

Recording The John Butler Trio

'Sunrise Over Sea' is the independent success story of 2004. Mark O'Connor finds out how this 'trio' made it to the top... without compromise.



Photos: Tom Walker



“That would be ‘Miss Peaches & Cream’ in the background perhaps?”
“Yes, that’s her.”

So begins my conversation with John Butler, a discussion that soon reveals an honesty and integrity that seems to be present in all aspects of his new album *Sunrise Over Sea*. From the classic look of the Decca-esque record cover to the songs themselves, this honesty carries over into the performances and the process by which the album was recorded – no wardrobe department or costume changes here. My interview with John reveals a quietly self-confident artist, not without some small but good-natured self-deprecation. He speaks about his songs as though they have identities of their own, souls even.

It would seem that the record-buying public too has responded to the unmistakable authenticity in Mr. Butler’s work – a commodity perhaps deemed to be in short supply in the upper reaches of the charts these days. *Sunrise Over Sea* is the first album ever by an independent artist to enter the charts at No.1. John’s song *Zebra* also won the prestigious APRA *Song of the Year* award, and at time of writing, *Sunrise Over Sea* had returned to the top of the charts in response to a sell-out national tour.

The beginning of my phone conversation with John from his home near Byron Bay on the eve of his departure for a two-month tour of the US is punctuated by the sound of his baby daughter in the background, subject of the song *Peaches & Cream*.

A New Dawn

Mark O’Connor: *The title of this album seems so appropriate in many ways, suggesting as it does a new beginning, a fresh approach to things, which you certainly seem to have taken with this album. A new band, a different recording environment and a new engineer, all of which has resulted in a fresh sound – not to mention your most successful record to date. How has your approach to this record as a producer differed from your other records?*

John Butler: I think I took more of an active production role this time. I came to this album knowing a lot more than I had on the previous albums and with more of a vision for the songs. Many of these were left over from the *Three* era and had been constantly stewing in my brain, subjected to various influences from stuff I’d been listening to and thinking about. So I actually knew what I wanted to do with the songs, I had some ideas I really wanted to get out.

MO’C: *What are some of those influences... how did they manifest themselves on this record?*

JB: I’d been listening to hip-hop and reggae and various artists that I liked. I really enjoy a lot of the loops that older hip-hop acts like the Beastie Boys have used, old R&B drum sounds with one mic in the room. Old James Brown recordings. Early ’70s Bob Marley stuff has a really good soul grit to it. And listening to Beck’s *Odelay* album – what an amazing producer! When you hear that stuff you realise you can really experiment with things. Now I can say, “I want to put a mic in *this* part of the room, put it through distortion and then push it up in the mix” – devise little things that start making the songs come alive. You start using the studio as another instrument, which is a really exciting thing. For example, on *There’ll Come A Time* we had about four tracks of Ebows being gated by Michael Barker’s marimba – it sounded almost dance-oriented. It was an amazing effect. I also became a fan of [Line6] AmpFarm, which just added some really good sounds.

MO’C: *To your guitar?*

JB: No, mostly to vocals and drums. I suggested placing this one room mic in the drum booth so that we could fool around with it, sometimes just grabbing the tom fills and whacking them through distortion and turning that up. It was lots of fun to do those things – although I don’t like effects to take your mind off the song.

MO’C: *So as well as realising musical and arrangement ideas, you’re actively getting hands-on in shaping the overall sound of the record.*

JB: Oh definitely. I haven’t necessarily got my head around the whole frequency compression

thing yet, but I'm definitely there as far as the sound-sculpting thing is concerned, and I'm very much open to the experimental side of things on the production front.

Having said all of that, I love something like Gillian Welch's *Hell Among The Yearlings* album, which was recorded with three mics on two artists and recorded 'live'. That's how we recorded *Peaches & Cream* – that



Slip slidin' away: John Butler was setup at Woodstock inside a nest of equipment, with his back to the 51-series Neve and mid-field monitors towering either side. The setup established good eye contact with other band members in the overdub booths to the left of frame. U67s were in abundance...

was literally me singing and playing acoustic guitar with no DI or amp signal to boost it, and Nicky in the other room playing a really simple drum beat that didn't improvise too much but just held down a reggae country groove. And Shannon overdubbed simple bass later. That's what that song wanted.

MO'C: *Which introduces us to your band. You have a new rhythm section on this album comprised of your brother-in-law Nicky Bomba on drums (John is married to Nicky's sister Danielle Caruana, who also sang backing vocals on the album) and Shannon*

John's Guitars

"I have a Washburn 12-string that I used for most of my previous recordings – it's circa 1970 when they were still made in America – that was my first 12-string and the first guitar I ever bought. I used it a little bit for overdubs on this album, but strangely enough my Maton 12-string proved to be the workhorse. I'd always thought it acoustically inferior to my Washburn, but it has actually kind of matured in the last few years and that's the one I used for most of the basic tracking. Maybe it was a mixture of the analogue equipment and the way Robin was treating it; there was something in the nature of those valve mics that just made it sound better. I also borrowed an open back banjo from a friend, and I recorded one song with a Laravee six string. Peaches & Cream was recorded with a 105-year-old Martin guitar, a really beautiful guitar!

Birchall on double bass. *How has the presence of these new musicians flavoured the album, and what have they brought to your music?*

JB: Well firstly, I didn't make an album with Nicky because he's my brother-in-law [laughs]. I made an album with him because he's an awesome musician. The way he plays drums is like no other. I just heard his drumming to the music I was writing. Nicky's been quite a musical elder and mentor for me in a lot of ways. He suggested Shannon and Michael to me [Michael Barker plays marimba and percussion on the album, and drums in the JBT touring band]. He also suggested that we record at Woodstock with Robin Mai. Because we have a great chemistry, personally and musically, I think he knew intuitively who would be good for me.

MO'C: *Both Robin and Nicky have observed that you have a very clear vision of what you want. To what extent do you 'hear' the arrangements in your head, and how do you convey that to the others?*

JB: I don't know exactly what I want as far as what's in my head – I know exactly what I want when it comes to my ears, when I hear it. I'm able to go 'Okay, I want *that*. I want more of *that*!' But I also have to leave room for the band's interpretation of what I want. If I tell Nicky I want a big fat dirty hip-hop beat here, and then come down to a nice cool 'one drop' reggae – it's up to him to then go, 'Okay, what's 'fat and dirty' mean to me?' and then bring it to the band and to the song. Shannon and Nicky are both great at interpreting what I want.

MO'C: *I imagine most of the arrangements solidified in pre-production.*

JB: Yeah, we had about two weeks' worth of rehearsals and just really jammed up the songs – I'm really open to having songs expand into sections where the outcome is unknown and seeing what happens, then going "Okay, *that*! Do that again, that's f**king great!" I recorded the rehearsals on MiniDisc... I remember Nicky burning CDs of them for us. On one of the tracks he accidentally left one of the reverb tracks open on the desk and the song just got drenched with reverb. I got so used to listening to it that way that when the time came, it had become a really big production value in my head. I was like, "*Bound to Ramble* has to have a lot of reverb to make this song work!"

By the time we walked into the studio the songs were pretty much arranged – bass, drums, guitars and vocals were, for the most part, all set. I had some overdub ideas for the songs – some strings here, some Ebows there, some percussion and marimba as well. But there's other stuff that you leave open-ended. For

example, Nicky ended up playing his drumsticks on the G-string of the double bass while Shannon was playing the riff at the end of the solo in *Hello*. We whacked that through a flanger and it just sounded awesome. You've got to leave yourself open to things like that, especially during overdubs because that's where the songs can get a new lease of life.

MO'C: *When you were tracking, did you put the songs down to a click?*

JB: We trialled using a click but generally found that the tracks had a better feel without it. I have a bit of trouble with timing in general [laughs] – I like to push it. And I've noticed it's both a blessing and a curse. Sometimes it really adds to the intensity and the feel, and then other times it can really ruin a groove. But for me to play to a click track takes out that good aspect of slowing down and speeding up. Because our songs are kind of funk, roots, reggae, rock 'n' roll, occasionally they need to go to all those places at once. Sometimes it just needs to speed up and sometimes it needs to slow down.

MO'C: *Did you have any difficulty resolving the issue of whether to sing live while the band tracks were being recorded as opposed to overdubbing the vocal later?*

JB: The vocal went down live on three songs, *Peaches & Cream*, *Sometimes* and also *Damned To Hell* which is the banjo song – that went through a little bit of AmpFarm as well! There were a couple of mistakes I had to drop in on – singing and playing the guitar – which was tricky because it was hard to get the right attack to match up with what I'd already recorded. But when I do my next album – which I'm keen to get started (but it's not gonna happen for a while) – I'd like to do more singing while the band tracks are going down, and keep the vocals. If there are any bung parts I can just drop in on them – I think there's more of a vibe that way. Those three songs have so much vibe for me personally. And often any vocal spill into the guitar mics just added a really cool reverb delay kind of effect to my vocal anyway, and seemed to add to the ambience of the track. You just need to be a little less pedantic about things sometimes.

MO'C: *I don't hear too much in the way of effects on your vocals.*

JB: There are, but nothing that you would consciously hear – maybe some small delays, just some subliminal thing to weld it to the track. I don't really like effects to be too obvious unless the song calls for it, and for most of the album, it doesn't. You're just trying to capture the spirit of the song, and effects and all the studio tools are there to help you do that. It's hard to put soul onto a disc. Sometimes it's hard to capture that vibe. Some days it's a real experimental thing; you just have to keep on screwing around with things until you find something that works.

MO'C: *I think you've succeeded in capturing that soul. The album has a great integrity which, for me, provides a great counterweight to the otherwise lightweight, fast food, quick-turnaround fodder that so often clogs up the charts!*

JB: Thank you. I think art's meant to be just as honest as you can possibly express, whether you want to be coded or not, as long as it's honest. That's all we try to do. When we released *Sunrise Over Sea* I thought, "New band, some new sounds – maybe no one will like it." But I thought well f**k it, at the end of the day I have to release an album. You release it and then you let go of it. You try to just do the best you can as honestly as possible. No one wants to be fooled, and I definitely don't want to fool people with the music.

An Engineer's Perspective

Engineer Robin Mai first made Mr Butler's acquaintance when he mastered the John Butler Trio's *Three* album with Bomba and Joe Camilleri at Woodstock Studio in 2001. Says Bomba; "Robin's really quick and efficient – you can just describe the sound to him and he gets it. The brief on this album was 'organic, punchy, raw' but with a warmth as well – and that's what he got."

I spoke with Robin from Woodstock and asked him if there was anything about the recording of *Sunrise Over Sea* that proved particularly challenging, or set it apart from other projects he'd done.

Robin Mai: I guess just having the three-piece band with vocal, it was a challenge to give the band a full sound. Obviously the players are great, and they have a hugeness about them when they play that you've got to capture – but you've still got to caress the sound from start to finish to keep it feeling live and full. I also wanted to ensure that

John's sound was really powerful, both instrumentally and vocally.

MO'C: *How did you set about achieving that? Obviously there was no extensive layering or overdubbing of parts to 'fill out' the sound.*

RM: By getting some nice mics and some valve compression... you can really only build your sound that way in my opinion. If you're relying on plug-ins it's far more difficult to get something that's present and

powerful. Basically, room mics and ambiances – the stuff you can only capture as things are going down live – they all help you build the dimension of the sound. For instance, as well as close-miking all of the drums I had a lot of room mics on the kit. This gave us more dimension to play with – more of the wood floor and lots of energy. We relied heavily on the room mics when we mixed down the album.

MO'C: *What about tape compression? Given the overall organic, authentic nature of the project I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that you were recording to tape.*

RM: We only hit tape at the end of the process, mastering to a half-inch Ampex ATR. We recorded and mixed through a Neve 5114 console into ProTools, but using very few plug-ins or digital effects. I think that was the key to keeping it sounding natural too. Analogue was the word of the day really. We used the Neve as the primary EQ, and a GML dual EQ for boosting. We generally only used Renaissance EQ plug-ins for subtractive EQ or filtering – I try not to rely on plug-ins for anything if I can avoid it. Any compression was through outboard compressors; we used the Summit DCL 200 valve compressor extensively on the bass and acoustic guitar, going into 'Tools and then again during the mix. John's vocal also hit the DCL 200 via a Summit TPA 200B dual preamp, followed by a bit of limiting with the LA-2A – so it's valve all the way.

Engineer Robin Mai (left) and Assistant Troy Trigwell in the recording/control room at Woodstock. There's plenty of analogue compression and EQ on hand including Neve, GML, Urei, Summit, Teletronix, Auditronix, Pultec, dbx, AWA, TL Audio, Altec and so on... ad infinitum!



Microphone Choices

Assistant engineer and 'all-round vibe enhancer' Troy Trigwell prompts Robin Mai's memory with recollections of microphone choices and their placement during the recording sessions.

Troy Trigwell: When we recorded the drums we wanted to capture as many different 'colours' from the room as possible. We used a Neumann M149 behind the kit (from Nicky's perspective), an RCA-77 ribbon in close at the front of the kit for a tougher mono room option, as well as Coles ribbons out wide in the corners of the room facing up off-axis to the kit. We used an AKG D112 on the kick, a Shure beta SM57 on the snare, a Sennheiser 406 on the hats, a Crown CM700 on the ride, and AKG 414s on the rack tom and floor tom. For overheads we A/B'd the 414s with a pair of Sony valve C37As and chose to go with the latter in X/Y configuration, as the smokier character of the C37s complemented the cymbals more.

A great suggestion of John's was to also include a condenser pencil mic (Microtech Geffell) just off the ground a metre in front of the kit at a 45-degree angle, pointing between the kick and floor tom. We used this signal primarily as an option when we wanted to blend in some 'lo-fi' processed kit sound (often AmpFarm!) depending on the track.

For Shannon's double bass we used a Neumann M149 placed up close to the bridge, about six inches from the f-hole at a 45-degree angle towards the strings. Shannon had two outputs from his bass so we ran one through a Giles valve DI and the other through an Avalon 737, panning them hard left and right to get some overall width in the bottom end, compressing as it went to tape and again in the mix.

For the vocal sessions I made a room inside the drum room using different fabrics, lamps etc to create a more intimate environment as well as a more deadened space without it seeming claustrophobic. We decided to double-mic the vocal with the C37 and an M149 to give us the option of two contrasting tones later down the track. For Peaches & Cream and Damned to Hell, Robin chose to go with a Neumann U77 for a grainier tone.

The banjo sound on Damned was the result of feeding the two close mics – a U67 from the front and a Sennheiser MKH 406 behind the back skin – as a mono signal through the mono Auratone on the Neve and miking that with a vintage 'ball and biscuit' mic.

The string section on What you Want was a nine-piece ensemble in the control room, split

up into three groups of three (cello, viola and violin) with one mic per group. We used an M149 on the cellos, an AKG C12 on the violin group and a Neumann U77 on the viola (with all mics switched to cardioid). We also used the Coles ribbons as overheads for all three groups in X/Y.

John's guitar setup consisted of two mics on the front of the guitar – a Neumann U67 near the sound hole, and a Sennheiser MKH 406 pencil mic down near the bridge – as well as a Marshall JCM 800 head/quad for a heavy sound and a Fender Deluxe amp for a clean warm sound to give the acoustic guitar extra body. We used two mics on the Marshall, an SM57 and an AKG D24 dynamic mic, and a Groove Tube MB2 on the Fender Deluxe. John also uses Fishman and L. R. Baggs DIs in conjunction with his own pedal board that has a volume pedal feeding his Marshall amp for extra grunt, just like he does live. [JB: "I can stomp on my volume pedal then all of a sudden I've got this hell distortion from my Marshall!"] We captured every possible signal we could, to have as many tonal options as possible during mixdown, but for the most part we used the three amp mics and the two acoustic mics to get the sound John wanted.

MO'C: *Can you tell us about recording the band 'live'?*

RM: When we were tracking we usually spent at least a day on each song just to get the band tracks down, which were in fact 90 percent of the finished product. The trio just went in and did their thing – they played for hours. The setup at Woodstock is unusual in that the console is in the main recording room, which is quite large. John was set up out there with us, so we had to keep our monitoring pretty low to avoid spill into the guitar mics, while John wore headphones. There are three separate isolation booths off the main room – Nicky's drums were set up in the biggest room, Shannon in a smaller room, and John's amps in the smallest one, baffled off from each other for separation.

MO'C: *How did you manage John's vocals as the band tracks were going down?*

RM: Well, that was the biggest battle because the vibe was often better with him singing, but there were separation issues between the guitar and vocal. So except for three songs we ended up just doing a whisper vocal or a few vocal cues instead and recording the vocals later.

MO'C: *The band obviously still managed to capture a vibe though – the tracks sound fantastic.*

RM: Yeah, John had a great vibe on the album and it came through in the studio. He's got a very clear sense of direction. He knows which way he wants to go.

The Drums Department

A major protagonist in the realisation of *Sunrise Over Sea* was drummer Nicky Bomba. Apart from gathering everyone together, Nicky's enthusiasm for the project greatly influenced the way *Sunrise Over Sea* was arranged and recorded.

Nicky Bomba: I introduced John to a thing called the 'one drop', which is the basic reggae groove, the cornerstone of reggae rhythm. To define the difference – in a rock rhythm, in a four-beat phrase you'd have the kick drum on the 'one' and the snare drum on the 'three'. With reggae, the 'one drop' groove simply plays the kick drum on the 'three', with usually a guitar doing a 'skank' on beats 'two' and 'four'. John really understood it when I played it for him. Reggae funk was what he wanted, and that was right down my alley. He really embraced that whole 'one drop' thing and there are actually a couple of tunes on the album – *Company Sin*, *Hello* and especially *Zebra* – that provide a really good example of a swinging 'one drop'.

MO'C: *Robin spoke about striving to create a full sound for the band, and obviously the drum sound is a big part of that – it's a very organic, 'in the room' sound.*

NB: We definitely wanted to record the room sound because for me the things that work well are those that capture the natural environment. On some of those old jazz recordings there are only two microphones – an overhead and a kick. Treating the whole drum kit as an instrument, and relying on the natural balance and dynamics of the drummer's performance is sometimes all you need. But we also had Robin's expertise and really good microphones. We dampened down the drum room, put up some blankets around the walls to diffuse and warm up the sound, and messed around with different angles of the kit in

the room. For me the best drum room is like a lounge room vibe where you've got both hard and soft surfaces. When we did *Zebra* the thing that really kicked home the drum sound were the room mics. When I first heard the mix it was sounding too nice, it wasn't capturing the explosive essence of the song – I remember just going "more... more... more... [room mics]". However, in order to really get the nuances of the rolls and fills poking through the mix we kicked in the close mics on the toms for those moments. It works well if it's done intelligently and Robin's really good at that.

MO'C: *I imagine this 'fullness of sound' is also achieved, in large part, by the players and the arrangements.*

NB: John MiniDisc'd everything during rehearsals and pre-production so we could listen back and see what was working and what wasn't. We gave a lot of thought to what was going on harmonically and avoided doubling-up wherever possible. We're pretty aware of the strengths and weaknesses of a trio's sound and we're really careful about intertwining the parts with one another. We knew that with some judicious choices – sometimes simplifying, sometimes playing less or having Shannon playing chords – it was possible for our trio to sound full.

By the time we got to studio most things were pretty worked out. Usually by the third take we had something we could use, so from then on we'd say, "Let's just play a bit" – try some takes with a different attitude, with more or less intensity, knowing we could always fall back on what we had. We all realised that magic can happen in the studio and we allowed space to encourage it. But you have to

be in the zone. I mean, on stage you'll do some brilliant things because you're inspired by the crowd and the atmosphere, but the studio's a difficult headspace to get yourself into. To try and recreate something like that you have to really dig deep. After all, the recording is the real legacy you leave behind. Regardless of how many gigs you've done, 15 years down the track it's the record that will last.



Woodstock studios' mic collection is substantial and Robin Mai took full advantage during the recording session. Top: John Butler pours his heart into the waiting arms of a Neumann U67. Middle: Nicky Bomba gets down with Sony C37As, 414s and RCA ribbons. Above: Slide guitar in the capable hands of John, a U67 and a Sennheiser MKH 406 pencil mic.