



Recording April Uprising

John Butler's success in Australia as an independent artist has been well documented over the years. His new album, *April Uprising* has become an instant hit – like the previous two – and his charmed run with the Australian music-buying public continues...

Text: **Andy Stewart**

▶ When I heard on the grapevine recently that John Butler was recording his new album in his own space in Fremantle, a bulb flashed in my head. 'Is this the beginning of the end for commercial recording facilities in Australia?' I mused. It's not of course; there are still plenty of good reasons why someone might want to record in a commercial facility, but it does seem significant that one of Australia's most successful independent artists – John has sold over a million albums in Australia alone – should choose to record his new release in his own private studio, away from the ticking clock.

Like his previous two albums, John Butler's new CD, *April Uprising*, has gone straight to No.1 and has quickly become one of the fastest selling albums in Australia this year. He's a hit-making machine of the independent variety. An enigma in many respects, John's musical style seems to push aside musical and social barriers like a gorilla at a tuck shop, and his albums appeal to every generation from A to Z. It's a mixture of genuine upbeat feel-good, reggae-inspired acoustic folk/rock songs, and an old school work ethic that has seen him gigging in every corner of Australia for well over a decade.

So what was his reasoning behind renovating the rehearsal room in Fremantle and turning it into a recording studio? Surely there were enough funds in the John Butler Trio coffers to pay for a few weeks in the recording studio? I had to ask.

Andy Stewart: John, I have to start our conversation by asking the obvious question: what possessed you to record the album at home in Fremantle?

John Butler: Well, strictly speaking we recorded the album at my studio in Fremantle, not *literally* at

home. I've got a rehearsal space down the road from my house that feels really good, and towards the end of rehearsals for the new album I started thinking: 'Why on earth am I contemplating recording somewhere else when I can probably just do it here?' So I put the money, that would otherwise have been spent on recording an album in a commercial studio, into modifying my own space, buying a bunch of equipment and doing it here!

AS: What sort of gear emerged for you once that decision was made?

JB: Well, for starters I figured we needed some sort of desk in there so we settled on a 24-channel Toft ATB, although as it turned out we didn't use the EQ on the console all that often, even though it sounded good. I also got some nice 1176 compressors, API preamps, and three Neve 51-Series strips (which I had racked by Rob Squire at Pro Harmonic), along with a few decent mics, including a fabulous Wagner 47...

AS: Which I presume you sang into on the album?

JB: Yeah, I sang into it and recorded my guitar with it as well. The aim was to get as much juice as possible into the sound *before* it hit the digital realm, which meant buying great gear. Of course, I also had Robin Mai at the helm, engineering the album so we had some golden ears involved to manage that elusive midrange too.

AS: The elusive 1k!

JB: The alchemy of the 1k!

AS: Did you track most of *April Uprising* in one group session?

JB: About half and half. I mean, we always put down

drums and bass beds together, but a lot of the time Byron [Luiters] would go back in and hit it again once the drums were recorded. First and foremost we tried to get the best drum track down live to a click and sometimes we also kept the bass, guitar and banjo from certain takes. At other times we completely re-did things and not always to a click either... it was a classic case of whatever worked best for the song.

AS: Were you generally tracking together as a group regardless of whether the aim was only to capture Nicky Bomba's drums?

JB: Yeah, with the exception of *Don't Wanna See Your Face* – that was a drum loop – and *The Satisfied Segue*.

THREE'S A CROWD

AS: How were you guys setup in the space?

JB: I was in the control room playing guitar and singing, and drums and bass were in the main recording room. There was only one song that I actually sang live and that was *Gonna Be a Long Time*.

AS: What about the rest of the vocals, how were they overdubbed in the end: in a block after everything else was recorded, or throughout the sessions?

JB: We did it differently this time. I always used to record my vocals right at the end, and that always came with a lot of pressure... and quite frankly, it's a lonely experience. So this time, after we'd tracked all the nuts and bolts of each song, I'd track the vocal.

I didn't have all the lyrics together each time either, so occasionally I was still writing the lyrics as I was doing the vocals. For some of the songs I'd record six or seven 'scratches', letting my subconscious do the work, and then writing the lyrics from there. That was an exciting way to work and it captured a lot of lightning, you know? And then other times I'd written and re-written lyrics over and over in a completely refined process as well. So it was a real mixed bag this time, and for once, it worked!

Sometimes the lyrics were about half written already, and stepping up to the mic really got them over the line. That was the missing link. It was like: 'Okay, I need to let this come from the gut a bit more... and at the risk of sounding clichéd, it needed to come from the ether somehow. I needed to let some magic happen, basically.

In the end I tried to keep my mind out of it wherever possible. I used my brain when it was needed and kept it out when it wasn't. But it's a fine line, you know? You can ruin a song by over-cooking it and sometimes you can ruin a song by under-cooking it.

ON THE (FRE)MANTLEPIECE

AS: How did recording the songs at your own place change things?

JB: It was amazing. I'd already built the place to be conducive to playing music in, so the aesthetic of the room was already pretty well established. I just applied that same brush stroke to the monitoring room. It was my shed, originally – metaphorically speaking – and as you know, every man needs a shed. Mine just happened to be a studio. It was kind

of a no-brainer to go, 'Why are we thinking of going anywhere else? Let's buy the gear and do this right here'. Once that decision was made we embarked on the task of making the space more soundproof, but I was also very careful to preserve the feel of the place, so that when we recorded we wouldn't feel like we were in a commercial studio again, where the clock's ticking all the time. I don't like that 'here we go, every minute is a dollar' mentality, you know?

Not having that pressure over my head during these recording sessions was fantastic. Having our own place meant we could work at our own pace and never feel stressed about how long things were taking. At one point we spent two or three days on a song and then just scrapped it when it wasn't working. That felt really liberating. It was the exact opposite of the ticking clock approach, where you find yourself saying, "Shit, we're gonna run out of money; let's just do this as quickly as possible!" So, yeah, it was an extremely conducive way to make music.

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It was also cool for the guys to be able to stay at the studio while we were tracking – we built rooms right above the studio in the upstairs area. Everyone had their own room and a kitchen – it was all in-house... very Funky Monk. Did you ever see Funky Monk?

AS: Yep.

JB: It was a lot like that!

SHEDDING SOME LIGHT

AS: Knowing that you've recorded *April Uprising* this way reminds me of how hard it must be to attract clients to a commercial recording studio these days...

JB: Sometimes I put myself in the studio owner's shoes and it's kind of frightening. But, of course, the thing is you can't get some of the sounds without some of that gear. So in terms of Sing Sing for example, where we mixed the album, if you want that sound, you've got to go there. It's the only place in Australia where you can get that kind of stuff.

AS: And it's a great studio... Kaj and Jude are amazingly hospitable.

JB: Oh they're total sweethearts.

MIXING AT SING SING

AS: Did you mix the album in the 'K-Room'?

JB: In the K-Room, yes. [The 'K-Room' gets its name from the 72-channel K-Series SSL that takes pride of place in the main control room.] That's a great room. We were in there for a little over three weeks I think... it's all a blur now. We mixed the album in two stints... with a couple of weeks' break in between. That thing's like a Mack truck, or the Space Shuttle – I could never decide which.

AS: And you mastered the album with Bob Ludwig in the end I see?

JB: Yeah, well last time I did Grand National, we used another great American mastering engineer – the one Mario Caldato Jr [the producer of the band's last album, *Grand National*] uses all the time – Ray Drummond. But more recently Bob Ludwig did the sound on one of the singles and his master just came back sounding better. Actually we did about three or four different masters until we got it right. I was quite picky and was always comparing them to some of Robin's quick masters that he'd done at the end of each mix. When you listened to them at the same level, you could hear that Robin had nailed it. So I was always comparing them to that, making sure we weren't losing that midrange, you know... it's just so critical to get that midrange right.

FROM PERFORMER TO ENGINEER

After speaking to John, and with his comments about Robin's 'golden ears' still ringing in my head, I raced over to Robin Mai's local engineering haunt, Woodstock Studios, in Balaclava, to discuss with him some of the details of the *April Uprising* recording sessions. As it turned out, most of the gear John purchased for the record was actually pulled together by Robin.

RM: That's right, I had the honour of deciding which gear to buy – that was a lot of fun actually. I had the models and makes in mind and shopped around for the best prices on the gear. Everything was sourced locally.

We bought three Neve 51-series channel strips; they were on the guitars. Then we had four channels of Vintec preamps, a four-channel Sebatron preamp for the toms as well as some Purple Audio, API, and Midas preamps. So there was a nice variety of preamps in the collection for us to use.

AS: Can you describe the scene of recording *April Uprising* from an engineer's perspective?

RM: Everything about this album was well rehearsed prior – even while the place was being built they were hard at it. Having said that, there were still parts being written during the recording sessions: new bass and drum parts, lyrics etc... so the recordings still had plenty of spontaneity about them. It wasn't totally by the numbers.

Nicky [Bomba – drums] was in the big room by himself, sonically speaking at least, Byron [Luiters – bass] was standing next to him but DID – his amp was in the next room – and John was with me in the control room with cans on.



Robin Mai: AKA 'Golden Ears'

AS: Were you close miking the instruments, trying to minimise the sound of the room or were you going for a 'roomy' tone?

RM: Well we baffled the kit off and sometimes we'd baffle the front as well to keep the sound *right* inside, but most of the time the kit had baffles on either side. We close miked everything on the kit, but kept wet room mics up at a distance as well. We also had a mic in front of the kit, placed in the usual 'front-and-centre' position for a mono kit sound – a Neumann U87. I originally tried a ribbon but it didn't work out.

AS: And the guitar amps... were they ever in the big space?

RM: No, they were always locked up inside an isolation room to separate them from the kit. I miked them up with a Shure SM57, a Beyerdynamic M88, and a Royer 121.

AS: So the amps never saw the light of day, not even during dedicated overdubbing sessions?

RM: No, we didn't use the big room for guitar. I did use the room upstairs occasionally though. It's a really big wooden room that sounded great. I took a couple of speakers up there and re-amped stuff through those occasionally – snare, guitar and some vocals – basically using the room as a reverb unit...

as well as a place to sleep! I used a pair of mics in an A/B arrangement, pointing away from the speakers to get some wetness and space back into some of the sounds, which I could then tuck back into the mix later at any level I liked.

AS: What resolution did you track the album at?

RM: We recorded all the songs into ProTools HD at 24-bit/96k. I had plans to track at 192k at one stage but it just didn't seem stable enough above about 20 tracks, so I abandoned that idea pretty quickly. We had Aurora converters and an Apogee Big Ben clocking everything.

AS: Did you get involved in any Elastic Audio work in 'Tools during the sessions or anything like that, or are the takes quite raw?

RS: Oh no, they're raw! There's very little tomfoolery involved in the tracking. It was a very simple recording philosophy. Occasionally two takes of drums might get spliced together, that sort of thing, but that's about it. The sessions were all about getting the performances right, and to achieve that we worked hard – about 12 hours a day. John loves to work late into the night, but the time just flew.

AS: John tells me you recorded the vocals with a Wagner 47... how was that?

RM: Yeah, most of the vocals were done with a Wagner 47; it's fabulous!

AS: There seems to be a lot of vocal unison work on the new album; a lot of genuine double-tracking. Were all John's vocal tracks recorded with the same mic or were the double-tracks recorded separately with that specific role in mind?

RM: No, not really. I mean, they've had different processing and they went through their own analogue chains – with different EQ and different compression. One is definitely subordinate to the other, generally speaking, although in some of the choruses the vocals are actually triple-tracked: lead vocals in the centre and a unison either side to give it extra power and width. John's a big fan of the double-track sound and I like it too. It sits in nicely.

AS: And I hear you mixed the album on the K-Series SSL at Sing Sing. How did that treat you?

RM: It was good, that was my first time on the paddock with the K. I quite enjoyed it really. It doesn't have the tone of the Neve but everything has got so much power and control, you can sort of do anything with it. It's wicked.

AS: And did you mix down to tape or 'Tools?

RM: We tried 1/2-inch tape, mixing to the Ampex ATR, and generally I'm a big fan of that approach, but in this case it just didn't help.

AS: It didn't make any difference?

It made a difference; I was hoping tape compression would do good things to the mixes, but it just took too much 'point' off the sound, so we just mixed back into the 'Tools session from the SSL. ■



INDEPENDENTLY MINDED

John Butler's success has always partly been attributed to his independence from major label intervention. So is he still in charge of the purse strings?

JB: Yeah, more so now than ever, in fact. We just signed with three different independent labels

around the world – and that's already proven to be a more effective way of getting our music out there.

Record companies are so crippled by downloading these days that they've had to down-size bigtime, which isn't cool, but that's what's happening. This has damaged their ability

to develop artists and there's not a lot of focus anymore. You just can't get a team to stick around long enough.

AS: Well that's the main problem isn't it? You ring back in six months and it's all different people!

JB: Exactly, and that was no different for our album.

So we hooked up with some great independent labels, and ironically all of them have major label experience – they're filled with everybody who got fired! But they've a lot more focus and a lot more quality control, which is exciting. So now it's a completely independent venture.