

CHIC CHIC BOOM!

THE ART OF PRODUCTION WITH JOE CHICCARELLI

He's already well known to AT readers, and here Joe Chiccarelli offers us some powerful insight into the magical art of record production.

Text: **Braddon Williams**

▶ On a hot August day in Los Angeles last year, I ventured to The Mix Room in Burbank to meet with one of the modern masters of record production, Joe Chiccarelli. A renowned producer, engineer and mixer, Chiccarelli has been behind the desk of an untold number of artists: The White Stripes, Tori Amos, U2, Beck, The Shins, My Morning Jacket and more recently, Gin Wigmore, Australia's own Augie March, and Leena. Joe has won numerous Grammy Awards over his career, the most recent of them being *Best Engineered Album* in 2008 for his work on The Raconteurs', *Consolers Of The Lonely*.

On the morning I met with Joe we talked about all aspects of record making, from the technical issues of recording through to the relationship that exists between himself and the artist. Like many of the records he's made, his approach to music is simple, pure and honest, and is best described by Joe himself:

DIVING STRAIGHT IN

Joe Chiccarelli: A wise man once told me, you can make the biggest change to a musical sound by: 1) changing the musician, 2) changing the instruments, 3) changing the microphone, 4) changing the mic preamp, 5) changing the EQ, and 6) changing the compressor. The point being: the more you affect things on the *other* side of the glass, the more interesting the sounds will be. Even when you've got every processor in the world at your disposal you're still not going to influence the sonic outcome as much as would a different musician with a different mindset playing a different instrument, or the *same* person playing the *same* part with a different instrument or a different amplifier.

Often as a producer all you can do is point people in the right direction. What you hope – and this is my favourite working relationship – is that when you suggest something, and a musician understands your idea, that he or she makes it their own. Above all else you want people to have ownership over the part they're playing and feel good about it – they always perform at their best this way.

Often I'll say: 'You know what bugs me about this verse, it feels a little dull, it's not grooving... can we come up with something that kicks the song along without making it busier or heavy handed?' or; 'I hear something like this...' (Joe plays a beat on his knee). I don't necessarily want someone to play that *exact* part. I want them to say, 'Okay, that beat feels a little ordinary, but I see what you're getting at, let me do this...'

The one thing I realised many years ago is that there are very few people who can think like every musician in an orchestra. I can come up with an idea for a guitar part or a keyboard part, sure. But I can never really come up with a sense of nuance

that a keyboard player or a drummer or a singer can because I'm not the performer. You have to leave room for reinterpretation.

Braddon Williams: Do you have to be a chameleon to help the artist achieve their best?

JC: No, but I go into every project with a picture of how I want the finished disc to sound. This includes the arrangements, the song choices and the sonic vision. When I meet with the artist early on in the pre-production process, I discuss these ideas with them and if my direction agrees with their vision then it's a pretty simple process. If it doesn't then I have to adjust my outlook. After all it's the artist's music, not mine. If things don't seem to gel during pre-production, the solution may be as extreme as all of us agreeing to go our separate ways, but this very rarely happens.

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

BW: Some producers are very technical; others are more musical. What do you feel your strengths are as a producer, engineer and mixer?

JC: You know, the exciting part about producing is that your role changes with every project. Sometimes you need to be very involved with the music, sometimes it's the sound, and at other times it's strictly a matter of being the one in the room who firmly holds onto the vision. The other thing I've noticed is that the more years I do this the more I find it even more important to give vague, general and sometimes even cryptic directions to the musicians and engineers. The more room I can leave for them, the more freedom they have and the more ownership they feel for the original idea. It's about setting a path, sowing the seeds or opening a door, not so much about dictating a specific part or sound. The truth is I just don't feel I'm a good enough engineer, musician or artist to be all things to all people.

BW: How do you stem the natural flow of production ideas when you're engineering someone else's production?

JC: Engineering an album is actually a bit of a vacation for me from all the responsibilities that come with producing. If I'm engineering for another producer I still have my opinions but hold off voicing them until someone asks, or until people are stuck in a trap and need a fresh viewpoint. In any album project there are usually enough opinions from the artist, producer, A&R, band manager and everyone else. Having said that, I do spend a good deal of energy trying to be the cheerleader for the artist – positive reinforcement goes a long way.

MAN OF THE WORLD

As music production becomes more global with each passing year, producers and engineers are often required to travel interstate or overseas to work with an artist. So what does Joe feel about all that travelling – working in different studios and time spent away from home?

JC: It keeps me fresh. The first few days of a session can be tricky when you don't understand the control room monitoring, or you need to spend some time moving instruments around in the tracking room to find the right spot. But I actually find it liberating in many ways. You certainly can't fall into a routine when you work all over the world. Having the ability

to get away from distractions helps me lose myself in the project more. You tend to build tighter relationships with the artists that way too – it speeds up the bonding process.

BW: Do you travel with any particular gear?

JC: The only gear I always bring with me, unless it's a simple overdub session, are my Tannoy 10-inch monitors.

BW: Is there anything specific that you look for in a studio when you travel, or are you comfortable working with whatever a client provides you?

JC: I tend to choose the studio for each project. For instance, for My Morning Jacket I figured it was time for a more urban environment so we decided to record at Avatar in NYC. With The White Stripes, Jack White wanted to go for a more modern, aggressive tone, so we chose Blackbird Studios, a state-of-the-art facility in Nashville. The best part about Blackbird is that the studio has the largest collection of vintage outboard gear and microphones you've ever seen – it's the perfect mix of modern and classic.

BW: Do you have a preference for digital multitracking or analogue tape?

JC: Not specifically. It's usually about the band, the accessibility of the gear, the track count, the depth of editing that needs to be done etc. Every album is different. To give you some examples: *Icky Thump* was recorded on analogue 16-track with EMTEC tape; The Raconteurs' second album, *Consolers of the Lonely*, was dual 16-track analogue machines locked together and recorded on RMG Tape; *Winning the Night Away* by The Shins was all recorded in ProTools at 24-bit/96k and mixed down to analogue tape. *In Our Bedroom After The War* [by Stars] was recorded 24-bit/48k and mixed to analogue half-inch tape; My Morning Jacket's *Evil Urges* was 24-track analogue locked to ProTools (24-bit/96k) for additional tracks, and mixed down to one-inch tape at 15IPS. And the Augie March *Watch Me Disappear* album was all recorded to ProTools at 24-bit/96k through Apogee converters and mixed to one-inch analogue tape at 30IPS.

BW: Have you ever mixed a song completely 'in the box'?

JC: All the time. I've made some great sounding albums in ProTools. I just prefer the colour that a great sounding analogue console can add to most rock albums. For a lot of pop albums, the 'in-the-box' approach can be great simply because it allows you the ability to recall the mix.

IN RECENT TIMES

Joe's career has spanned a number of decades and during that time he has achieved incredible success with artists such as Elton John, U2, Beck and even Frank Zappa. Despite such an impressive back catalogue, Joe remains hungry for interesting projects and in recent years he's been involved in some massive success stories. These include the hugely successful, Grammy Award winning album *Icky Thump*, by The White Stripes, The Raconteurs' second album *Consolers of the Lonely*, *Evil Urges* by My Morning Jacket, *Winning the Night Away* by The Shins, *In Our Bedroom After The War* by Stars, and the fourth album by Australia's own Augie March, *Watch Me Disappear*.



REGARDING ICKY THUMP

JC: I have to say, I adore Jack. I have so much love and respect for him. He's all about the performance and the connection with the listener. He is so tapped into that. It's astounding when you're around him because it makes you acutely aware of it too and you grow to protect it with your life. With Jack it's all about spontaneity, honesty and magic, not about bullshit. As an engineer he is an absolute dream to work with because he just leaves you alone, trusts you – he's totally hands off. This allows you to be creative and inspires you to work harder and have more ownership in the project.

He doesn't over think; he doesn't labour. It's all about: 'Is this magical, do you connect to it, does it get you off, do you get excited?' When I'm doing guitar solos or vocals with him, for instance, he will ask how a performance sounded and I'll say; 'Ya know, I liked this and I liked that, but I'm not sure about that...' and he'll say, 'Okay, erase it, let's do it again.' This won't stop until that magic – that *connection* – is there.

BW: If you had to attribute one factor to the sonic quality of *Icky Thump*, what would it be?

JC: The tracking room at Blackbird Studio D, as well as its live echo chamber. I used the room tone and the live chambers a *lot*, whether it was for bagpipes or a lead vocal. There was always some type of ambience captured off the floor. Even down to the *Icky Thump* synth sound, which was just a room mic placed five feet away from the speaker case – no direct, no close mic.

THE RACONTEURS: CONSOLERS OF THE LONELY

BW: You recorded Jack White's other band, *The Raconteurs*, which really captivated the rock world's imagination. Like *Icky Thump*, you've mentioned this album was recorded to tape. From your perspective, did the recording medium influence the way the band performed?

JC: Recording that album to tape meant that the performances had to be spot on – it definitely placed more demands on the players. There was never a click track used so communication and guide vocals were crucial. Patrick [Keeler] is a very live drummer, very improvisational as well. So often we would edit sections together to grab that magical moment.

BW: How much was the recording of this album influenced by your time working on *Icky Thump*?

JC: Actually it was quite different to The White Stripes album. *Icky Thump* was about making each sound as huge as possible. For The Raconteurs it was about making each part count equally. Sometimes this meant a thinner guitar sound, or a drier drum approach to help an instrument find its spot in the mix.

BW: The drums on *Icky Thump* and *Consolers...* are massive, yet very raw and organic sounding. Is there much mix processing on these kits to bring out their aggression, or is that just the way they were played and captured?

JC: I'm fortunate in that both Patrick Keeler and Meg White are great drummers. Both are easy to work with and open to trying new things. I'm not afraid of heavy compression or EQ while tracking either. Basically I approach every album the same

way, in that I'm always mixing while I'm recording. In other words, I'm aiming for what I want tracks to sound like in the final mix *as I track them*. So all the effects are added live. That's why *Icky Thump* was mixed in five days – two to three songs per day; most of the decisions were made during tracking.

BW: Presumably that means you follow your gut as to what you think will suit the song, get your sound and go for it?

JC: I try hard to change things up to accommodate whatever is required for a specific song. I'll use different combinations of mics depending on the song. Maybe for some of the bigger rock songs there could be six room mics, on other songs there might only be four mics on the whole kit. I never print 20 tracks of drums and decide which mics work best later. I make decisions on the spot. Going into the session, and certainly *at* the session, I try to commit to what's going to sound right for the song. Whether it's a simple or a complex setup, I commit to it there: craft the sound, make the decision, and live or die by it.

MY MORNING JACKET

BW: Jim James [My Morning Jacket's front man and co-producer of *Evil Urges*] said that he wanted to get away from more 'traditional' rock sounds on *Evil Urges* and get back to a more live sound. Is this something that was targeted consciously by you as the producer?

JC: I think the goal for *Evil Urges* was to do something organic yet experimental, but at the same time retain the life and spontaneity of their live shows. And that's where the studio came in. Avatar in New York is a great sounding wooden tracking room [see pic] – formerly The Power Station where all those huge sounding '80s albums were made. You put drums in that room and it's as if they've been pumped through a Marshall amp! There are a lot of thick aggressive early reflections that reinforce every sound you record in there.

The trickiest part about recording drums in the main space was finding the right cymbals. Because everything in that room is so amplified, at times it was a challenge to find just the right cymbals that wouldn't compete with the high end of the guitars.

We also took advantage of the studio's vocal booth for some of the more old-school R&B-type drum sounds.

BW: The vocals on this record are very distinctive, especially all the high falsetto parts, and layering. What was your approach to vocals on *Evil Urges*?

JC: A number of the vocals are live off the floor. We did a lot of experimenting with different vocal mics and reverbs. Jim uses these and sings differently based on what he's hearing in the 'phones so it was always important to get a sound for him that he was inspired to sing along to. The mics ranged from a [Shure] SM7 to a [Neumann] U47 to an old Altec 639 'birdcage' mic. The reverbs were as varied as an old AMS RMX to an EMT plate to a cheap Zoom reverb. In most cases he would do just two or three takes and I would comp' them together.

A WAR-TORN BEDROOM OF STARS

BW: You mixed Stars' fourth album, *In Our Bedroom After The War*, at Phase One in Toronto back in 2007 without working on either the



production or the engineering. Does not having been involved in the recording of an album affect the way you approach the mixes?

JC: In some ways, certainly. Stars came to me with a pretty complete album for the most part, however, we did do a few days of overdubs on the single *The Night Starts Here*. When I brought up the faders to mix that song, it just didn't feel complete to me, so I suggested adding a drum kit and changing the bass line as well as doing some changes to the song form.

BW: Which room did you mix in at Phase One?

JC: We mixed the album in the API Legacy Plus room. I love the tone of these consoles especially for mixing. They are open and fast but still have size and punch. The EQs are different to the standard API 550 but have a great aggressive tone. I like the combination of tracking on an old Neve and mixing on an API. They compliment each other very well as the API has a forward aggressive midrange, while Neves tend to have a nice rounder, softer bottom, and the combination of recording on one and mixing on the other is really great.

SSLs are great for records that are really layered, dense and complex because you can chisel things out and make room for stuff, whereas older consoles tend to work better on records that are sparser, more simple, and more honest.

BW: When you mix, how long do you typically spend on a song?

JC: I usually take a couple of hours to get my sounds together then the next several hours are spent balancing. From there it's a matter of working with the artist to make sure they hear what they want in the track. What I really wanted to add overall to the Stars album was some aggression and cinematic qualities. Some of the keyboard parts had real majesty and I wanted to try and put them in their own sonic space. In most cases I just used simple delays or programs on an SPX90 or in many cases the Roland Space Echo. The tracks were recorded extremely well at the Warehouse in Vancouver, so the mixing of that album was actually relatively simple.

WINCING FROM A KICK IN THE SHINS

BW: *Wincing the Night Away* [the third studio album by The Shins], is another record you co-produced with the leader of the band. What was the relationship like between yourself and James Mercer? Was there a lot of collaboration, or were the duties fairly separated?

JC: Every album I do regardless of what the credit reads is a co-production. It's the artist's music, and hopefully they have a vision for it. If they don't then I shouldn't be in the studio with them until they do. James is one of the most unique and wonderful artists I've ever worked with. We instantly hit it off. He and the band were hysterically funny to work with.

He started this album on his own at home, and when I came in he needed feedback and objectivity. Some songs were built on his original tracking beds, some songs we started again from scratch while others were totally reinvented. Some of the simpler songs are his home demos with a new lead vocal, an overdub or two and a proper mix.

In some cases we used a drum track or just a guitar part and built on that. Often it was really a matter of reworking song structure for flow and dynamics. We did do several days of vocals and odd overdubs at James' home studio as well. Overall I think we spent about 8-10 weeks between recording and mixing and doing a few B-sides etc.

BW: Did the DIY approach to this record make your job difficult?

JC: Luckily, James has a very singular aesthetic, so the sounds he chose at home have a lot of personality and were inspirational to build upon. My job was to come up with other atmospheres and textures that supported them. From there it was a matter of getting great vocal performances from him and working out background vocal ideas, solos and making sure the groove was right.

BW: There's a beautiful ambience to this record, and some interesting effects. Can you share with us the general mix setup for this record?

JC: The console we used to mix this record, coincidentally, was an API Legacy Plus, the same as the one at Phase One. But the real secret weapon was the liberal use of spring reverb, compressed plate reverb, tape delay and lots of cheap guitar stomp boxes. Many sounds were re-amped and re-amped again. The overall tone comes from a Crane Song Ibis EQ that was put on the stereo bus. The real hero of the album, however, was Emily Lazar, the mastering engineer. Since I was in an unfamiliar monitoring environment I think my mixes needed more help than they usually do. Emily really made this album sound exactly the way it did in the control room.

MARCHING INTO ROUNDHEAD

BW: In 2008 you ventured south to New Zealand to produce Augie March's fourth studio album, *Watch Me Disappear*. What can you tell us about that experience?

JC: Glenn Richards, Augie March's frontman, is one of the most talented songwriters on the planet right now. I really believe that. There are some songs on this record that just kill me. They are phenomenal. I have so much admiration for his whole style and approach. The rest of the band are talented producers and solo artists too – all very musical. Every single one of those guys was capable of producing this record, so in some ways my skills weren't required. The record label input was also strong so it was my job to find a balance between what A&R wanted and what the band wanted.

BW: Given all that, what was your goal going into the recording?

JC: If there was one thing I wanted to bring to this project, it was to allow the vocal to be heard. I

“ I do spend a good deal of energy trying to be the cheerleader for the artist. Positive reinforcement goes a long way ”

wanted you to 'get' the songs on first listen. I wanted to make sure you had the reaction: 'Wow, this guy has got something to say, wow this guy has a really original sense of melody and beautiful lyrics.' To this day, every time I listen to it I still find something new in his lyrics that blows me away – Glenn is a really special talent.

BW: You recorded at Neil Finn's Roundhead Studios in Auckland. What was that experience like?

JC: It was fantastic. It's a stunning building, there's a perfectly restored Neve 8088 console in the control room, it's a fantastic complex, and Neil has got to be the most gracious, wonderful, kind person in the world. It was a brand new studio when we worked there so it had some quirks with the monitoring admittedly, and I don't think anyone had really tracked in the live room before. So tracking drums was a bit of a challenge.

But the great thing about Neil Finn is that if you tell him, 'You know, I wish the room sound had this or that,' the next morning when you show up there's a construction crew in there! There were a couple of questions I had about the monitoring in the control room, and next thing I knew he had a crew there moving the console because they determined it was a foot further back in the room than it should have been, and sure enough, when they moved it everything sounded so much better. The entire staff were the coolest people – I would go back there in a heartbeat.

BW: How did you go about capturing Augie March's performances?

JC: We cut the whole band live to ProTools. I always try to go for as live a feel as possible with as many people playing, even if you end up redoing an

instrument later on. I think having all that energy there really makes a difference during tracking, whether you cut to click or not, and I always try to have a guide vocal in there and make it a performance.

BW: You then mixed the album back in LA at The Mix Room. Did you mix down to tape after recording digitally?

JC: I promised the band we would mix down to one-inch as opposed to half-inch or quarter-inch. So we mixed down to one-inch analogue. I know this sounds silly, but it sounds twice as big as half inch! (Laughs). It's so much more dimensional. Analogue tape sounds great to begin with, and half-inch sounds great, but one inch has a bit more punch.

A TIME FOR REFLECTION

BW: Do you ever reflect on past records or try to replicate previous successes?

JC: There have only been a few times in my life where I've worried about 'beating' a previous record, mostly you just get caught up in what you're creating at the time. Every batch of songs that an artist or a band makes is different so I don't think you can ever really compare an album you're working on to a previous recording.

Your job as a producer is to serve the song and bring out its best. The more I connect with that, the less I worry about commerciality, or past albums, or whatever other pressures exist. In the end it comes down to wanting each song to shine by working out what makes it tick. That's the thing to focus on – always. You're into the minutia of things constantly in this job, but at the same time you *have* to remain objective and a fan of the artist. You have to be a first-time listener at every juncture – be able to step back and hear a song like you're hearing it for the

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first time on the car radio. When you develop that skill you do a better job, and after that, all the other pressures become noise in the background.

When I was 20 years old and working as an assistant engineer, I was privileged to work with Jerry Wexler, who founded Atlantic Records and produced Aretha Franklin, John Coltrane, Dire Straits and Etta James. Sadly, Jerry passed away recently at 91. I learned so much about making records from him because he was all about listening to the song, all about being an objective listener – taking in the big picture and not the details. I learned so much about perspective from him.

A few years later during my first album production project, coincidentally Jerry was working on another project in the studio next door. I was so thrilled to see him because I'd grown and come into my own, so I invited him in and played him a track. I was really proud of it, but after he listened to it, he peered over at the console, looked at the scribble strip and went through all the tracks. He then went over to the vocal track and pressed solo, and said: 'See that, when you can solo that one track by itself and it holds your attention for three minutes, then you have a record.' My life was changed at that moment because I realised he was talking about the song, the vocal delivery, the melody, all those rudimentary things.

All the sounds that I'd labored over, all the parts that I'd helped sculpt with the band, really didn't mean a thing unless the soul was there. Maybe he didn't think the vocal performance was great, maybe he didn't think the song was great, maybe he just didn't connect with it – that was profound. We get caught up in all this technical crap and forget it's about the honesty and the emotion, all those things that connect with your brain are so important, and everything else is just unnecessary. ■

