

# MARK MOFFATT

## EX-PAT IN NASHVILLE

Sometimes it feels like there are more Australian engineers working overseas with international acts than locals working with Australian ones. Is the grass really that much greener in places like Nashville? We find out from long-time ex-pat, Mark Moffatt.

**Text:** Peter Moses



Mark Moffatt in the legendary Blackbird 'C Room'.

 It's a sunny afternoon in the remote leafy U.S. town they call Nashville: one of the few places left on earth where the recording industry still thrives. New commercial studios are opening every year here and the number of session musicians is well beyond counting. Long perceived as the centre of the Country Music universe – almost to the exclusion of all other musical genres – these days Nashville also boasts pop/rock powerhouses Kings of Leon, The Black Keys, Kei\$ha and The White Stripes to name but a few who now reside and record in Nashville. Home and single studio facilities are abundant, bookended by the large recording complexes of Ocean Way, Sound Kitchen, Sound Emporium and Blackbird Studio, the last of these boasting the incredible control room/acoustic space of the George Massenburg-designed 'Studio C'. Blackbird has become a haven for producers such as Brendan O'Brien, Dan Huff, and one notable Australian who's called Nashville home since 1996 – Mark Moffatt.

Right now, I'm walking down Music Row, Nashville's three concentrated blocks of music facilities, offices and studios with the experienced Aussie ex-pat. Mark is one of the most respected producers to come out of the Australian music industry and is now one of the leaders in the emerging Nashville indie scene. With a slight Southern lilt now evident in his accent, Mark is happy to discuss his career, his knowledge and love of the history of Australian sound technology, and, of course, his creative works, including how he became one of the most trusted confidants of (and to this day personal Christmas card recipient from) Roland founder Taro Kakehashi.

### LONDON CALLING

**PM:** Mark, can you tell AT readers what first got you started in the recording industry?

**MM:** I moved from Brisbane to London in 1972. All I'd done since school was play guitar, so I wrote to every guitar store in London and eventually landed a job at Top Gear in Denmark Street. Not only was that store considered 'guitar central', the street was also home to many major publishers and studios. I got to know the engineers at Central Studio and Regent Sound and would regularly duck out to play sessions there. After a while I started asking the usual 'what does this button do?' type questions, and during the course of this awakening Terry Britten (ex Twilights and a major writer/producer) took me under his wing and convinced me there was a career in it if I was interested. I returned to Brisbane in late '75, and an old friend, Bruce Window – who had opened a 16-track studio with his self-built custom console and an Ampex MM1100 – asked me if I'd like to base myself there. I knew enough at that stage to mic things up and record and his technical staff graciously filled in the gaps for me.

**PM:** What were some of your early works that are still influencing people today would you say?

**MM:** The Saints' *I'm Stranded* keeps coming up as an important record, one that's credited with changing things worldwide in the '70s. Over the years, I'm finding the records that pass the test of time are the ones that were 'firsts' rather than huge sellers. I was an early electronica experimenter and the first in the world to use the Roland TR 808 and MC4 digital sequencer on a record. At the other end of the spectrum, Anne Kirkpatrick's *Out Of The Blue* album is recognised as the first 'new country' record in Australia. Records like these and, of course *Treaty* by Yothu Yindi,

opened doors that a lot of Australian artists have walked through since. That's something I'm still proud of.

### STRANDED IN BRISBANE

**PM:** You say you still get asked about *I'm Stranded*. Can you tell us more about what you remember about those early guitar sounds?

**MM:** Top Gear had all the major UK guitarists coming through every day, either to buy stuff or get repairs done. In the first few months I had tasks as diverse as scraping violin rosin off Jimmy Page's #1 Les Paul to setting up every Beatle guitar you've ever seen. Watching guys like Page or Kosoff play up close, asking questions... just interacting with people like that was an opportunity of a lifetime. I learned so much about guitars, amps and sounds back then. I bought one particular amp there – a '60 Fender Super with a Partridge output tranny that made it very loud and angry sounding – and when I returned to Brisbane, I took it with me.

When The Saints came in to record, Ed had a 60-watt Vase – a great locally made valve amp – but it was too clean, so he plugged into my Super and that was that; it roared. The combo of two old Jensen 10-inch speakers just about to give out, the Partridge tranny along with Ed's powerful right hand was pretty much the sound on *I'm Stranded*. There was a live track that we doubled and I also used a long cement hallway leading to the studio for distant miking. You can hear that panned against the close mic on the solo in *No Time*. There was also a pair of the fabled Pye compressors in the rack, which I used extensively during the session.

It's funny, despite all the rock journalist hoopla about that record, no-one in Australia has ever asked if I documented the session. Steven van Zandt here in The States asked about it recently, and as it happens, I did write a fair amount of stuff down about mics and set ups etc., which I guess will see the light of day some time soon.

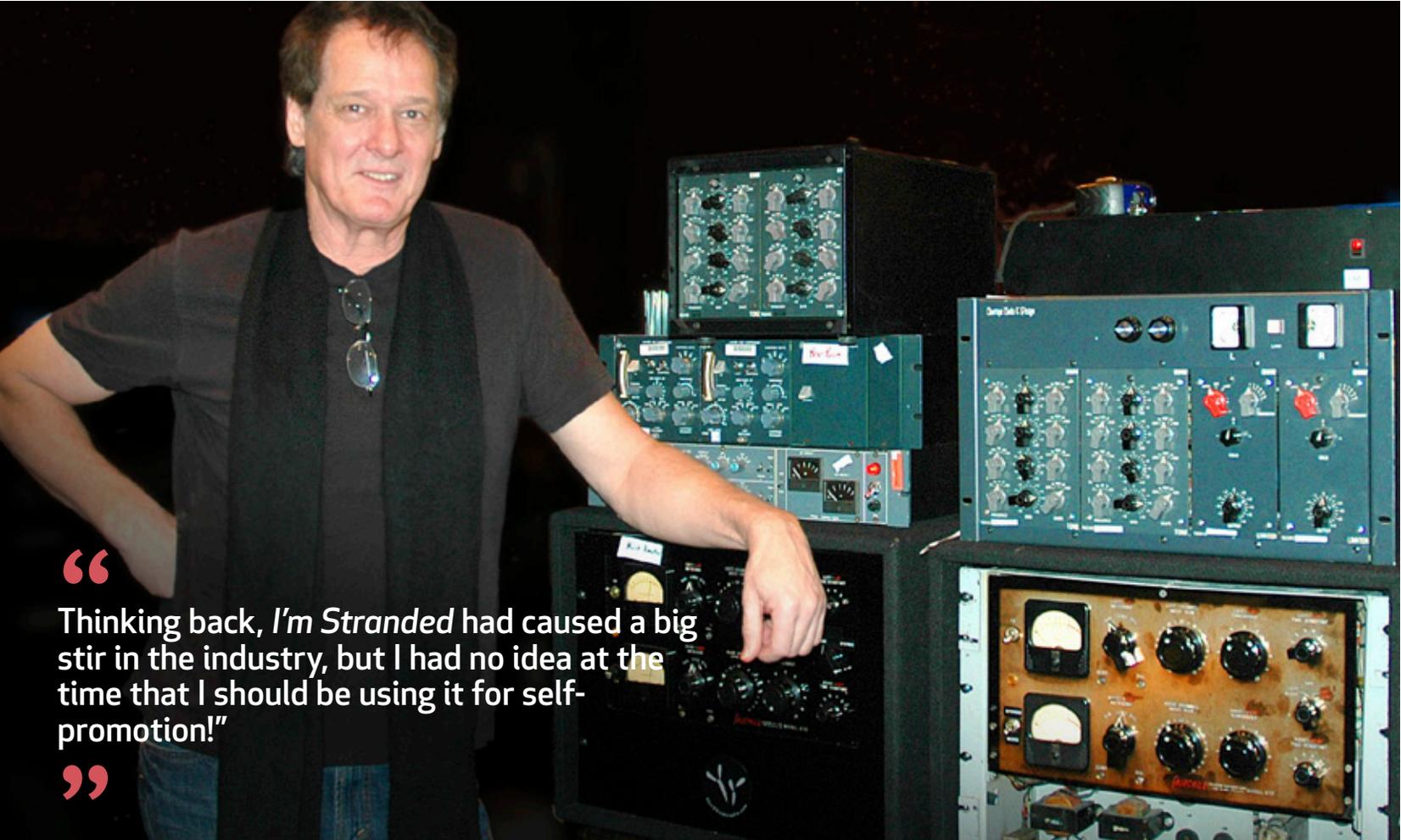
**PM:** What made you move to Melbourne soon afterwards?

**MM:** I was in a Brisbane band, the Carol Lloyd Band (signed to EMI) and was doing all our demos at Window where *I'm Stranded* was recorded. The band was folding and, coincidentally, we dealt with the same A&R people at EMI who'd signed The Saints. They knew I played pedal steel guitar and asked if I would produce an 'outlaw' country band they'd signed called Saltbush. EMI booked TCS in Melbourne for the album, and as it happened, Barry Coburn was running TCS at the time and was really into that edgier kind of country. He kept sticking his head in during the sessions and before we finished up, he offered me a job as house engineer. So, I moved from Brisbane to Melbourne almost immediately.

### MELBOURNE THEN SYDNEY

**PM:** What was the scene like down there at the time?

**MM:** Armstrong's and TCS were the main facilities in Melbourne back then. Flagstaff and Richmond Recorders started a little later, along with a few other 24-track places. Mushroom Records was really doing well and Michael Gudinski kept those studios pretty busy. TCS consisted of two big old sound stages behind GTV 9 that were set up to do the music tracks for TV shows, but eventually it started doing outside sessions. There was an Auditronics 501 & MCI 24-track in Studio A, and an Optro console (which rocked!) and Ampex MM1000 16-track in Studio B. The Optro was originally in Studio A and was used for



“Thinking back, *I’m Stranded* had caused a big stir in the industry, but I had no idea at the time that I should be using it for self-promotion!”

**Vintage gear anyone?:** This collection of outboard gear is probably the most expensive per square foot ever gathered in the history of AT. Fairchild’s, EMI’s and Neves by the kilo.

all those legendary Chain, Skyhooks & Daddy Cool records before the studios upgraded. I wish I knew where it ended up. [Answer: these days it’s owned by Melbourne sound engineer, Simon Grounds – see box item for more on the console’s recent history.] Studio A’s outboard gear included a Universal Audio LA-4, two Kepex gates, an Eventide delay, and two or three shared EMT plates; pretty sparse by today’s standards. John French was the main engineer when I arrived, and he became another major mentor of mine. In general, it was a really friendly yet competitive scene, though I was still pretty green about the business back then. Thinking back, *I’m Stranded* had caused a big stir in the industry, but I had no idea at the time that I should be using it for self-promotion! (Laughs)

**PM:** You moved about a bit... what made you move again, this time up to Sydney?

**MM:** Well, TCS management was then handed over to 3AK – the Packer owned ‘beautiful music’ station – and we all knew how that was going to pan out. Here was the funkiest, most in demand rock ‘n’ roll studio in the country suddenly being managed by suits from a muzak station. I quickly got into trouble there for recording my own stuff after hours and was fired at about the same time as a friend told me about an opening as in-house producer at Festival in Sydney. I flew up for an interview and got the job.

The TCS stint probably carried more weight than I realised in hindsight – I discovered later there was some tough competition for that gig. I’d never run a Neve before – funnily enough,

back then no-one liked them!). So, I went out to Channel 0 at Nunawading before I left for Sydney to receive a crash course on their Neve, which was pretty similar to the Festival desk from memory. Once I got inside the Festival business machine I began to learn more about how the record industry worked and things started moving pretty fast for me, including getting a call from Ross Wilson to produce what later became the *Chemistry* album for Mondo Rock, my first platinum album. But of course, in those days, once a house producer became that successful it was deemed time to leave the fold, which I hated because Festival was such a great family. I miss it still, and it’s crazy to think that the last management team eventually sent it to the wall. It had been such a well-run company before then.

Some artists I worked with in those first few years at Festival include Richard Clapton, Renée Geyer, Mondo Rock, Tim Finn, Eurogliders, Ultravox and I had a huge hit with my own technopop project, *The Monitors*.

#### RO-LAND

**PM:** How did your association with Roland come about?

**MM:** I had been using their early synths in Brisbane and, as a result, got to know John Egan, the CEO of Roland Australia, who somehow saw the value in my technopop musings before anyone else and always made sure I had their latest gear. John was showing Roland founder Taro Kakehashi around Sydney one fateful day and called me at 301 saying he wanted to show Taro the studios. Coincidentally, I was in the mix

#### CREDITS & CRED

Not only is Mark Moffatt one of the most experienced and respected producers to emerge from Australia, he is also an accomplished musician (guitar, pedal steel), engineer, and writer.

In 1980, he took a position as director of artist development/house producer with Rupert Murdoch’s Festival Records, at that time Australia’s largest independent record label with 25% of the market. That year saw Mark’s first nomination as ‘Best Producer’ and the beginning of steady chart success through the ‘80s and ‘90s.

At the 1996 ARIA awards, seven of the 15 awards went to artists produced by Mark! During his career in Australia he featured in reader and industry polls, including the Rolling Stone ‘Best Producer’ and ARIA ‘Producer of the Year’ categories and has more productions in the APRA Top 30 songs of all time than any other single producer.

As a writer he’s had two No.1 Australian country singles, two Top 10 pop singles, two Top 10 UK and European singles, and has composed scores for seven major motion pictures and TV series.

Production credits include: Keith Urban/The Ranch, The Saints, Yothu Yindi, the Divinyls, Neil & Tim Finn, Ross Wilson, Slim Dusty, Tony Joe White, Stacey Earle, O’Shea, Jasmine Rae, Deana Carter, Leslie Mills (with John Shanks & the Dust Brothers), Gloriana, Adam Gregory, and Jason Aldean remixes.

room – Studio M – that day, and happened to have one of the first AMS RMX 16 reverbs with me, which by the way, didn't reach The States 'til much later. Mr Kakehashi mentioned they were making a digital reverb, so I asked, "Oh, will it do this?" as I dialled up 9.9 non lin on some drums. Apparently, he went straight back to the hotel that night and called the factory. I was up in Japan the next week working on the SRV 2000. That was the beginning of the relationship. I still use my SRV every day by the way!

**PM:** What did they expect of you when you got there?

**MM:** There were only a handful of Western people invited to participate in high-level product meetings in Hamamatsu, among them, Adrian Scott, Eric Persing (who later founded Spectrasonics), and myself. Basically, you had young Japanese engineers developing new products and they needed 'Western ears' and creative minds to bring professional needs and applications to the table. I was lucky enough to work closely with Mr Kikumoto, who essentially wrote the MIDI specs with some help from Tom Oberheim.

Hamamatsu is an amazing place. I remember having lunch with Kikumoto one day and him saying, "Sssh, talk softly... see that guy over there, he developed the DX7. And that guy in the corner there, he's from Korg," and so on. It was an eye opener to see just how concentrated the MI business was in that town, and still is. Years later, I discovered I'd been designated a 'yatoi' along with Tom Oberheim, Roger Linn, and other US guys. Yatoi is a 19th century term meaning: "foreign worker brought in for expertise."

#### **SIGNING THE TREATY**

**PM:** *Treaty* by Yothu Yindi was one of the nation's most important records for more reasons than just the politics behind it. Can you tell us how that record came about?

**MM:** The background to this story was that

I'd previously made a great record, *River*, with Shane Howard, and obviously, Shane was held in very high regard by the Aboriginal community across Australia thanks to his own work with Goanna. After hearing that record, Mandawuy Yunupingu had Mushroom contact me and set up a meeting. It was a long preamble because he was insistent I understood their spiritual beliefs and culture before we did any work in the studio. We eventually went into the studio in Melbourne, and I had Ricky Fataar come down and play drums given there was no drummer in the band back then. That was a big part of the whole experience for them because Ricky is such an amazingly sensitive musician. As soon as they hit the traditional vocal and didge breakdown groove in *Treaty* you could tell magic was happening. I loved the Razor Gang mix, of course, but the fact that the remix was the radio hit made it easy to forget the work and human effort that went into getting that band collectively on to tape in any shape, let alone something that was able to be remixed!

**PM:** What were some of the cultural differences you had to adapt to once you got the band into the studio?

**MM:** Shyness, a different perception of time, all those predictable things. Even then it was clear that Gurrumul Yunupingu was the big talent. He played a lot of the keyboards and guitars and sang like an angel. We became very close and spent weeks together just doing things he wanted to try, things that were in his head. I played one particular guitar lick live on the basic track of *My Kind of Life*, some simple nondescript little thing, but it hit a nerve with him and every time he heard it play back while we were overdubbing, he would laugh out loud and nudge me. So joyous was he.

#### **THE VAULT**

**PM:** You set up one of Sydney's best known studios, The Vault, at a time when private use

24-track facilities were rare. What was the motivation behind that?

**MM:** I had always been a 'sit at the console and play' person and really needed a studio after leaving Festival. I bought an Auditronics 501 from AAV and imported a Soundcraft two-inch 24-track in '82, which eventually went into a studio I built on our farm in Queensland. But ultimately the travel was too hard, so I moved the gear back to Sydney in '86 and rented the space in Balmain. It was in pretty rough shape back then but had already been a small studio in what was once the explosive store for the Adelaide Steamship Company. It was a foot thick concrete bunker basically, hence the name. Most of the time we'd do slave reels at 301, retire to The Vault for overdubs and vocals etc, then head back to 301 and lay it all up on the Mitsubishi 32-track digital recorder to mix. It was a heap of fun and a lot of great music came out of that place. I rented it out when I finally moved to The States and sold it to James Cadsky a year later.

#### **THE BIG MOVE**

**PM:** Why did you decide it was time to move to The States?

**MM:** I'd hit a creative ceiling in Australia, and also I knew that in a youth oriented industry like Australia's, there was never going to be acceptance of an Australian equivalent of Phil Ramone, Glyn Johns or T Bone Burnett, even though I was not yet that old. Not to mention that so many questionable US and UK 'producers' were arriving on vacation visas, convincing local A&R people they had major credits, and taking all the major album projects. More often than not, these went off the rails of course, and it was very frustrating to witness. I finally made up my mind to leave the day I saw the Neve from 301 Studio-M being crane lifted out through a hole in the wall and down onto Castlereagh Street by Fletcher's guys [from Mercenary Audio]. I virtually lived in that room

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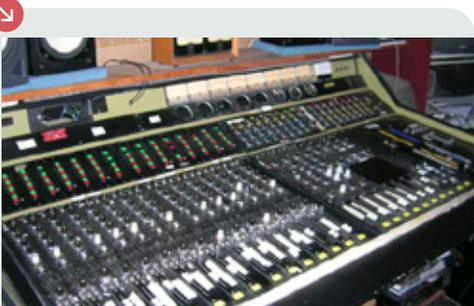
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#### SIMON GROUNDS ON HIS OPTRO CONSOLE:

**SG:** I got wind about the Optro console back in 1990, and finally tracked it down at Melbourne's iconic venue, Festival Hall, where it was languishing in exile in a back room like a forgotten king. It was a 16:8 console back then, with four auxes, three-band EQ and various submix matrixes – a beautifully made board. It had a nice minimalist signal path and great '70s transformers. I've heard there were five made for Channel 9's capital city studios but I can't be certain of this, so there are others out there somewhere. I spent a long time re-capping, switching, potting and modifying the routing layout with the help of audio whiz Ross Giles, and eventually turned the board into a 20:2:2 mix console with six auxes and sub-in points on all the buses for an extended setup. I also updated the main op-amps to FETs to 'speed up' the sonics a bit, which has worked out well.

A lot of fine Aussie artists have passed through this board since I've owned it, and of course there's the rich history of bands that used it previously, as Mark Moffatt has already pointed out. Recent additions to its history include the Underground Lovers, Snout, Rocket Science, Birds Blobs, Laura Jean, Guttersnipes, KES, Spoils, Black Pony Express, Shower Scene from Psycho, Sandro, Anyones, Dave Graney, and Panel of Judges to name but a few. The Optro lives on!

and it was not going to be there any more. [That console now comprises half the 80-channel Neve at Ocean Way, Nashville.] I'd also like to point out here that in The States the Grammys are run by NARAS, the recording industry body, not RIAA, the record label body. Just before leaving, I was briefly involved in trying to set up an Australian producer/engineer guild, but ARIA wasn't really interested in any dialogue with us creative types in the studio community. Hopefully, that's changed.

#### SETTLING ON NASHVILLE

**PM:** So why Nashville? What drew you to that city, not L.A. or New York?

**MM:** Barry Coburn had moved to Nashville after leaving TCS where he had broken a huge country artist named Alan Jackson. Barry had been at me for years to move over here, and finally it seemed right. I visited in '95 and was knocked off my feet by the studios, players... everything. Barry and I did a publishing deal and I finally moved here in August '96. Besides any career motivation, I really just wanted to live in the music grid that runs through Nashville, Jackson, Memphis, the Mississippi Delta and Muscle Shoals. It's tough when you've lived your life totally under the influence of this stuff, and one day you wake up and realise no-one really gives a shit about it in your own culture.

**PM:** Can you talk about how you got involved with Keith Urban's career?

**MM:** Barry Coburn and his wife Jewel had done very well, establishing a thriving publishing and management business, and had signed Keith to a publishing contract. When I arrived, I really didn't have a clear picture of what my role would entail, but as it turned out I was mainly employed to work with their writers and artists, Keith obviously being among them. This pretty quickly developed into an A&R role inside what had already become the most creative and supportive environment I'd ever experienced. It wasn't exactly easy for anybody back then, and there was a lot of wheel spinning on Keith's part, but he was given the space to get through his stuff, and once he did, things started to fall into place very quickly. There are any number of people in Nashville willing to take credit for Keith's rise, but the family at Ten Ten Music had an enormous amount to do with it.

**PM:** How would you describe Nashville as a music and studio city to people who have never been here?

**MM:** Well, there's simply nothing like it on the planet, and the last couple of years has seen it emerge as *the* industry hub across many genres, to the point where even Rolling Stone magazine now claims Nashville has the best music scene in the US. Besides these very positive changes in the local business, the big attractions here are the location and lifestyle – 65% of major US markets are easy drives away, something that's impossible from LA or NY. Nashville apartment and housing rents average US\$700 – \$1000 per month, vans and trailers are cheap, and there's a concentrated

yet accessible creative community like nowhere else, especially for musicians and writers.

The quantity and quality of studios speaks for themselves – where else can you find 35 Elam 251s and 16 channels of Fairchild under one roof? When I did the Digidesign Strike drum sessions in Studio D, Blackbird owner John McBride pulled out all the stops with the outboard gear and wheeled in pieces I'd never even seen before, like the EMI tube curve bender. These days that kind of thing can only happen here, and maybe Abbey Road.

Having said all that, breaking into the producer/engineer side of things here can be a long haul, and it was like starting from scratch for me when I first arrived. It was very tough.

**PM:** What are you working on currently?

**MM:** Currently, I have a band with Derek St Holmes who sang all those great Ted Nugent hits. We're recording right now with a couple of guests, including Brad Whitford from Aerosmith. It's a total DIY project, so we're tracking at home and it's sounding great. I mixed some Gloriana tracks for Matt Serletic last year and they've called about mixing some more just this week.

**PM:** Nashville-based Aussies O'Shea recently had a No.1 country song here; can you tell us more about them?

**MM:** I produced Mark O'Shea's first record for ABC Country, which did well, but he was very young and pretty quickly veered off down a more rock oriented path. We lost touch for a while, but then when he moved from LA to Nashville, I hooked him up with some major writers who liked him a lot, and he was accepted quickly into a normally very closed group. His wife, Jay, moved here a little later, and they started doing a weekly gig as individual artists. This quickly got huge, and they morphed into a duo not long after. They entered a CMT reality show, Can You Duet, and came in fourth, which gave them massive US TV exposure. So, we went in with their live band and recorded last year, all self-funded. Their circle of incredibly supportive co-writers includes Shawn Colvin, Kim Carnes, Billy Falcon (Bon Jovi), Georgia Middleman and Dave Berg (Keith Urban). Needless to say, the songs are fantastic.

**PM:** Anything you'd like to say before we wrap this up Mark?

**MM:** I see so many Australians dismiss Nashville, focussing instead on the 'meetings in LA/NY' mentality, and going down the SxSW route, and then wondering why they're not getting anywhere in the US. Many Australian artists and managers are stuck with the 'yee haa!' stereotype of Nashville, and fail to understand just how dense the US market is and that short visits here don't really achieve a whole lot. At some point you need to be on the ground here.

Besides being a unique place to write and record, this town has become a very affordable and hip base – a stepping off point for touring artists. The Australian industry, in general, would do well to look in to that aspect of the town. ■