BRIAN AHERN

A RARE INTERVIEW WITH COUNTRY'S GREAT 'NATURAL' PRODUCER

Music is much more than the articulation of mathematically executed notes. It is the rendering of the space in between those notes that helps give each performance its unique character and soulfulness. This may seem like a very logical assumption, but most productions fail to illuminate and enhance that reality. Brian Ahern understands the value and beauty of using space to create unique sound stages that have subtle immediacy, depth and color, a technique that can be readily heard on classic recordings by Emmylou Harris, Anne Murray, Ricky Skaggs, Ronnie Hawkins, Jesse Winchester, George Jones, Rodney Crowell, Roy Orbison, Jonathan Edwards, Johnny Cash, Billy Joe Shaver, Albert Lee, George Fox, The Woodys, Terry Radigan and others. Ahern got his start in music in his hometown of Halifax, Nova Scotia, playing guitar in three bands and regularly performing on two Canadian television network shows. While in Halifax, Ahern met a young female singer named Anne Murray, who was performing on a TV show where he served as music director. That meeting launched Murray's incredibly successful career, and provided Ahern with the impetus he needed to begin a full blown production career. Ahern moved to Toronto, where he produced ten Anne Murray albums and gained national prominence in the Canadian music industry. After a string of hits with Murray, Ahern's next find was Emmylou Harris. After moving to Los Angeles, Ahern produced eleven classic albums for Harris, including *Pieces of the Sky, Elite Hotel, Blue Kentucky Girl, Roses in the Snow* and *Evangeline*. They were also married for many years and had a child together. "I was very lucky to do all of those records with Brian, because I learned to be completely relaxed and open to the creative process," recalls Harris. "I really feel that I became a recording artist during that time. Brian tends to have a lot of faith in the intrinsic instincts of an artist. It is because of this empathy [that] he attempts to make the artist blossom intact, rather than trying to fit the artist into his particular sound." Ahern's production sensibilities have influenced the cream of Nashville's best producers. In fact, it would be fair to say that it is almost impossible to hear country music of the last 15 years without recognizing elements of Ahern's sonic vision. "Brian Ahern's Emmylou Harris albums rank up at the top with the great country records that were done by Billy Sherrill and Owen Bradley," says Tony Brown, president of MCA Nashville. "Although that seems like a big statement, Brian's influence on how records are made in Nashville today is more prevalent than some would care to admit. When I was looking for a producer to do the *Bradley Barn Sessions* with George Jones, there was only one person I considered, and that was Brian Ahern. The end result was a classic 'Jones' album that will hold up years from now." Over the years, the quiet and elusive Ahern has turned down many requests for interviews. So fans of Ahern's work will no doubt enjoy the anecdotes recounted here, and those looking to refine their production and mixing sensibilities should appreciate the generous tips offered. *Mix* is especially grateful for the time and care he took in helping us make this a special interview.



How did you get into production? Were you a musician first? **I remember the first job I had. I used to watch a live local television show that broadcast from a TV station a couple miles from my parents' house. One night I noticed the guitar player was missing, so the next day after school I went over there with my guitar and told them I wanted to do an audition for the job and I got it. They made me play a live guitar solo in front of some fishnet every Saturday night. I was 17 or 18, I guess.**

So I started making money playing folk and electric guitar. At one point, I had actually three bands going simultaneously. I was working at two different television networks, CBC and CTV, at the same time with these different bands and they didn't catch on.

One of the bands was called The Offbeats, and we played on a national television show called *Music Hop*. They were going to play records and have kids dance, and we convinced them that we could play the hits just as well as records and it would be much more interesting to have live music. I wore sunglasses in that band, because the lights annoyed me, but the image of the sunglasses became a very hip thing and generated lots of fan mail. Paul Shaffer wears sunglasses to this day. Maybe it is a Canadian thing. [Laughs]

At the same time, I had a band on the other network called The Nova Scotians that played totally different music like Celtic jigs and reels. I was not recognized without the sunglasses, and I had changed my hair. We wore plaid blazers and really itchy gray flannel pants.

I had a third band of totally different musicians, called the Bad Seeds. We had a record deal in the States on Verve Forecast and we put out a couple of singles.

I was also music director on the folk music show called *Singalong Jubilee*. That was where I met Anne Murray. This was all in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Even though I had all the work I could handle in Halifax, I got bored. I went to Toronto and starved for a while and talked Anne Murray into doing a really cheap album for $2,500. That was around 1968. I used that record to get her a deal at Capitol Records, where she stayed for 20 years.

That first Capitol album had the international hit "Snowbird." Was this album your first major-label production.

Yes. I produced that and I played everything except the strings [on that track]. It was my first 8-track experience, and I could only think of six tracks worth of stuff, including the strings.

While you were in Toronto, you conceived and built what has become one of the legendary mobile studios In the music industry, The Enactron Truck. How did that come about?

It was inspired by an image that had come to me in my sleep. One day, about 1971, I got up on the garage roof at my Toronto home with all the card board and plywood I could gather from the neighborhood and built the interior of a mobile unit. I walked around inside this space I was creating and cut it, hacked it and changed it until I got it the way I liked it. I then called up a young architect



Brian Ahern (L) with Mark Knopfler on the steps of the Enactron Truck outside Bradley's Barn

to come over and draw it before the wind blew it down. I wanted to make it a real studio, with an overdub booth, a control room and a shop in the back, with a machine room. So I had this crazy idea and did it.

Why a mobile unit?

I had left a successful career in Halifax to starve in Toronto. Once I had a successful career in Toronto, I assumed that I would be moving on. This time I wanted to have some tools that I could count on that were constant. At the time, a typical mobile unit was a cluster of equipment strapped down and wired together in a box on wheels. I wanted to have a working environment, fixed and comfortable inside, but very portable. It had to have at least three rooms with sound-lock doors. In most trucks, the speakers are jammed into one end of the vehicle, and the other 30 feet are behind you. I mounted my gear sideways, so you could look in either direction and have a 40-foot sight line at all times. I lined it with lead, so that if we pulled up next to a radio station, power pole or a lighting tower, RF would be minimized; although we tell clients we did it so we could mess with Lois Lane, and Superman would never know.

So you bought the trailer. Did you buy a truck with it too?

No. This thing is making money when it's parked. When you buy a tractor, you buy it with the idea that you're making money while you're rolling. So I just rent a tractor and he comes with a million dollars of insurance.

What are some of the more memorable sessions in the truck?

I had an interesting experience in Toronto just before I left for Los Angeles. I was sweetening an Anne Murray album and working on two other Canadian projects at the same time. The trailer was in a machine shop having some welding done. I had a big horn overdub session to do, so I booked these guys into the machine shop—all those brass horns in a shop full of steel machinery. We hung the music charts from the lathes, and we sat on crates. It sounded like some bizarre steel temple.

I had a realization that the Enactron Truck could stimulate the people and enhance the music. I decided to try this idea on a big string session. At that time in Toronto, most of the string players considered it a real yawn to come in to studios and overdub on popular music. It showed in their attitude and performance, until I booked this session at their Toronto Symphony home, which was an old wooden concert venue downtown called Massey Hall. They had to play well, because it was their place. Their attitude was totally different. They played their hearts out. I had big speakers on the stage, so they could listen back and fix things. We finished early, and it was wonderful. That's when I realized what magic I could work by having a mobile studio.

Typically, we drag music into environments that continue to become more sterile and generic. Everywhere you go you encounter the same configurations and equipment.

How has the Enactron truck evolved over the years?

I've just kept turning the gear over and keeping the stuff that wasn't necessarily the most valuable, but had the most character and would be difficult to replace. I like gear with attitude. Flat is boring to me. My favorite EQ is a big old stainless steel Lang. I recorded all that acoustic Emmylou Harris stuff with the Neve 1084 mic pre. It has excellent 3-band EQ. The Neve 1081 can't be beat for bass and drums. I cherish my old stainless Ampex Mixer. My Sphere console sounds like an API. I often link Neve 2254A compressors so that a lead vocal will duck a busy electric guitar. The best all-round compressor is the obscure UREI LA-22. My favorite mics are my mint omnidirectional Neumann M50s.

Shortly after you got the Enactron Truck up and running, you made the transition from Canada to the States and from Anne Murray to Emmylou Harris.

Well, it was an interesting transition. I was on the pop charts with Anne Murray and I was starting Emmylou Harris. You never know what's going to happen. I liked being in L.A.. at the time, and Anne Murray liked to record in Toronto. I didn't want to go back there.

How did Emmylou come into your world?

It was Don Schmitzerle, who worked at Warner Bros., who perceived that there was a woman singing harmony on a Gram Parsons album. Don asked Mary Martin, who was doing A&R for Warner Brothers, to look into it. Mary used to work for Albert Grossman when he managed Bob Dylan, and she had managed Leonard Cohen and Van Morrison. Mary is a woman of substance. If I had a record company, I'd hire her in a minute. Mary called me up in Toronto, and booked me a flight and limo into Silver Springs, Maryland. We sat at a table with a portable Uher cassette machine and recorded four sets of Emmylou Harris and her band at the time, at a place called the Red Fox Inn.

And what was the material like at the time, stylistically?

Merle Haggard, Gram Parsons...I think what I liked the most was how she seemed to be in command of the band.

It was around this time that you also had the good fortune to hook up with a young singer-songwriter named Rodney Crowell. How did you meet or hear about Rodney?

It was a combination of things. Skip Beckwith, Anne Murray's bassist, came back from the road with a tape of songs that Rodney had given her band for me to hear. I was also given a tape by great guy named David Nelson who worked for Almo Music at the time. I ended up buying Rodney Crowell's songwriting contract from Jerry Reed's company, Vector Music, and I signed him to a new contract to my company, Tessa Publishing in Toronto. I then flew him into Maryland to meet and write with Emmylou Harris. I had an album to make with her and I knew Emmy liked Gram Parsons songs and that I would need more material with poetry and depth. Rodney went on to join Emmy's Hot Band. That airline ticket launched his career. I still have the receipt in his old itinerary file.

Were there any special things that you remember about the first Emmylou album sessions?

I just remember being amazed at how well my truck worked. We'd rented an old rundown estate in a private canyon in Beverly Hills, pulled up outside this ranch-style house, and ran umbilical cables from The Truck into most rooms and the pool area. There was no linen, so the first night we were there, Linda Ronstadt and Emmy had to go out and buy us some bedding. They came back with Linda's MGB hatchback loaded for all us recording guys.

Did you do much pre-production with Emmylou?

I'd have her sing the song for me and I did it in my head. Sometimes I would suggest structure changes because it would unfold better or open an arrangement door for myself. I'd write down the chord changes, and then lid get by myself, play my old J-50 guitar, and start to imagine the record in my head. During the session I'd always have a station set up for myself in the studio so that if the band didn't get the tempo and the feel just right I could "drive" the track with my guitar part. We recorded almost all of those tracks live.

Was that true for most of her records?

Yes. Sometimes we would have to repair or replace a lead vocal. And some times there'd be an acoustic guitar sound or feel that I had in my head that we couldn't get live, so we'd go into The Truck, find and situate the appropriate mics and play ahead or behind the beat in certain places to make the feel change with the lyrics. We used J 200s a lot. She'd play sometimes, and I'd play. I mostly used an AKG 224, which has two transducers. It articulates the complex midrange of acoustic instruments. I also have an amazing old AKG 212 that has been dropped just the right number of times. It makes every acoustic sound great. I used one of my bidirectional Reslo mics to record the live vocal on "How High the Moon." The backside of the mic was looking at a plate-glass reflection of Emmy's voice. This was inspired by Les Paul's story of recording Mary Ford at their kitchen sink.

The first record, Pieces of the Sky, was released in 1975. That was a very strong debut.

There was stuff in the can after that album, because we over-recorded. I felt that if we could skip the lame first album and jump to album number two, so to speak, the music would be better and the record company and the artist would save lots of time and money. That there are still some debris tracks that nobody ever wants to see the light of day confirms the wisdom of the decision to over-record. So in a sense, her first album was a second album. Once the record

company realized what a good idea it was, we always had about 20 songs going. At one point, we had 30. The stash kept building, and we recorded consistently. When we had enough ideas to justify a session, we would do it. And then when It came time for an album, we would pull out a group of songs that seemed to fit together. If it was still required, we'd go in and record two or four more songs to finish up an album. When it came time to deliver an album, we always had about 20 tracks ready for mixing.

 You managed to attract some very significant talent for each of Emmy's albums.

 I think we were the first to cross-pollinate with other luminaries to work on records with us, like bringing in Garth Hudson, and Rick Danko to play fiddle. We were fortunate to be able to attract these people. The "Most Goose bumps Award" should probably go to Neil Young and Dolly Parton, who came into The Truck to sing on Emmy's Christmas album called *Light of the Stable*. It was pretty scary.

 Willie Nelson has pitched in on more than a few projects.

 That's right. Willie often came in to sing and overdub guitar. He was always willing to play, and he's great to work with. Here's a story for you. One day I got really impatient with that old guitar of his, the one with the hole in it, be cause it wouldn't stay in tune. I said, "Willie, this isn't going to work." He just looked disappointed and he left. A couple of days later he pulled up in a big limo, and walked in with a $30,000 gut string classical guitar, ready to do that overdub. He did it, climbed back in the limo and left. This really impressed me and made me realize that he really is a professional fellow.

 Emmy has always been known for her incredible live bands, the most famous probably being the Hot Band. Did you have a hand in assembling that?

 In a kind of a standoffish way, yes. At that time, most artists did not record with their bands. I thought this was a stupid waste of time and energy. Here bands did all the rehearsing and the bonding onstage, and went through the exhaustion and the work, only to be dismantled and to watch someone assemble some studio musicians to try to get that natural band feeling back. I thought why not just spend more on a better road band, and then when you finish your tour, you can record with them.

 Profile *is an amazing anthology of Emmy's early Warners work Did you have any input on compiling that collection?*

 Yes. I put it together and named it. Donivan Cowart and I also technically assembled it in an interesting way. I separated the low frequencies, so that I could compress and equalize them differently from the mids and highs. When I took the finished work into Doug Sax at the Mastering Lab, we thought it was easier to work with and sounded better than the original.

 After* Profile*, Emmy went through a noticeable turn toward a very stripped down acoustic style.

 Perhaps you are referring to *Roses in the Snow*. We started doing a bluegrass/ acoustic project, but marketing and management started to worry about the lack of commercial potential it would have. I stayed adamant and stubborn about it, and this acoustic album went higher on the pop charts than any of Emmylou's records, and it was probably the most economical. Instead of having a drummer, I played a big Gibson Arch Top Super 400. That was the drummer. Most of the sessions or albums that we did had some little rule that would serve to set it apart from the other records. In this case it was a big rule: no drums or electric bass. There might have been an occasional card board box or foot pedal, but most of the rhythm came from that big Gibson, and no click track.

 Tell me about some of the most significant moments in your production career.

 The high point for me, as a record producer, happened while I was working in a studio I built in North Hollywood. Roy Orbison called to tell me he had won his first Grammy. After all he'd accomplished, he finally got a Grammy. He was emotional and weeping. It was for a song we recorded called "That Loving You Feeling Again."

 Do you remember anything about those sessions with Roy?

 One thing you'll notice about Roy's records, especially the old ones, is that there are few solos of any kind, or as he calls them, "rides." Sometimes he might have a riff, as in "Pretty Woman." During this session, Skunk Baxter was designing an electric guitar solo. Roy took me

aside and said softly, "B.A., I don't like 'rides.' I'd rather we just called a break, and you and I sit in the control room and we'll write a third part or some kind of a bridge just to make the song longer, so we don't have to have that 'ride.'" So he bounced stuff off me and I told him what I liked. We worked it into the arrangement and bang—there was another "Roy Crescendo"! So you'll notice there's no solo in that record. That's why many of the Roy records have that huge crescendo—out of desperation, because he couldn't tolerate solos. You know, he sings very softly.

 Even in those real impassioned parts?

 They sound loud, but it's just what he's doing emotionally with his throat. Good singers are true athletes.

 The lowest point in my career was when I had to file for divorce [from Emmylou]. It was more than the break-up of a marriage. My identity was caught up in being the producer of this quality body of musical work, which was about to come to an end. The last record we did was *White Shoes*.

 What is your opinion of the sound of the CD reissues of Emmy's catalog?

 Since I've heard the first few CDs, I've kind of given up on hearing my old analog work remastered. And I wish they'd called me. When I made those records, I often had three reverb effects going in the mix, and they were all clearly identifiable and all were making their analog contributions. When they got to the reissued CDs, they were all blurred into one reverb.

 I built a two-story booth off the control room with non-parallel walls and a teak tongue and groove floor. We called it The Silo Room. That room typically was populated with lush Roger LS3-5A—my favorite—and edgy NS-10 speakers on the floor. I panned a stereo send to get suitable balance between the two. I would often send a kick drum through the LS3-SA and a hi-hat through the NS- 10. In addition, an AKG BX-10 would furnish the brief, initial reverb, and I used the Lexicon 224 to leapfrog over it. So the effects were in constant motion waving outward. I always attempted a sense of place. I use tape speed to alter the delay time of rooms. Having recorded a drum or vocal, I might speed it up or slow it down and play it back into the room. If you speed it up for instance, and run it through the room and record that sound, when you play the tape back at normal speed, you get a larger version of the same room. You can go for the opposite effect, too. I'll spread the larger version of the same room out wide. When I do that, the sound will seem to zoom out through the small room into the big room. These are time-shifted versions of the same room that I've recorded in stereo. It's true stereo, so it works up in mono.



What are some other things you have done to play with space?

There's a track on Terry Radigan's record, "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again," where I had my Neumann M50 mics about 60 feet from Eddie Bayers' drums. During mixing, I shifted the ADATs to remove the decay time, as if they were right in your face. Then you have the sound of scheme thing 60 feet away, but not the delay that your brain normally expects to hear. Spooky. Have you bothered to transfer your old Emmy masters to DAT? I have analog generational safety copies that I've transferred to DAT, a frail format which I mistrust. I'm going to put them on ADAT, which is very robust. ADAT is like driving alone down a six lane highway. You may only need one lane, but you can mess up and not worry about it. You can stomp on the tape and wrinkle it and it still plays. What's even better is magneto-optical. It's supposed to last 100 years. Perhaps we should carve the numbers into the pyramids.

Emmylou is finally getting the box set treatment this year. What input did you have on this box set?

I've got my work in three box sets so far, and in all three cases I've declined to interview or contribute to liner notes because I think my work speaks for itself. I'm not about to ramble on and on about it. I've also been called by three or four different people who are writing books about country rock and how it evolved. There are many people who are pontificating about how they masterminded country rock. We all just did the best we could with our influences and the assets around at the time. We never did any masterminding, so I just decided not to say anything. It's so unconscious. You just do what you can. When the Beatle albums were being made, I'm sure they didn't sit around and say, "They're going to love this in 1996. We're going to reissue it..." [Laughs]

What is it about country music that appeals to you?

I'm not a swept away, spellbound country music fan. I like a lot of things about country music, and I respect what has happened historically. However, there is something about every kind of music that appeals to me. The George Jones record I produced was sort of a dessert tray of country music. Only in country music can you have a song about a family who are so dirt poor that they can't grow anything until they bury their mother under it. That's what I like about country music. Try to put something like that in rap or pop! Country music is the only venue for some of those real feelings, and people know it.

How did the George Jones Bradley Barn project come about?

I got hired to do a Dan Seals project and was fired halfway through. I got angry, so I finished a couple of songs with my own time and money to play for skeptics. I think that determination to finish appealed to Tony Brown [president of MCA]. When it came time to do the George Jones project, which we both knew would be like running Desert Storm, Tony picked me. I also had one foot in the past and still had one foot in the present. I came up with that retro concept for George, wherein I put him in a sonic time machine hoping to provoke him to sing as in days gone past. It worked. I wouldn't allow any electric bass or crashing drums. I wanted to transport time. It was just an intuition, but I always thought that singing against an acoustic bass seemed to be a part of his thing. The bass would strike and then fall away, and his voice would fill and swell. It worked, as you can hear. George went back in time.

So everything was cut just straight on the floor. . . no overdubs?

I had assembled a team of superstar musicians and did not want to bore them. First of all, I would rehearse only sections of each song with the band. When it came time to play it all the way through, I would hit record, and, because they knew the song, but they'd never really done it all the way through, it was fun for them and the sky would open up. There was an excitement and an urgency, a kind of presence to it. I recorded that "excitement" first. Then we would do two or three more takes that were increasingly more tidy. I almost always used the first take, and then I would plunder the subsequent takes when needed to replace an occasional sloppy passage in the magical first take. I used the technology to actually avoid overdubbing. I think this was the first big Nashville ADAT project. Alesis was very helpful.

And the groove was steady enough that you could lift from the other takes ....

Yes, plus with ADATs you can shift things around. Like two trains in the night, you can line up the windows and look right through them. You can look through eight trains. Once in a while the bluegrassers, like Marty Stuart and Ricky Skaggs, would rush a little. That's part of bluegrass, and that's why we love that music. The rock guys, like Leon Russell, would sometimes lay back. The windows on the trains wouldn't line up, .so I'd slow the "grassers" down about 12 milliseconds for a few bars, when they got a little excited, and at that same point, maybe I'd speed up Leon Russell about 8 or 15 milliseconds. The outcome is impressive. That's how you avoid doing over dubs. You mine and shift.

Not only have you done the lion's share of your recording in the Enactron Truck, but I understand that you do your mixing there.

Two songs on the new Ricky Skaggs album were mixed by me in The Truck, and it's an "illegal" mixing environment. You're not supposed to be able to get good sounds there, but we have done it for 25 years. It's a poor mixing environment, according to the rule makers. It's only eight feet deep, and when you mix you have your back to a wall. Some of the bass passes through the walls, which I think is good, but that too is illegal. We pioneered the use of near-fields because we were compelled to record, overdub and mix masters in the truck. All those early Emmylou albums were done on Klipsch speakers and a single Auratone.

Are there specific things you like to do for mixing?

I like to continuously do updated rough mixes back to the ADAT while working on a project. When it is final mix time, I instruct the engineer to have my rough mix in sync and available at any given moment on a 2-track selector button on the console.

What projects were done in that truck with out you?

Hundreds. We did _The Rose_ with Bette Midler and Barbra Streisand's _A Star Is Born_. We've done symphony orchestras, Black Sabbath, Bob Dylan's _Hard Rain_ and a lot of television. I've been told we have over 40 Gold and Platinum records attributable to work done in the Enactron truck.

***One of your most recent productions is Terry Radigan, which is still unreleased*.**

Yes, it's an album I did for Asylum Records here in Nashville. I developed her and managed her for a while. Got her a publishing deal with Tree and put together a showcase and that kind of thing. When we signed with Asylum, they were going to be the special alternative country record label. By the time we finished the record to their liking, they had experienced what record company president Kyle Lehning called "mission creep," which is a military term. When it was time to release the record, they had evolved into mainstream radio pursuers. They were no longer the company she had signed with, and there was a mutual separation. From your perspective, how is the future shaping up? I have a Ricky Skaggs single climbing the charts right now, with two more singles in the wings over at Atlantic. I have been approached with four record projects, one of which is pop, and another which is a film soundtrack. One of the projects is a wonderful duo called The Woodys. They sound like Gram Parsons and Phil Everly. I am also looking forward to the imminent release of Terry Radigan's debut. After maxing out what Halifax, Toronto and Los Angeles had to offer me, I find myself really busy in my fourth city, Nashville.

Formerly based in Memphis, writer, songwriter and producer Rick Clark now lives in Nashville.

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