

Jimi Maroudas.

EARNING AN ARIA

Getting nominated as the ARIA Engineer of the Year doesn't happen to all of us. CX talks to two guys who got the nod this year.

By **STEPHEN BRUEL**

As this magazine rolls off the press, the 23rd annual ARIA Awards Ceremony is being held at Acer Arena in Sydney. Established in 1987, the ARIAs have 28 award categories to honour excellence and innovation across all genres of Australian music. For this year's Engineer of the Year award nominees Steven Schram (Little Birdy – Confetti) and Jimi Maroudas (Eskimo Joe – Inshalla) being nominated is an honour, a dream, and recognition from the industry for their respective audio production skills, hard work, dedication and professionalism.

"It's great to know that people in the voting pool scrolled down and saw Little Birdy's Confetti on the list and thought it warranted an engineering vote," said Schram. "Most of the voters probably don't know who I am so it is particularly rewarding that the nomination is based on the strength of the sound of that album."

"The nomination is a huge honour and in many ways a way a dream come true, but really it's all about the music and doing the best and right thing by it," said Maroudas. "It has also made me reflect on all the important people whom this couldn't even have been a

possibility without, my Mum and Dad who gave the courage to chase this career, my brother for his musical influences and most importantly my wife for whom without her support this would still be a dream. Of course all of the great artists/producers/engineers that I have worked with who put their hearts and souls out there every day deserve a mention also."

STEVEN SCHRAM

Schram (whose credits include Little Birdy, Little Red, Art Of Fighting and Public Enemy) began his audio production career through forging a relationship with Triple J sound engineer Chris Thompson.

"I was living in a house which had a computer with some music on it and none of us knew how to burn a CD," said Schram. "I called the ABC and asked to speak with Chris as he was the only sound engineer I'd heard of."

According to Schram, Thompson had injured his elbow the day before and said if Schram carried all of the equipment he could tag along on his next Live At The Wireless recording and pick his brains as much as he wanted. After tagging along for numerous recordings Schram received work to record a live to air broadcast from a nightclub in Melbourne and more work from Thompson.

"Around this time Chris started work on The Waifs ARIA award winning album Up All Night so naturally I tagged along on those sessions," said Schram. "From Chris I learnt the most important aspects of record making which are performance, great tones and good people management skills. Chris and his best mate Tony Cohen (Bad Seeds, Cruel Sea) passed on a bunch of artists and albums to cut my teeth on."

JIMI MAROUDAS

For Maroudas, (whose credits include Eskimo Joe, The Living End, Tim Rogers and Pete Murray) the journey to an ARIA nomination started with a more traditional 'musical' beginning.

"I picked up the guitar at age four and began playing in bands at age 12," said Maroudas. "I moved from guitar to drums to lead vocals, all the while writing songs. I think it is this understanding of many instruments which forged a great foundation for a career in producing records and how things all fit together to make a great song."

The road to securing a job in the industry wasn't easy (it never is) and involved a lot of door knocking and a lot of rejections before finally getting a break at Melbourne-based Sing Sing Studio.

"I started looking for assistant gigs at



Jimi at Work on Eskimo Joe's Album.

any place that would take me," said Maroudas. "Unfortunately I had no contacts in the industry and as an outsider trying to get in it was impossible. I learnt how to take the answer 'no' many times and every studio in Victoria would have said 'no' to me at least three times.

According to Maroudas, Sing Sing is one of the best studios in the country and in this part of the world. Producers and engineers from around the world came to work at Sing Sing and Maroudas was working alongside them and most importantly learning from them.

"I spent the best part of my 20s at Sing Sing working 100-plus hours a week, being first in and last out," said Maroudas. "In that time I learnt a lot of what to do and what not to do, got to work on some incredible music and made some great friends in the process. It was the best thing that ever happened to me."

PREPARATION IS THE KEY

Schram describes himself as not being the most technically savvy engineer around, and prefers to keep things in the studio simple while focussing on getting the artist to deliver the sound and performance which suits his taste the most.

"All of the hard work is done in the rehearsal room including getting the equipment sounding great and working out tones," said Schram. "Once the band is ready to perform those songs in their sleep then all you need to do is head into the studio and record it. It simply becomes a matter of setting them up and pointing some microphones at them."

Maroudas agrees with the importance of a band being well prepared, long before there is any talk of recording.

"The key to any project being a success is the initial interaction between the producer and the artist," said Maroudas. "We spend whatever time is necessary in pre production before going anywhere near a recording studio. The last thing I want to do is to go into the studio with the band under prepared and with question marks over the songs, parts, and/or arrangements. It's a waste of all of our time and makes for an inefficient and unproductive session."

SPACE, SOUNDS AND PERFORMANCES

Schram prefers to spend more time getting the sounds that he wants from the recording room as opposed to the control room,

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Steven Schram (centre) takes a break while recording with Spun Rivals.

placing emphasis on the sound source. For example, Schram will spend a lot of time listening and making changes to the drums in the drum room rather than in the control room ensuring the tone of the instrument is the sound he wants.

“With Confetti, this was very much the case and we set out to make a recording that didn’t involve studio tricks or boo jiggery,” said Schram. “The band had great songs which were extremely well rehearsed, and we were all meticulous about the tones and the performances.”

The album is an extremely live recording with three tracks featuring vocalist Katy Steele singing live with the band.

“In the track *Into My Arms*, Katy is singing louder in the room than the piano she is playing,” said Schram. “But the performance is so great and you are listening to her so intently that you don’t notice the piano sink into the mix underneath her.”

Maroudas also places emphasis on getting the sound source right and pays particular attention to the space he records in. He frequently auditions different parts of the room, moving baffles and sound barriers around to make sure that he’s getting the best out of the space.

“A lot of kids think that the answer is in the gear, and overlook the fact that they’re recording in an untreated square room with lots of nodes and then wonder why the recording doesn’t sound great,” said Maroudas. “You’ve got to cover all angles.”

YOUR JOB, MY JOB

Maroudas enjoys working hard in the background so that when the band goes into the studio the only thing that

they need to worry about is delivering incredible performances and nothing else. This includes spending time writing down exactly where he wants every band and instrument set up in the room, and then listing every signal path for every instrument.

“For drums that means going through what mics/mic pres/EQ’s & compressors I want on every path from the kick and snare, right through to the room microphones,” said Maroudas. “I’ll do this for every instrument and then send my assistant this list so that he can get in early and get this all set up so that we can have a flying start to the session.”

“Invariably I’ll make changes on the day as I’m hearing things in the room, but this means that we get off to a flyer, the band feels great because it’s a smooth process, and I can focus on getting great performances and sounds as I’ve done my homework for the session.”

Maroudas also likes to have a drum tech come into the studio and tune the drums in the room he is recording in.

“You can tune them at home or in the rehearsal room, but once you move them out of that space, the tuning invariably changes,” said Maroudas. “Temperature, room acoustics and transportation all play a role in detuning drums and you want to end up with drums tuned for the room they are tracked in.”

SONGS, NOT SYSTEMS

Confetti was recorded at Sing Sing Studios and Schram and the band allowed themselves three days studio time per song. Day one involved getting the tones they were after, day two for capturing the perfect performance and day three for recording overdubs as needed. They repeated this process until

they had an album.

“I like to work like this as it helps me get the right sounds for each song rather than have all the songs sound the same,” said Schram. “This method also keeps everybody in the band continually involved in the process and spreads the vocals out over the duration of the session. There’s nothing worse than a singer needing to record an album’s worth of vocals in a couple of days. I don’t want to listen to somebody singing for ten hours a day either.”

Mixing followed a similar process to the tracking in the fact Schram would totally reset the board following each song. At the end of each day Schram would email a version of the song to all band members to listen to the mixes in a familiar environment. They would write back with any comments in the morning and then Schram would print the mix and all the stems.

“Starting each song from scratch and not from the template of the previous song forces me to listen to what I’m doing a lot more,” said Schram. “Each song was recorded very differently so using a template wouldn’t have really worked in this case anyway.”

Schram recorded the album in Sing Sing’s Neve room on a 60-channel Neve VR60 console hooked up to a Pro Tools HD3 rig. Mixing was done in the XL room on an SSL XL9000K 72-channel console.

“It really doesn’t get much better than that,” said Schram. “The professionalism and friendly nature of owner Kaj Dahlstrom and staff make it the most brilliant place to focus on the task at hand. Tracking through their Neve VR80 and mixing on the SSL K9000 makes things a little easier also.”



Steven Schram (at console) at work with Spun Rivals.

Although Schram and Maroudas have followed different paths to where they are today, they both list Sing Sing studio as their preferred facility to work in, and both are represented by the Catherine Haridy Management company (Eskimo Joe, Bob Evans).

ENGINEER MANAGEMENT

Haridy started her Melbourne-based artist management business in 2006 after being approached by Eskimo Joe to manage them. Having previously worked in A&R for both Festival Mushroom and Warner Music, Haridy was working closely with Eskimo Joe through their time on *A Song Is A City* and *Black Fingernails*, *Red Wine* and thought the time was right for a change.

Since then Haridy decided to start managing producers, mixers and engineers. According to Haridy, it was a natural progression for her based on her background in A&R and something she was very keen to get back in touch with.

"I'm absolutely honoured to be able to work with these guys, and be there to help them evolve their careers in a long term sense and with the bigger picture in mind," said Haridy. "All three of my producers are very talented and it's important that we celebrate the achievements of our local producers, mixers and engineers. More attention should be placed on their importance in the music making process."

AND THE FUTURE?

Maroudas has plenty in the pipeline having just finished producing a Christmas song for Tim Rogers, Autumn Gray's debut album *The Diary of a Falling Man* and is currently in production with Sunbury-based outfit *The City in Motion*. Schram also has a few gigs on the horizon but doesn't want to expand further at this stage.

Regardless of who takes home the ARIA Engineer of the Year award (the other nominees are DJ Debris for *Hilltop Hoods – State of the Art*, Greg Wales for *You Am I – Dilettantes* and Peter Mayes for *Empire of the Sun – Walking on a Dream*) the future for record production looks as strong as ever in this country.

Good luck to all.



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