

Josh Pyke

Recording Chimney's Afire

With his new album, Josh Pyke turns his hand to producing his own work. AT follows the creative flow.

Text: Mark O'Connor



▶ If Josh Pyke's career as a recording artist should ever founder, he has a contingency plan – a career as a record producer. Based on the evidence thus far it would seem unlikely that he'll need a Plan B any time soon. His debut album, last year's *Memories & Dust* entered the national charts at No. 4, and went on to win the 2007 ARIA award for 'Best Adult Contemporary Album'. The obvious commitment of his record label, Ivy League, not to mention a sustained touring schedule of the UK, all bode well for a long career.

Yet notwithstanding the unlikelihood of his artistic demise, the prospects for an alternative production career are already looking good. At those same ARIAs last year he was awarded 'Producer of the Year' along with *Memories & Dust* co-producer, the much respected Wayne Connolly.

But Pyke insists that the whole music production thing is not so much a backup plan, but rather an abiding passion, an inseparable and indispensable part of his creative process. It's something he's always done since he first began knocking quietly on the door of the Australian independent music scene as part of Sydney band, An Empty Flight, in 2002.

"Music and the production element have pretty much gone hand in hand ever since I started, as far back as my first band. We always co-produced the demos, and we co-produced an EP with Paul McKercher years ago. Then, when I went solo, there was still never any separation – I was always either producing or co-producing my demos and my EPs."

After knocking more loudly for a while with a couple of solo EPs and some Triple J high rotation – *Kids Don't Sell Your Hopes So Fast* won the Jaxter songwriting prize, the prize money from which he invested in a ProTools 002 rig – Josh finally broke down the door with *Middle Of The Hill*, a lyrically relentless three-minute autobiography which, without drums or even a discernible chorus, lodged itself at No. 19 on the Triple J Top 100.

PRODUCTION PYKE

What follows is the result of two conversations with Pyke. The first, conducted by phone early in the year, took place as Josh had just submitted completed demos for his next album to Ivy League and was awaiting feedback. The second occurred some months later at a Sydney studio during recording sessions for the album.

Even over the phone, one senses that Pyke is not here to get his picture taken; that his thoughts are seldom far from his music. It would seem he barely has time to look up from the console of his home studio to check his chart position, let alone ponder what he should wear to the next gig or awards night.

We began by discussing his production aesthetic, and indeed, what constitutes 'production'.

Josh Pyke: Production is such a difficult thing to actually define. When somebody sits down and

writes a song they have the chord progression, the melody, the lyrics, and that's the core of the song. For me, production then involves things like sonic embellishments, ideas and motifs and signature melody lines. It can involve writing, augmenting the song and the structure, and the arrangement. It's very hands on, and for me as a songwriter it's very much a natural step. It's also getting the best performance out of musicians, having little techniques to ensure the musician is fulfilling his or her potential with each take. And Wayne's amazing at that. I learn something from everybody that I work with, but Wayne [Connolly] in particular is amazing at eliciting the best performance out of the musicians that he works with.

MOC: But what with the success of Josh Pyke the Artist, it seems the Josh Pyke the Producer will need to take a back seat for the time being.

JP: Right. But I've been in the game long enough to realise that you're only ever as good as your last batch of songs. But I'm incredibly passionate about the development of songs. That creative process of taking the rough song and turning it into something sonically lush and amazing – that's still my favourite part of music. I've got a little studio setup at home and I'm actually currently demoing for the next record, and all I do is sit there – it gets quite hot in my apartment during the day with all the valve gear heating up – so I sit there in my underwear demoing all day with the blinds drawn! I love it, it's just the best fun.

MOC: Do you put on a songwriting hat first, then the producer's hat? Or are the two roles inextricably intertwined?

JP: For me they're inseparable. That's the thing about demoing: I'll have a song's basic structure thrashed out on the acoustic guitar, but in my head I can hear every other little bit that needs to be on there – harmonies and interesting instrumentation or whatever. The process of demoing is very much fundamental and just as important as the initial songwriting process because it takes the song from an acoustic track into this whole other thing. For example, when I first wrote the song *Memories & Dust* I could hear the timpani and orchestral bells motif, and I didn't exactly know how to get that happening. So I did a rough demo of it and went into the studio with Wayne and we worked it up. He had the experience to get it happening exactly the way I was hearing it in my head.

DEMO QUALITY

MOC: So at what point do you generally let a commercial studio take over from the home studio?

JP: I'll usually demo a song at home and then take that template to the studio where we'll basically either redo things that have too much of a demo quality, or sometimes we'll leave stuff in there specifically *because* it has that demo quality.

MOC: So elements of your demos might eventually end up part of the finished product.

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JP: Yes. I do everything at home on ProTools, and always to a click so we can fix stuff and be able to work to a solid template for the song. Often we'll redo the acoustic guitars in a more hi-fi way than just one mic in a bedroom, recording them properly in the studio. Contrary to what is probably common practice, we usually do the drums last.

MOC: How so?

JPL: I'll always build the track up the same way: I'll do an acoustic guitar and vocals, then I'll do the harmonies, then I usually do bass and electric guitars, and then whatever other instruments are involved, by which time I'll have an idea of what drums and percussion I want, if in fact the track needs drums at all. I'll work that up in MIDI just to convey the basic idea – I might do an acoustic shaker but I'll do kick and snare on a keyboard. Then I'll give that to a drummer to figure out a part along those lines. We'll go into the studio and do all the other stuff, and then get the drummer to come in and play to what's largely a completed track, as opposed to starting with the drums

and working up from there. So it's kind of backwards, but it's always worked for me.

MO'C: The songs seem to have an organic feel notwithstanding the click.

JP: I've always heard criticisms of working to a click and I can understand it sometimes makes things sound too rigid, but I think the thing that counteracts that is how the rest of the instrumentation is mostly done by me. And, while I'm not a super tight bass player, I have a certain clunkiness that can sound quite organic.

MOC: And if you're playing all the other instruments then I suppose the groove is going to have a consistency.

JP: That's right. I did get other musicians to play on various tracks but... yes, I think there's a cohesive kind of clunkiness to a lot of the record. And that's what I wanted, I didn't want it to sound too polished.

MOC: Do you adopt that same approach with songs that don't end up having drums, such as *Middle Of The Hill* or *Beg Your Pardon*?

JP: Yes, I think the acoustic guitar has such a rhythmic, percussive quality, it often takes the role of the snare. So particularly with those two songs that you mentioned, I just did them at home. For *Beg Your Pardon* I had a kick drum and snare at home in my room. I recorded the kick, and then just turned the snare drum upside down and was brushing across the snare chain on the bottom of the drum, while tapping with my fingers on the snare – that's the whole drum track. That sort of improvisation often arises out of not having access to a drummer at the time of doing the demos. I think a lot of the time that works best for my sort of songs.

SONG WRITING

MO'C: Can you tell me something about the songwriting process for you?

JP: I think I probably write more when I'm on the road because I'm a bit more displaced, and I find that if I'm in uncomfortable situations I have more inspiration to write songs. So I'll often just come up with little bits and pieces in a hotel room or at soundcheck, and I'll do a series of little scratch demos on Garage Band on



SIGNAL FLOW

Chris Vallejo: Josh was big on having everything 'set up' so once we were going, we didn't have to muck about putting up mics etc. So every instrument had an 'area' that was left as-is. This made things quick and easy.

- Most of Josh's vocals were recorded with a Wagner U47, although a couple of tracks were done with a Coles 4040 ribbon. I think one track was also done with a Sony C37a. The pre was either a Neve 1084 or Universal Audio 2-610.

The compressor was typically a UREI 1176. We also had an AWA compressor which we used a little. On a couple of tracks we used a Studer B67 as a slapback delay.

- Acoustic guitar was recorded using a combination of a Coles 4038 and a Neumann KM85. We sometimes used the U47 as a distant mic, but I'm not sure if this was used in the mix.
- Piano was recorded with both an Electrovoice RE20 and an old RCA

44BX ribbon.

- Bass was DI'd into a UA 2-610 onto a Distressor. Josh played it in the control room.
- Electric Guitar was a Shure SM57 on a Roland JC120 into a Langevin Dual Vocal Combo pre.

For the tracks with drums, the setup was:

- Pair of Coles 4040s on overheads (through a Focusrite ISA215 preamp)
- Beyerdynamic M201 on snare top (through a Neve 1084)

- Josephson C42 snare bottom (through a UA 2-610 pre)
- Kick In was an Electrovoice N/D868 (with Neve pre)
- Kick Out was a Rode Classic II (UA 2-610 pre)
- Toms were EV RE20s
- Room was a Sony C37a.

All the tracks with drums were recorded to a Studer A80 two-inch 24-track @ 30ips. Everything else was recorded into tools using Apogee AD16X converters.





ENGINEER CHRIS VALLEJO

According to Linear Recording's Chris Vallejo, Josh Pyke knows his stuff on either side of the console. "He's quite into the recording process. He knows what mics are good, and he understands a good pre and good converters and which mics to use where." I asked Chris to elaborate on Josh's approach to the sessions:

Chris Vallejo: I think he just wanted it to be fairly honest. There were no tricks, it was just simple old-fashioned recording. And not 50 million takes – not everything was perfect, but he didn't want it to be perfect either. He'd worked most of his harmonies and parts and guitar bits out already so we just had to listen to them so that he'd remember them, and we'd just basically re-track it. All of the legwork for working out all of the parts was already done, which is what made it so quick, probably why we were able to get 16 or 17 songs done in a short space of time. I think we had a target of a song every day and a half.

MOC: If the demos were of a sufficiently high quality and musically all the parts and arrangements were there, why bother re-doing everything?

CV: Well, it's not quite the same when you're sitting in your bedroom trying to record your own vocals, versus being in the studio with an engineer who can actually record the takes. Even though he was producing, it meant that there was another person to say 'you need to do that one again' or 'you can't quite understand that vocal'. And also it was about improving the signal chain as well.



my laptop, just using the inbuilt computer mic, to progressively develop the song further and refine it. When I get to where I'm comfortable with a finished structure, I'll start thinking about a proper demo when I have the time.

MOC: As these song ideas are arriving in hotel rooms, are they accompanied even then by textural or arrangement ideas?

JP: Yeah, for me it's always been the sort of thing where I'll hear all those production elements like other sonic palettes and melody lines and stuff from the beginning of writing. Which is good, but it's also quite frustrating sometimes because you know that there's going to be another six months before you can actually get those songs out of your head!

PART II – IN THE STUDIO

Fast forward a couple of months to an Autumn morning at Linear Recording, a small studio in Sydney's Leichhardt where Josh Pyke and engineer owner Chris Vallejo are about to commence the day's work.

From where I sit chatting with them in the control room I can see into the live room where an array of instruments either stand ready in racks or are set up to record – various vintage keyboards, a piano, racks of guitars, a mandolin, banjo, and an electric bass. Even the glockenspiel is miked up.

Recording sessions for Josh's second album have been in full swing – quietly – for what will end up being five weeks, with a timetable to record all 17 of the tracks that Josh had submitted as demos. For the most part it's been just the two of them, artist and engineer.

And the producer?

JP: I put my hand up to produce it. At the same time this is my first shot at producing a whole album, and because it's an important record for me I didn't want to f#%k it up. I wanted some guidance on the songs that we'd decided were the main contenders for singles. So I've worked with Paul McKercher on two songs, and then I'm recording 13 songs by myself here at Linear, after which I'll do two songs with Wayne Connolly. The mixing is up in the air at the moment, but I'll probably do half of it overseas and half here. And I'm mixing the B-sides myself as well. I saw it as a way of getting more experience as a producer, without potentially ruining somebody else's career. If I screw it up, I'm only screwing myself up.

MOC: You're your own crash test dummy then.

JP: That's right. With Paul's songs we tracked everything here at Linear except for strings and brass, which we did over at Electric Avenue. I got Dave Williams from Augie March to play drums and Matt Fell (multi-instrumentalist producer from Love Hz studios located in the same building) to play bass on a couple of songs. Josh Schubert, the drummer from my touring band, played on five tracks and he'll end up doing the two tracks with Wayne as well.

MOC: It would seem that you have that

simpatico with your co-producers, not only with Wayne, but also with Paul McKercher who you've also previously worked with.

JP: Many years ago, yes, with Empty Flight on the very first EP we did.

MOC: Was that a good experience?

JP: It was amazing. We used Paul back then because he'd produced all the Augie March stuff and we were huge fans. I'm a big fan of his work, all the stuff that he's done since then with Augie March, and with Blasko (McKercher engineered Sarah Blasko's *What The Sea Wants The Sea Will Have*).

MOC: Can you describe what it is that he brings to a project?

JP: Like Wayne Connolly, he's a musician, so he can actually pick up an instrument and demonstrate an idea. We did a bit of pre-production round at my house and we listened through the ProTools files and cut and pasted things to do with different arrangements, and it was just a lot easier because he could just pick up a guitar and put a capo on the 8th fret and say "I'm thinking that something like this could be great". All these guys know more about music than I do and I kind of need that sometimes because it takes me out my comfort zone and I learn a lot. With all these things, as much as they're going to get the best results for my songs, I also see them as like a free training program.

Paul has sort of been acting as tech advisor on things, so he'll drop in and make sure we're on track. Because I'm literally going in and performing and then coming out and doing all the ProTools editing and comp'ing and stuff, he's come in to make sure that I'm not screwing things up.

MOC: And ensuring you're not losing perspective as well, I guess?

JP: Well that's the other thing. That's definitely a risk in doing this by myself. But because my demos were pretty developed, any time I feel like I'm disappearing up my own arse I just go back and listen to the demos and remember that this is what everybody was happy with; this is the direction, and I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel with these recording sessions. In fact, a lot of the time we're using original vocal harmonies, bass or guitars from those original demos in the final versions – if it sounds good we're keeping it.

STEADY AS SHE GOES

MOC: It strikes me you've resisted that gratuitous knee-jerk step often taken by bands who experience some degree of success with album No. 1, and then promptly head overseas to record with a big-name producer. Or considering you won 'Producer of the Year' last year, you could have gone all out this time around with big production in a big studio.

JP: Well, the thing is I don't have the need for a massive studio. You don't need to pay \$1200 a day for a giant room with a grand piano that I'm not going to use for a month and a half. The

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JOSH'S HOME STUDIO SETUP

"It's basically a Pro Tools 002-based studio. Every time I've gotten a little bit of money from a publishing advance or whatever I invested it in gear."

- ProTools 002 Rack (legacy of the Jaxter prize)
- Apple MacBook Pro laptop
- Sebatron Thorax
- Bellari valve pre
- A pair of Quad 8 vintage solid-state mic pre's (reputedly part of the desk that the soundtrack to *Star Wars* was recorded on)
- Reslo ribbon mic
- Rode NTK & NT2000
- 2 x Guild acoustic guitars
- 1 x Larivee Acoustic guitar
- 1 x Guild 12-string guitar
- 1 x Guild baritone guitar
- Fender mandolin
- Fender P bass
- Fender banjo
- Assorted keyboards
- Various percussion, glockenspiel, harmonicas etc

bottom line about making records is that there are budgets involved, and because I'm the acting producer on this record I want to make a record that's excellent, but within a budget. It's finding the right mix of having awesome gear and a great space, and also comfort and a reasonable price.

If you have good songs, really nice, not over-the-top but refined arrangements, and good performances, *and* a certain level of sonic quality, then the rest is probably irrelevant – and might just end up being a distraction in the creative process.

MO'C: We touched upon the writing earlier. Can we revisit the process briefly to track the song's evolution in terms of arrangement.

JP: As mentioned, I'll often write the song on the road and do maybe 10 versions on Garageband until I arrive at a finished song.

He decides to demonstrate, setting up his laptop and opening iTunes to reveal a list of song fragments in various stages of evolution – a chorus here, a few lines there, a verse idea – with titles that often mark the geographical location in which the idea was put down... 'London idea'... 'London idea #2'... 'UK Idea Middle 8'... "This is a version of Lighthouse that I did in the UK with my violinist in a hotel room..."

JP: Then eventually I'll do a completed version, still in Garageband – just guitar and vocal but completed in terms of structure – which then goes into a new folder for completed songs. Then I'll just live with it for a while, and won't overthink it. Then at home I'll do my proper demo, and *that's* when I really jump into the proper creative process; that's where it's really spontaneous and I'm just sitting in a small room and grabbing different instruments and playing ideas and working out different harmonies. And *that* for me is like a process of real joy and spontaneity and really feeling creative and joyous about the whole thing. I'll often be just dancing around my house listening to tracks. So when I come in here to the studio, that process is already done and my job in here is more as a producer of myself, to maintain that general vibe. That's why it's kind of easy to separate

it because my producer head is saying, 'don't worry if this guitar track's not perfect, don't over-think this, don't mess with this too much' – but then I'm also reminding myself that this has to be of a certain quality. If I was producing another artist I think I probably *would* strive for some higher degree of perfection, but I don't think my fans are really going to care if I vibe out on a guitar string.

MO'C: Better that than to sanitise the soul out of it.

JP: That's right. And I know that's how Wayne is with his recordings too. Paul McKercher's also very open to that, the proof of which is that on one of the songs that I did with him we kept the entire vocal take and harmonies from the demo. I can hear the sonic difference between the track that I did at home and the one that I recorded here – it doesn't sound as high fidelity but it's just got a vibe. And some of the harmonies are slightly off, and I can hear that too, but I don't really care.

POSTSCRIPT

Just as I'm about to press SEND on this story, the postman delivers an advance copy of *Chimney's Afire*, the new Josh Pyke album (scheduled for release Oct 4), to my door. Half of the album has been mixed by Paul McKercher at Studios 301, the other half by Rob Schnapf in LA. I quickly cue to the tracks that I had heard in the studio that day, and recall my notes and Josh Pyke's observations: *Candle In My Window* – one of Paul McKercher's collaborations, replete with Salvation Army band horns, and an intro instantly evocative of Simon & Garfunkel; *Our House Breathing* – re-recorded guitar and piano, the rest is Balmain demo; and *Even In Corners* – a ribbon mic used on the vocal for that slight grittiness.

Listening to this music with its restless melodies and organic textures, I'm reminded of the remark that stuck in my head as I left the studio, suggesting as it did something essential about its author, the producer. "I'm obsessed with counter melodies... with coming up with the right ones for the song, that suit the vocal line. That's the skill." ■