

Planting the seed

Prior to the release of his new album, **John Butler** invited **jmag** to join him at one of the many projects funded by his JB Seed program. While there, we spoke to him and partner Danielle Caruana about how they want to affect the world around them, where John sees his music going and how the next album's looking.

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Partners in both meanings of the word: John Butler and Danielle Caruana in the Blue Mountains.

Two hours drive out of Sydney's west and you're in Blue Mountains territory. Katoomba is a regional town full of tourist buses. With its 1920s, retro-style décor, plush lounge chairs and red walls (complete with depictions of royal boxes gawking at the stage), Katoomba's Clarendon Guesthouse is a legendary venue where theatre performer Reg Livermore staged his one-man shows and musicians such as Cat Power and Darren Hanlon have performed. It's a cosy venue famous for housing intimate, unforgettable gigs. The first time John Butler played the Clarendon was back in 1999. Today, however, he's here for a very different reason. This afternoon is the final session of a three-day workshop, one part of 2006's JB Seed, a fund set up in 2005 by Butler and his partner, Danielle Caruana, to support local, independent musicians via a series of arts grants, workshops and services.

Currently talking at the front of the room is Stuart Watters, CEO of the Australian Independent Record Labels Association (AIR), giving the 20 applicants in the room information on how the AIR chart (sales of independent releases) works. He's part of a panel of music industry professionals, including publicist Paula Jones, triple j assistant music director Kirileigh Lynch, Paul Mason (head of AMRAP, the Australian Music Radio Airplay Project) and independent radio promoter Russell Thomas.

Up the back of the room, Butler sits alongside his manager, Phil Stevens (who also looks after Little Birdy, The Flairz and more), JB Seed administrator Stacia Goninon and Seed supporters Carlo and Natalie from Blue King Brown. Caruana nurses the couple's eight-week-old son in her arms, mediating the conversation as it goes along. "It's really common at AIR to have bands call us up and say, 'We've got a CD we want to launch, and we need some help manufacturing it,'" Watters explains, when asked by one applicant what the most common issues the organisation sees day to day are. "We say, 'OK, when did you want to release it?' And the answer is always, 'Three weeks!'" he laughs. "You have to realise that just isn't feasible ... you need to work on a much longer timeline than that."

This three-day workshop is just one of the many projects undertaken by the JB Seed in 2006. For this, the fund takes care of accommodation, transport, food and other related costs, while various music industry figures donate their time to come and offer advice on ways emerging managers can help their artists be heard. Of course, it's not the first time a workshop on music management has been held, but there's no mistaking the passion and dedication in the room today. The last few days have, says MGM Distribution CEO Sebastian Chase, been groundbreaking. "This entire thing is excellent," Chase nods. "We've all been learning things, not just the applicants who've come along. Everyone's talking about how great it is."

It's hardly surprising after you spend an afternoon with Butler and Caruana. Their dedication to nurturing and encouraging a community within Australian music is both obvious and inspiring. "We've been talking about it for a few years, from when we first met and started touring together," explains Butler. "There's just so many great acts in this country. We wanted to do more for them and help those acts become self-sufficient – we just want people to be able to pay the rent, you know? That's really important to us – it's really important to every artist and that is a common denominator for every musician, wouldn't you say?"

"We were just like, 'Imagine if we could set up a private fund that's not restricted by government protocols,'" Caruana continues. "We thought it would just be great to give back, set something up that we could do ourselves. It was really a pipe dream for

such a long time: 'Hey, maybe we should set up our own arts grant funding!'. Then it was just [a matter of] getting off our arses."

And so they did. At the end of 2004, following on the success of Butler's LP *Sunrise Over Sea*, the pair came up with the idea of the JB Seed, a private funding body that would provide arts grants across several categories. Contributing \$50,000 in the first year, grants were available in categories such as Multicultural Arts, Music Workshop and Professional Development, Indigenous Music, Music Marketing and Social Activism through the Arts. "We had a team of three working on the project intermittently in this really dingy room in Collingwood," remembers Caruana of the Seed's early days, "and we had 400 applications across five categories. We were expecting, maybe, 80. It was amazing."

After fine-tuning the process, and bringing Goninon on board, this year the JB Seed has gained financial contributions from the likes of Philip Stevens Management, Missy Higgins, John Watson Management (who looks after Wolfmother, Silverchair and more), The Cat Empire and their manager Correne Wilkie, The Waifs, MGM Distribution's Chase Greenlees, with his partner Kylie, and Paul Gilding and Michelle Grosvenor from sustainability consultants ECOS. Together, the group contributed roughly \$100,000 to the fund – a huge pool of money. "There should be more grant programs like the JB Seed," says Higgins of her involvement. "Our country is bursting with talented, creative minds that aren't able to express themselves because they don't have the [financial] means to. I'm eternally thankful for my leg-up into the industry and I'm proud to be supporting a fund that offers the same chance to other artists."

"I think it's created a forum [to overcome] those barriers that smaller artists may feel that are between them and people at a higher level that they may be too intimidated to talk to," says Nasrine Rahmani, a self-managed artist who also looks after San Lazaro, a nine-piece Melbourne act. "I mean, not at any time this week have I felt intimidated to talk to anyone."

"[Butler]'s a massive inspiration," offers Julian Abrahams, from Canberra-based outfit Casual Projects. Talk to the various applicants and it's clear that it wasn't necessarily Butler's music that drew them here; it was his successful independence that impressed. "He's proven a point to so many musicians in Australia in that you can be very successful doing it yourself: knowing the right avenues to take, knowing the people to employ, knowing the next step," Abrahams continues. "This whole event has been overwhelming, but very informative. The more you know, the more you realise you don't know – everyone's at different levels here, but everyone's learning, even people on the panel."

In 2006, programs for the JB Seed included Social Activism through the Arts, Professional Skills and Development, Indigenous Touring, Publicity/Marketing (where three artists landed a publicist and radio promoter) and today's Management workshops. Some of the recipients include: Yowarliny, an indigenous duo, who received \$4200 for touring in support of their upcoming LP, *Dijiva*. "How Radiation Makes You Sick" is a project of the Medical Association of the Prevention Of War, who were awarded \$5000 in funding. There are sitar players from Sydney, flamenco and Spanish percussionists, opera singers, roots artists, anti-nuclear groups and many others (see www.thejbseed.com for more information on how to apply and who's been successful so far).

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Participants in the JB Seed's three-day Music Management workshop in the Blue Mountains.

Sitting down with Butler and Caruana after a lunch break, jmag chatted with the couple about the JB Seed, making music, and why it's so important to give something back.

jmag: How has this year been for the JB Seed, second time around?

Danielle: The second round has been a lot different – we've administered it a lot more professionally. For instance, we're going through the Australian Business Arts Foundation and they make it possible for us to have tax-deductibility status. To date, they've been really great in letting us have free reign with what we fund – things like being able to have categories like Social Activism Through The Arts and Multicultural Art, which was specifically for people on refugee visas. Things that just can't be funded by the government.

How did you know what you wanted to cover when you first started?

Danielle: For the first year, we knew we wanted to do something with refugees who were coming into the country. We knew we wanted to do something with recorded products, and so we just did Music Marketing – that was a very, very broad category of the first year. Professional Development was another huge category; we wanted to cast a net to get a feel for what was needed out there. In the second year, we fine-tuned everything and tried to be a lot more specific about what we were funding, like Social Activism through the Arts.

John: We wanted to open a debate with the uranium industry, for instance, and also promote multiculturalism with a specific view on tolerance towards Australians with Middle-Eastern backgrounds. That's the great thing – we can act on things we're seeing in society. We saw the Cronulla riots going on and we just thought we need to put some social activism in there.

Danielle: That's the ability we have – we can be very responsive year by year, we don't have to go through a massive protocol. The other thing we did this year was this particular category today, which was the Music Management workshop. The outcomes are about working with professionals in the industry to demystify the process. Some people think that there's some magic language and once you learn that magic language, you know how to manage. It's also about making people realise that it's a

community and a network. If you can get people of similar status together to start networking within themselves, regardless of the people sitting on the panel ... that, in itself, is going to be a proactive thing to do for the Australian music industry.

John: The biggest thing behind this year's program is that saying, "Give someone a fish and they'll eat for a day; teach them how to fish and they'll eat forever." ... You can't bottle things like instinct, serendipity or just time and place and luck, but all those other things you need, you can get in contact with, and I think it's very empowering and inspiring to gain knowledge. People are like, 'What's the secret?' – and there is no one secret, you know.

What about the music the artists make? Would you choose an applicant to receive a grant who was a really good pop artist, for instance?

John: Oh, absolutely. We've got heavy-metal acts, contemporary-roots acts, really traditional music ... as far as our taste goes, we try to keep that right out of it. But we did ask how did they use their ear, how did they record their album, their attention to detail. We wanted to see someone who's willing to be a hard worker with or without money. You're going to have to work your butt off, so you need drive, passion and you need to show us that you can work to get to that point, or definitely have a history of it. With the music – [it's a matter of] how are you willing to present it? If you showed a lot of diligence recording your music, that obviously helps.

Danielle: One of the people in Professional Development is an opera singer, Laurence Meikle, who's going to have a mentorship program with another singer in Sydney. I'm actually not into opera, but the application was such that he had thought out what he was doing, why he was doing it ... he engaged all the people he needed to engage, everything was in place. It was visible that this was a person who had a vision and was taking steps to implement it. Easy. No problem. We can be a cog in that.

What do you get out of doing all this? I mean, you are extremely busy and, if you chose to, it would be easy to give support in financial means only. Why be so hands-on?

Danielle: If three people walking out of here make sustainable music careers out of this, great. If five people walk out and decide they don't want to be managers and don't

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Caruana and Butler have made independent success seem possible for many Australian musicians.



want to waste other people's time doing it, wicked. There's so many possible outcomes and they're all positive. It's not just about getting out there and being a kick-arse manager – it's about thinking: "Do you really want to do this and, if you do, are you inspired to go and do it in a different way and not be intimidated by it?"

John: Firstly, it's not a gratification thing. It's amazing to be inspired by the stories and the speakers and how much I want to do what I do better – that's what I'm getting out of it. It's a dream seeing all this. It's been an empowering project, a community on different levels. You know, established music industry members and emerging applicants, artists and managers working together. We're providing and at the same time we're reaping the rewards.

It's obvious from coming here up here that you guys feel very strongly that the music industry is a community, first and foremost. What's your role in it?

John: I think, for us, having a career wouldn't be enough if it wasn't for contributing. If I can't be contributing in some way to benefit my society, then it's not going to be rewarding enough for me. It's just not enough to have gold albums or money or awards without some deep sense of contribution. I knew that from the start when I was busking.

Danielle: That's also why we've invited other people to join the fund this year. The true vision was to set up an arts fund, run by artists for emerging artists, and people are really generous. Ideally, I'd like to get international acts that are touring here to pay a small margin of their ticket towards things like this. The importance of art to bind

culture, it creates something that everyone can invest in and feel connected to. The fact that there's so much responsibility on triple j's shoulders to represent youth music ... I mean, that's a huge responsibility.

John: It's a great job they're doing – it's just a shame that it's only them.

Can you tell us a little about your new album?

John: I think it's just as diverse as ever with ... I think it's just a forward movement, you know? We just keep on growing – we want to keep progressing and developing what we do. I guess the only one thing I try to keep out of my mind is that it wasn't about making another 'Zebra'. Appreciation is very appreciated, but you've gotta really keep that out of the artistic process.

What's the biggest difference, recording an album now, after you've had so much success, from when you started out?

John: There were differences for sure, like how much the public knows of us, but I've taken a couple of new directions. I've broken up with my band, I've had another baby, I'm making a record with my new band and I've been touring with them. We had a huge amount of success and you never know what it's going to be like the next time around. History shows that a lot of time you come out with a bang, so who knows what can happen? There's no guarantee, so it's pretty much the same mystery all over again. Are people going to like it? To a certain degree, well, tough luck if you don't. I made a record I enjoy and I'm going to do it anyway, but I hope people dig it. We only do the best we can! 🍷