



ETHAN JOHNS

A second-generation production wiz moves to the other side of the glass

By Michael Gallant

FOR ETHAN JOHNS, PRODUCING ROCK STARS MEANS carrying on the family business. After all, his father is famed producer Glyn Johns, whose credits include Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Linda Ronstadt, Bob Dylan and the Who.

"It wasn't a big deal for me to have any of those people show up at the house," says Johns, who grew up in the U.K. "Although if there was a drummer or guitarist, I'd pester them to show me something new. But it wasn't a rock 'n' roll house—it was extremely normal. I didn't figure out what was going on, or who they were, until I was older."

By age 10, Johns had it figured out and began making his own recordings. He went on to become an accomplished multi-instrumentalist, and took on several studio jobs, including an early and formative position at A&M Studios in L.A., where he helped engineer U2's epic film and album *Rattle and Hum* in 1988.

Johns' prowess in the studio earned him the trust of pioneering artists far and wide—he's helmed albums for Paul McCartney, Kings of Leon, Joe Cocker, Counting Crows, Tom Jones, Kaiser Chiefs and many more. Says Johns, 45, "My job is to help the artists achieve their goals, say whatever it is they're trying to say, and do so in the most honest way they can."

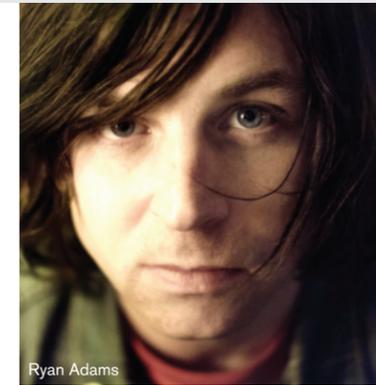
After spending decades producing for others, Johns released his debut solo album, *If Not Now Then When?*, in 2013. His latest effort, *The Reckoning*, is a folk-infused song cycle that puts his expressive baritone and assured guitar work front and center. In an interesting role reversal, Johns chose Ryan Adams, for whom he has produced several projects, to captain the album. "As a producer, I'm used to having to tell the artist to really hit the emotional nail on the head and not to worry so much about the technical aspects of the performance," says Johns. "It just goes to show how important it is to have someone in the studio with you that you really trust."

When were you first drawn to music?

I discovered music when I was 3 or 4 years old. There was a mountain dulcimer in the house that I wanted to play all the time. I also got a small drum kit when I was quite young, and a guitar when I was 5. I played every spare minute I had. Most of my childhood was spent making music on something—if it wasn't drums or guitar, it was piano. My earliest memories in life were music-based. No question, I was obsessed with it.

What was it like working with U2 so early in your recording career?

That period of time was amazing. The band was working on this behemoth of a record as well as the film, and they were recording tracks all over the country, using A&M, where I was on staff, as the hub. At one point, they had almost every room at A&M going to get the project finished. I had never



Ryan Adams

spending four hours compressing and trying to get something to sound the way you want it, it's much quicker to make everything in the room sound the way you want—and then choose mics that will capture that sound best. It's an old-school approach, but I feel extremely fortunate to have learned from an engineer who came through during a time when those values were important. It has sure made my life in the studio a lot easier.

Why didn't you produce *The Reckoning*?

I've found that producing myself is not very practical. I need to have someone around who has perspective on what I'm doing. If I'm making a record as an artist, I don't want to think about anything other than playing and singing the songs. So I put myself in rooms with people whose opinions I trust and let them help me make records that I hope have some emotional weight and movement to them. It was very liberating. I guess I wanted to be the artist I hoped I would work with if I were producing. (laughs) There's a lot less weight to carry, and it's worked really well.

Why select Ryan Adams to produce?

He and I have always had a very healthy creative relationship, and I think it was interesting for us both to have switched roles. We had made so many records together that once we were in the thick of working together, it wasn't much of a stretch.



Paul McCartney

seen anything of that scale before. My job on that record varied between assisting post-production for the movie to engineering—overdubs, some rough mixes. I loved the band, so getting the chance to record Edge at that age was unbelievable. I remember quite clearly the Vox AC30 showing up, the one with the ripped speaker cloth, and going, "Wow, I get to mic up Edge's amp!" A red-letter day. They were all fantastic, and it was an extraordinary experience.

What's your approach in the studio?

I've seen many engineers making life difficult for themselves because they begin at the wrong end of the process, trying to start with a favorite EQ setting for bass drum or something. Why box yourself into a corner? The first thing to do when walking into a studio is to listen to what you're about to record. If the drums don't sound great acoustically, find a better spot for them. Just angling a drum kit by 25 degrees can make a huge difference. So rather than having your preferred microphone setup and then

I think he did the kind of job for me that I had done for him in the past.

How long did the demo session take?

Two days. At the end of that first day, I think Ryan knew he had the record. So it was very quick indeed. It's interesting—a lot of my favorite records were made incredibly quickly. You can tell that there's a real immediacy to them. Maybe it's just because studio time can be expensive and limited. Limited time does feed into the record feeling a certain kind of way.

Do you work quickly as a producer?

I do. We made Ryan Adams' *Heartbreaker* and Ray LaMontagne's *Trouble* in 10 days each. Both records have really interesting attitude to them, and a lot of that has to do with the fact that we didn't have time to second-guess what we were doing. With limited time, the stakes were high and performers knew they had to give everything they had. They couldn't deliberate. That creates a very interesting scenario.

Does that pace offer challenges?

When you watch great engineers like my father Glyn work, it's easy for people to say, "He's going so fast! He doesn't seem to think about it. He grabs a microphone, throws it in front of what he's recording, pushes up a fader, and it sounds amazing." The thing to remember is that he's made so many hundreds of thousands of recordings that the mental process begins as soon as he walks into a room and hears a person playing an acoustic guitar. He's accessing a huge Rolodex of information. What's going to capture that sound the best? It might look easy to someone unaware of the amount of knowledge that goes into making decisions before the producer even sits down at the console. They're all things that experience is telling him to do.



Kings of Leon

PRODUCER



Tom Jones

'With limited time, the stakes were high and performers knew they had to give everything they had!'

How do you establish trust with legends like Tom Jones or Paul McCartney?

It doesn't take long, and the proof is in the pudding. After I spent half an hour with Tom, I knew we were going to get on really well. We communicated well with each other, and I felt confident that he had called me for the right reasons—we were both looking to make the same kind of record. Once you're on the same page and you've got a track or two, then your working relationship is established—you've got it on tape and you can hear it. So it does tend to take care of itself in a lot of ways, and working with both of those guys was amazing, obviously. I really enjoyed it. I've had some amazing times with both Tom and Paul in the studio. I'm very happy that artists of that experience and caliber would call me and ask me to help them make records.

Are you ever starstruck?

Hopefully, you get that kind of rush from any artist you're working with. Of course, it's thrilling to make music with Paul, but you can't do a good job if you're awestruck. That would negate the proposition a bit. You have to clear that stuff out of the way if you're going to do the job you're asked to do. You're on the path together and have to get straight down to it. Paul had worked with my father, so there was an element of familiarity. He knew me when I was young—plus he's very disarming. Within 10 minutes, he'd gotten an acoustic guitar out and was singing a song, and I was thinking about how best to record him. We jumped in with both feet and off we went. I learned a lot from working with him. That's the goal—to learn something from everyone you're working with.

Examples?

I learn from everybody I work with in some way, though it's hard to pin that down because it tends to be quite broad stuff. Emmylou Harris has an incredible work ethic, for example, and working with her was just phenomenal. I remember when I met my wife, she was looking after Daniel Lanois, and I am a huge fan. I remember helping with some of his shows—just being a roadie for him because I wanted to be there. Humping gear and tuning a guitar for a guy like that gave me an opportunity to watch him work. It doesn't matter that much which role I'm playing—I could literally be a guitar tech or be producing an iconic artist. To me, nothing really changes between those two positions. The opportunity to just be around amazing music—that's the real value and joy in the life that I've led.

Valley Music UK: Tom Jones; J Henry Fair; Emmylou Harris



Emmylou Harris

Here are a few of the many albums that showcase Ethan Johns' production prowess.

ESSENTIAL JOHNS

- Paul McCartney, *New* (2013)
- Kaiser Chiefs, *The Future Is Medieval/Start the Revolution Without Me* (2011)
- Tom Jones, *Praise and Blame* (2010)
- Kings of Leon, *Because of the Times* (2007)
- Joe Cocker, *Hymn for My Soul* (2007)
- Ray LaMontagne, *Trouble* (2004)
- Counting Crows, *Hard Candy* (2002)
- Ryan Adams, *Heartbreaker* (2000)



BETTY WHO | DECEMBERISTS | MIKE STERN | ALLISON MOORER



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Goes solo

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