foreseeable future.

It was dabbling in the Otumoetai College recording studio that started Clint Murphy thinking that rather than drumming, a music career in audio engineering might be the go.

And so it has proven to be. In April this year 29-year old Murphy and his wife will head to the Cotswolds in England where Modern World Studios have offered them a house to live in, free of charge, for six months.

Instead of 7th form Murphy did an audio engineering training course at SAE in Auckland where he excelled, helping out, even teaching his classmates drum recording tips and before long getting involved on the admin side. A year and a half later he was pretty much taking one of the certificate courses and recording demos for bands including Tadpole and Indicator Dogs. His talent, enthusiasm and initiative were apparent to former tutor Jeremy McPike who offered him an engineering role down the road at York St studio.

"I guess the advantage of working somewhere like York St is, it's not everyone that can afford it, so you get really good acts most of the time and also quality musicians. One of the first eye openers for me (after about six months of doing all the shit jobs) was watching Gil Norton and Danton Supple working on the second Feelers' record for about two months. I had never seen anyone work on that production level before, didn't really know what a producer did until that point. I learnt so much from both of them."

Of course not all that glitters is gold and Murphy also got to work

alongside some "rubbish" producers, though he's reluctant to name names.

"I think bands get scarred by these bad producers and a lot of NZ bands have worked with people and because they were shit decided after that they can do it themselves. It's a shame because when you work with a good producer it is actually an easy, pleasurable and fun process.

Cue Welsh producer Greg Haver, who Murphy first worked with on 48May's *Fight Back* single. Haver's introduction to Kiwi music came when the British Council brought him here as a guest specialist for one of their Resonate conferences back in 2003. His credentials then included a bevy of successful Welsh acts notably Super Furry Animals and Manic Street Preachers, with whom he had been involved in the winning of two Brit Awards. Warner Music NZ asked him to come back and produce The Feelers' 2003 (triple-platinum selling) 'Playground Battle', for which Clint Murphy engineered and shared mixing duties.

Over about 40 separate projects since the two have forged a friendship and working partnership that threatens to become world renowned. When Murphy moves to the UK in April it will be largely to continue as Haver's production partner.

"I will be freelance but I'm guessing 80% of my work will be with Greg. If budgets don't support us both, Greg will do the tracking and get me to mix it. That's another reason why I'm going over, I am really wanting to start focusing on mix engineering, that's the passion I have gone into."

After a few years at York St, the then 25-year old Murphy felt it was time to try his hand at working freelance, a move he combined with OE plans, shipping off to the UK in 2004.

"Obviously Greg was there and we had a relationship going and the first record I ended up working on over there was Melanie C's album ('Beautiful Intentions'). I was little bit scared to be honest. Leaving York St where I knew every nook and cranny, how every single button and dial worked, and going to work in various studios where I had no idea about the monitoring or what gear they had – and it was for a Spice Girl!

"I remember turning up for my first day at Metropolis A Studio and it had what seemed like a 500-channel SSL – it was massive! I'd never worked on an SSL before and it was J-series, which I now think is the most difficult of them all to work with. It all seemed so overwhelming and I just pretty much shat my pants!"

Murphy describes being overly keen to please Sporty and her band – but she and they assured him he was doing just fine – indeed better than, as Haver confirms.

"Clint has been working with me on tons of records from all over the world. I often fly him over to the UK to work just because he's the best engineer I've ever worked. When I brought him in to do the Mel C record all the hardened London session musicians were saying, 'Where did you find this guy? He's brilliant.' 'Oh, I found him in a studio in Auckland! He's got a great work ethic and we're both drummers and have the same sense of humour. I always try to work with people I like 'cos it's a hard enough job...'"

Haver's own path to producer fame is both funny and fortunate, stemming, as he tells it, from an early '90s divorce that left him cleaned out. He had been a songwriter with EMI publishing for several years, learning a lot about co-writing, arranging and demo making. About then the Manics were recording their 'Holy Bible' album in a studio down the road in Cardiff. They spent so much time there no other bands could get in, so the trade went elsewhere – and when the Manics finished up the studio found it couldn't survive.

The owner offered Greg and his mate (who was a studio assistant but on the dole at the time), the keys to the studio for £8000. His mate said he could do half that and Greg went to the bank to blag his split, on a very short term loan. They bought Big Noise Studio before the bank realised and could close his account.

"We literally closed the doors one day, fresh coat of paint, bought a new coffee machine then opened up again and just hit the phones. But then within two months the Manics came back and finished up the 'Everything Must Go' [1996] album there. So within like six months we had a Brit Award-winning album and a platinum disc on the wall!

"That started to attract lots of work and I remember Cerys and Mark from Catatonia came in and said they were having troubles with their label and could we give them some cheap studio time to finish some tracks. All of a sudden *Mulder & Scully* was a massive hit, the album sold about 900,000 copies and I had credits on two Brit Award-nominated albums! Management started phoning, the Super Furry Animals came in and it was incredible. I'd spent 10 years learning my craft but I just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

Two years later the Cardiff council turned up to say they were knocking the building down, but by then their £8000 studio was worth £175,000 – because it had generated 2.5M record sales. The pair looked for another studio space but eventually gave up – his former partner now stage manages both the SFA and The Manics.

"In retrospect it's the best thing for me cos it made me go to other studios and I started developing a taste for different bands and different studios. Now I like the flexibility of moving around."

The Mel C album project lasted close to three months and included use of three of the Metropolis studios, (each with a different model of console) and Rak Studios which is now one of Murphy's faves.

"I must have worked at six or seven different studios on that. The great thing about that was it got me familiar with walking into a place I had no idea about, with a new set of monitors and new set of gear, so I had to use my ears. But the cool thing was it made me do different things (whereas) at York St I found I was just putting up the same old thing everytime – and I think Greg really likes that too. If you don't know about a mic just chuck it up and give it a go. I came up with some interesting sounds that way."

In 2006 Murphy returned to NZ after nearly two years away, half spent travelling and most of his studio time spent working alongside, or for

Haver. He came back thinking that producing was the logical next step, having worked with some top producers he says he couldn't see himself letting bands take the overall control and leaving him to just push faders.

In the time since he has produced albums for The Bleeders, Autozamm, Tainted and Goldenhorse's 'Reporter' (on which he started out as engineer but ended up sharing production and mixing credits with Brit Phil Vinal). In that same period he has been back to England four times to work with Haver who has himself come out to NZ three times, meaning the two spent six months of the last year working together, despite being based in opposite hemispheres.

"We've got such a good team thing going on. He lets me take a massively creative role. He's always been about getting the right people in and letting it unfold and he'll let me produce a lot of. So I'll come up with all the harmonies for the backing vocals, do a lot of the vocal comping and he lets me do my thing. I get to engineer on a really high level, working with someone who is really professional, I have a massive production role and our best albums are those we do together.

"So at that point I realised this is what I want to do, and the mixing thing is something I really hope to get a bit of a name for. It's not that I don't like producing but I really like engineering on a high level. Being the engineer and producer is such a massive role, because you are doing two jobs, and it's stressful. When I work with Greg it's stress free."

Haver's demeanour is indeed very relaxed, so shorts and bare feet casual it's no surprise he finds the Kiwi lifestyle appealing. Whether in Europe or here in NZ, he always has plenty of options to pick from. In recent years he has been to-ing and fro-ing between the UK where he works with big budgets and here where... he gets to make records he enjoys.

"Without wishing to sound like, horribly noble, the music is actually really important to me. Otherwise what's the point of being in the studio 12 hours a day and a large part of my year? I want to be with musicians who inspire me and I enjoy being with. Why not pick and choose the projects better, and who wouldn't want to come here to record? It's a beautiful place to be and there are some fantastic studios. And the quality of life is really important, especially with a job that's so all encompassing. Yes I can earn more in Europe, but there's a balance."

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Haver admits to being a disorganised musician for 20 years of his life, saying it's only been the last 10 years that he has actually got himself organised. Now he thrives on organising the recording process to make it easy for the bands he is working with.

"If they enjoy it then the record will be a better record. A producer should be a sort of facilitator to guide the band in the right direction. Sometimes you do practically rewrite the songs, sometimes all you do is guide them enough to get the recording finished on time. Producing can be a really, really gentle process, you don't have to be Phil Spector – you don't have to have a gun on the desk to make a great record. The less you can do, I generally think the better the production is. Sometimes that gets mistaken by bands as that you haven't really done very much, so the next time they (mistakenly) think they can do it themselves."

For him the producer's role extends well outside the studio, particularly into working out a recording process to fit the budget – which may mean weeks spent negotiating studio rates and additional musicians, booking hotels, flights and a lot of other things most wouldn't typically think of as a producer's job.

"Every job you've got to show the same care and attention to, you can't use 'we didn't have much money' as an excuse. It is possible, you've just got to be really creative and find ways. Sometimes, you've really got to get in the trenches, playing, re-arranging. A lot of the solo artist records I do I'll play on to save money – why bring a drummer in when I can play myself? Plus I enjoy being in there with the other musicians."

"I think that Kiwis put too much emphasis on mastering sometimes – do the recording half arsed then spend all the money on mastering, thinking that having Ted Jensen on the record credits will help it sell." – Clint Murphy

When I ask Murphy what makes a good engineer he predictably starts with the need for a good set of ears.

"Greg will say he wants a certain sound and it's my job to achieve that kind of sound. You need to be able to listen to something and, if it's wrong, know what to change to get it to sound right. I've never been one to have an understanding of every bit of audio equipment there is. I don't read a hell of a lot of studio mags. I know what I like and what bits of gear work in different situations – having confidence in the monitoring and that what you are recording is good is the key.

"What I find when I am doing mixes for other people's recording is things like drum kits just sound terrible. You open up a Pro Tools session and it might have just a few mics which all sound horrible, and then just a whole lot of samples chucked on top.

"Something Greg has taught me is to get a great sounding drum kit, bass and guitar sounds so that you are not going to be fixing it all in the mix. Then when it comes to the mixing it should just be push the faders up and it's done. I have

this theory that you really should only need three hours to do a song mix. (Though when you are mixing other people's work you do need a couple of hours to familiarise yourself with it.) That should be enough to deal with what's important, the rest is just bullshit that no one cares about anyway."

Another thing he says he learned from his first stint in the UK is that the belief you need to go to the UK to make a great record is "... just bullshit. NZ has some great studios. York St is in my top three favourites. It's got an amazing vintage console, everything works, the staff are friendly and it has that amazing drum room. And now we've got Roundhead as well, another world class studio – it's like having two Abbey Roads in NZ! So there really is no need to go overseas to make a good record. I will definitely miss both those studios.

"I think also that Kiwis put too much emphasis on mastering sometimes – do the recording half arsed then spend all the money on mastering, thinking that having Ted Jensen on the record credits will help it sell. It's a dark art mastering and I truly believe that the Americans are the best at it, but I don't think mastering should be relied on, that you can send a shitty mix over and hope they will make it sound amazing."

Although he has benefited regularly from NZ On Air Phase Four grants and been responsible for some of our more high profile and high cost projects (Feelers, Opshop, Nathan King), Haver is sensitive to accusations of being hit-focused.

"That 'being an overseas producer' thing will only cut it for a while – you'll get found out real quick if you're rubbish! I've heard some people

think I have some formula for NZ radio hits. I have never, ever consciously made a record for NZ radio – I can't think like that, I'm a musician. You just make the record as good as it can possibly be – and if radio like it, great. I always say to artists they should be making the record for themselves first, not for everyone else."

In fact his own record at NZ radio is tarnished pretty much only by Carly Binding's 'So Radiate' album, one which he thinks is one of the best records he's made in NZ so he got fired up angry when it didn't get the acceptance at radio he felt it deserved. Knowing nothing about Carly's history with TrueBliss, he says he just thought the songs and singer were great.

"I'd just finished the Mel C's record which was one of the hardest I had ever made and it was just a joyous process. Great musicians, she was wonderful, some brilliant songs and I thought it was a surefire hit record. I heard so many stories about radio programmers hearing it blind and loving it, then finding out it was Carly and not playing it. It made me really angry. We all knew it was great record and only she knows her own level of frustration about it."

He has no time for musical snobbery about mainstream popular vs cool, and says he himself comes from a kind of Welsh DIY ethic. As evidence in 2000 (then almost 40) he set up the Booby Trap Singles Club with well known BBC Radio 1 DJ Huw Stephens.

"We used to put out a single every month and could only afford a day's studio time to record the two songs – we had a £200 budget for every double A-side single. I put up my services for free and learnt a lot about production from doing that.

"I listen to the Opshop record ['Second Hand Planet'] and I'd applied a lot of the techniques I would have for a British indie guitar band – it just comes out a certain way because of the interaction of the musicians. Because a lot of people buy a record doesn't make it a worse record! As a producer, unless you want to sell a lot of records you're probably not doing your job properly. Obviously a label will expect a certain level [of financial recoupment] from me, it's always a fine balance between artistic integrity and commercial sensibilities."

NZ On Air and Siren certainly got their money's worth with 'Second Hand Planet' which turned Opshop into a chart-topping local super group. It seems a given from here, but Haver says it was anything but.

"It was only when we got near the end, getting rid of a lot of stuff and narrowing down the songs that we began thinking it was going to be a really good record. It was quite a hairy process – really on the edge in terms of having enough material. We were due to record it a year before we actually did the recording, and two days before I was due to fly over to start the label phoned to say they didn't think they had enough songs and what should they do?

"I said I would come over for a month and do some recording, so we know what we've got, then come back to the UK and keep working on this Nicky Wire solo stuff. When I came back again Jason was in this really dark place, saying that they don't have enough songs, but in that month off they had written a lot of the big tracks from the record. There was debate about whether *One Day* should be left off the record cos it doesn't fit neatly with the other tracks, but me and Tracy at Siren fought hard to keep it on. Of course it helped them take a step up to being a good solid Kiwi band to being one of the most successful bands in the country."

He knows he's preaching to the converted, but it's still good to hear Haver assert should be no inferiority complex here.

"There is a really high standard of songwriting here and some of the best singers I've ever worked with – like Carly and Jason and James Reid who has a unique voice. You listen back to them and all the takes are great. And some of the musicians I've met here are as good as, if not better than, those I work with in Europe – there are lots of things in place to get NZ music heard [elsewhere] and it's only a matter of time really."

Like that old wedding adage about not losing a daughter but gaining a son, NZ music isn't really losing yet another top flight Kiwi recording professional to the UK, but rather has gained a valuable itinerant Welsh ally. And like the man says, it's only a matter of time.