

Tex Pistol

THIS GUN'S FOR HIRE

By Chris Bourke

photo by Chris Mauger



"Imagine Bruce Springsteen ... driving across America in a Honda Civic." It's 10pm at Wellington's Soundtrax Studios, where Ian Morris AKA Tex Pistol, Callie Blood and Jim Hall are producing a single aimed at skin cancer.

Jim Hall is explaining why the client's idea — to use Springsteen's 'Cover Me' — was daft. "It just didn't work. Cover me? Springsteen never gets out of his car!"

Hall's in the production seat for this job, while Morris engineers and operates the Fairlight. Blood, who wrote the jingle, concentrates on the vocal which is being sung by Rikki Morris — of 'Nobody Else' fame — in his first commercial appearance. The session's only been going an hour, but already Rikki's vocal track is almost complete; squeaky pop over a backing that recalls Georgie Fame's 'Yeh Yeh'.

The 30-second jingle extolling the virtues of UV cream quickly becomes embedded in the consciousness, as Ian coaxes his brother through take after take: "Hold that G ... make that hot hotter ... one more time for Ringo."

What's really remarkable is the speed and competence of the work. Morris decides to double-track the vocal as an experiment. He slows down the tape, then Rikki adds another vocal at a lower pitch. At normal speed the jingle sounds as poppy as a Madonna single.

"What we really want," grins Hall, "is someone blonde and unreasonably young — like Kylie Minogue. 'I could be so sunburnt ...'"

Main vocal complete, the musical maggies pick up guitars to work out some fills. Morris plays a line from *Exile On Main St's* 'Hip Shake', while Hall tries out familiar licks from *With The Beatles*.

Time for the backing vocals. In walk Annie Crummer and Barbara Griffin, moonlighting from the *Holidaymakers'* album sessions taking place in Marmalade Studios next door. Hall plays the backing melodies on his guitar, and within half an hour Blood, Crummer and Griffin have oo'ed and ah'd three-part harmonies. Morris alters the parts of the final chord; the result echoes the famous dissonance that ends 'She Loves You'.

Vocals down, it's still only 11pm as the final touches are recorded. "There's some garbage in there, I think it's the hi-hats," says Hall. He wants some holes in the final mix, but proceeds to pack more into the jingle. "I think it needs some warm Georgie left hand," he says, quickly working out a piano part and recording it. "Maybe a sax fill." Hall

works out a riff and records it. "Is that too much like the original?" he thinks aloud.

Meanwhile Morris is tapping away at the Fairlight, fine-tuning tracks already recorded, changing instruments at the flick of a switch from Hammond organ to Yamaha piano to church organ. He decides the opening is a bit limp, so quickly finds a metallic drum sound, works it into a fanfare ... and the result booms out like the start of *Hawaii Five-O*.

"I think I know a way to get bagpipes in there," muses Hall, but three hours after they began, it's all been completed: 'Melanoma with Matt Bianco'.

"I changed my name in search of fame to find the Midas touch," sang Mott the Hoople, perhaps the greatest influence on all those young Dudes. It's ironic that after a long and varied career in music, Ian Morris should receive most recognition for a busman's holiday called *Tex Pistol*.

Now 31, he's been an engineer (the classic *Hello Sailor* albums, plus lots worth forgetting), a producer (*Cool Bananas*, the *Meemees* album, and lots he wants to forget) and a band member (Th' Dudes, Pink Flamingos, DD Smash). This month his first solo album comes out, called *Nobody Else*, still using that cowboy moniker.

"Ian Morris just doesn't sound poppy enough," he explains. His first solo project, a single called 'Boot Up (Let X=Y)' was done in 1983 using his nickname Jag Moritz. It disappeared without a trace. Morris's next project was a cowboy epic, so a different name seemed appropriate. *Tex Pistol*. It had the same hokey flavour as the song, 'The Ballad Of Buckskin Bob'. When released on Pagan in '86, it also disappeared. But *Tex Pistol* won the Most Promising Male Vocalist award.

Now happy to be stuck with *Tex*, 'The Game Of Love' followed, and the rest is history. It shot to No. 1, reaching the top on the day when the shops ran out of stock. The follow-up, 'Nobody Else' also made No. 1, once again only for a week: U2's 'Desire' was an unstoppable juggernaut.

"Tex started off as a joke, a one-off

cowboy thing, and it's still very much an after-hours hobby," says Morris. The separate persona suits Morris, whose day-job now is producing music for advertising. "I like *Tex* in that it isn't me. I can hide behind it. We get clients coming in, people I've known for years, saying 'Who is *Tex Pistol*?' They don't realise it's me, which is great."

Morris has a take it or leave it attitude to success. He experienced our version of pop stardom in Th' Dudes and DD Smash, and a lot of it wasn't much fun. "I've toured the country a million times. So I don't envy someone like Ardijah who've just put out a fantastic single — but

Abba: "Brilliant songs, great melodies! The lyrics — who cares?"

what next? It's a career move for them, but it's not for me, which is the advantage I have."

Nobody Else came about when Pagan's Trevor Reekie suggested there was enough material for an album. "I thought, oh, that sounds like a bit of self-indulgent pleasure, I'll have a go," says Morris, "but in the end, I had to really force myself to go in to do it. Because working all day on a Farmers' jingle, then having to go back at night to record 140 acoustic guitar parts for the album wasn't a whole lot of fun. But I didn't want it to drag on for years and years, I didn't want it to become an audio *Stranded in Paradise* — eternally updating and revising."

The result is a diverse work that,

Morris thinks, conforms to the original meaning of album; a collection of songs. "Much as I love 'Bad Medicine' by Bon Jovi, all their songs have the same drum sound, the same guitar sound, the same vocal echo, the same overall concept. This doesn't."

Nobody Else is certainly a diverse display of Morris's talents and tastes. He's fan of pure pop and productions expansive and sparse. The album's got a sense of history and humour, and reflects his love of country and classic New Zealand songs. It shows a perfectionist with a commercial ear revelling in the craft of making music. Morris's record collection is the

best guide to where *Tex* comes from. He's got boxes of singles, hundreds of them in shocking condition but alphabetical order; Abba's 'Mamma Mia' right through to ... yes! The Zombies' 'She's Not There' and Zager and Evans' 'In The Year 2525'. But there are also Frank Ifield and Cliff Richard hits from his English childhood, and a New Zealand collection that goes from Ash Burton's 'Tea At Te Kuiti' through the La De Das, Fourmyula, and Space Waltz to Golden Harvest and the Features.

In the albums, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones are worn out from teenage years playing them at 16 rpm to learn off the lead breaks the Georgie Fame, Gene Pitney. But the 70s are of equal importance: Mott

the Hoople, Alice Cooper, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop. More especially Elvis Costello and Todd Rundgren. Plus, the country section: Bob Wills, Gram Parsons, stacks of George Jones. All make an impact on *Nobody Else*.

Producers: Phil Spector, George Martin, Holland-Dozier-Holland, Mickie Most, Jimmy Miller, Tony Visconti, Chinn-Chapman, Richard Perry, Dave Edmunds, Guy Stevens, Nick Lowe. "All great pop songs have a colourful image. You get a picture in your mind's eye. Think of some people, you get a very dark two-dimensional image of what they're doing — all very serious. Think of *Sgt Pepper*, it's a tapestry of sound. The songs were great, but it's the sound of them that has so much character. Sonic painting."

Pure Pop for Now People. Abba: "Brilliant songs, great melodies. The lyrics — who cares? Just the sound: 'Ma Ma (chang chang) Waterloo! Great sound.' Tomorrow's Hits Today. Current faves: "Drop The Boy" by Bros and Bon Jovi's 'Bad Medicine'."

What about cover versions, Yesterday's Hits Today? The year's worst: 'I Don't Want To Talk About It.' "She's done it exactly the same, only she can't sing." Drive My Car. "It's always hard to do Beatles songs, to capture that feel. Think of the good ones: Elton John, Joe Cocker. Even Ray Charles couldn't do 'Yesterday'."

"People frown on doing covers, but look at Ella Fitzgerald. In those days Cole Porter would write a song then everyone would have a bash at doing it."

"In my first band, with Peter Ulrich, we used to play Eastern Suburbs rugby clubs. Chillum. Peter thought of that. Jeans above the navel and curly hair. We used to play rugby dos, farmers' daughter's weddings. Stones songs. Chuck Berry, Creedence. Lots of rock 'n' roll, but no Beatles. It's like people doing Dave Dobbyn songs. Only Dave can do them."

"People frown on doing covers. I have endless discussions with Trevor. He loves originals. I'm chuffed 'Nobody Else' is an original too. But look at Ella Fitzgerald. In those days Cole Porter would write a song then everyone would have a bash at doing it. There are no definitive versions, maybe Frank Sinatra's version, but everyone had a bash."

Ken Avery, who composed 'Tea At Te Kuiti' and many other novelty songs in the 50s, bemoaned the effect of the Beatles; suddenly you were dead as a songwriter unless you could perform as well. Although Morris co-wrote Th' Dudes songs and half of *Nobody Else*, he agrees. "The day the term singer-songwriter was coined was a dark day for music. All of a sudden you had no credibility unless you were moaning about your own particular problems. People forgot that music is entertainment — above all else."

"I listen to Paul Kelly and think it'd be great to write an album of

fantastically honest Ian Morris songs. I could, but it would be a heap of old toss. I'm more into interpreting things."

And the witty references to the past, 'Sweet Dreams' strings, 'Sympathy For The Devil' percussion, 'Respect' BVs, 'Here There And Everywhere' and 'Honky Tonk Woman' chord changes? "There's two things happening there. A couple of the songs are pastiche, in the truest sense of the word; sending it up and adoring it at the same time. That's 'I Don't Know What Came Over Me', which is wearing a bit thin, but what the heck. Also, any musician is only the sum of his or her influences and their interpretation of them. That's why Rikki's song ('Nobody Else') is pretty Beatles-ish. And country music is mongrel music — there's no musical form that hasn't influenced country. It's part of the way music evolves, people say 'Ooh, that's great, let's do this with it.' The steals are obvious. Rappers are the biggest thieves, and so boring. They probably think country's boring."

Working in the ad industry, is he torn by the way jingles exploit great music? "No, not at all. I always end up thinking about the geezer who wrote the song. I don't think I'd ever let 'My Old Friend' become a beer ad. It's my choice. Maybe if I needed the money. But if Bobby Womack really wants \$5000 from Brut for 'It's All

Over Now', it's up to him. Mick and Keith won't let any of their songs be used — they don't want \$10,000 from New Zealand. It's when the remakes are badly done and the client tries to shove his chemical formula for soap powder into the lyrics that he takes offense.

Production is a mis-used term, says Morris. "On my passport, it says 'audio producer' because it's such a broad term. I do engineering, write songs, produce, make audio." George Martin was the first producer to be an influence, Alan Parsons the first engineer. "When I started at Stebbings, 'Year Of The Cat' was the studio song. Walk into a new studio and you'd put on Al Stewart to check the monitors."

"But Parsons was more a good engineer than a producer. That's where people get confused, they mistake a sparkly bright sound as good production. Paul Streeckstra [at Harlequin] used to get great sound, much better than me. But producers have to rehearse the band, chop songs around, throw things out, say to the bass player 'You're useless — fuck off.' They've got to talk to the record company. There's a lot more to it than meets the eye. And a lot of psychology. Every performer has a quality curve, you've got to be aware of when they're not getting any better."

The next producer Morris followed was Guy Stevens, who did Mott the Hoople and later the Clash's *London* ▶

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