

At every New Zealand music industry awards show, you'll find expatriate Kiwi Grant Thomas, just having flown in from Sydney and just about to leave the country. *RipItUp* cornered him one Saturday at his Stamford Plaza hotel room and in between phone calls such as — "I know that Ben Stiller (Hollywood director, *Reality Bites*) is a huge *Crowded House* fan but how can we give him a new Neil Finn track for his movie soundtrack before we've even chosen the singles from the album?"

Thomas left New Zealand for Sydney in 1980 to manage Sharon O'Neill after working 10 years in tourist hotel management and one year with Ian Magan's Concert Promotions. While working with Magan, Thomas met the Finn brothers when he did two New Zealand tours with Split Enz. In Australia Grant Thomas has managed diverse artists including *Crowded House*, the *Rockmelons*, Mark Williams, the *Exponents*, the *Divinyls*, and *Screaming Jets*. The New Zealand artists he is currently working with are Neil Finn, Tim Finn, OMC, and Dave Dobbyn.

How do you define what a manager does do for an artist and what a manager does not do?

"There's lots of different styles of management. There are various times at which what you do ebbs and flows a little bit. You can be involved in everything from the most personal and intimate part of artists' lives, running tours around their family arrangements and helping them put that together, to just purely sitting back on certain days, and just taking phone calls and directing traffic.

"The big areas are dealing with the record company, dealing with the artist on a day by day basis, and dealing with the agents, the publishers, and depending on how strong the record company is, dealing with the media — print and electronic."

Do you draw a line as to what you don't do?

"We don't procure drugs for any of our acts, they have to do that themselves [chuckles]."

Is it imperative that you're based in Sydney?

"I've been living in Sydney for 16 years. We have Tracy Magan on the ground here in Auckland and Bill Cullen in London. It's a global business and a lot of it is done by phone and fax. Managing artists is about relationships, and obviously it's about the relationship with the artist, but as important and sometimes even more important is the relationship you have with the record company. Really, the manager's job is to exploit the artist without prostituting the act. Exploitation is quite often perceived as being a negative word, but I don't think it is as long as the exploitation is in harmony with what the artists want. It's about relationships, and living in Sydney there's more international traffic through there. New York, London and probably Los Angeles are the three big hubs but there are other sub-hubs, healthy scenes out of Toronto, Canada or Germany. Australia is part of that as well. It's a bigger market than New Zealand or Auckland. The other part of your job is travel, you're never in Sydney, you're actually in the Northern Hemisphere."

Did you leave New Zealand due to disillusionment?

"Sharon O'Neill had gone to Australia to reside there, and had management there that was not working for her. So I left here, not in a disillusioned way at all, but with an opportunity to go to Australia and get involved in her management and set up there."

In 1980 was Australia a young scene then or was it already an established music scene?

GRANT THOMAS

Managing the Music Makers

RipItUp
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"It was more established than here but I still think it was quite young. Little River Band had already been successful in America. Midnight Oil had not broken, INXS had their first single out, Men At Work hadn't even formed. A year later Air Supply broke really big into America. Hoodoo Gurus were forming. Radio Birdman had just broken up. The big bands were Cold Chisel, the Angels, Split Enz."

Were you naive about record company contracts?

"I had to learn about it. The record companies are always finding another angle to make sure they don't give the artist any royalties, that's the constant game. They think in one paragraph they can tell you what your royalty points are then there is 60 pages of how they will claw it all back. So you basically at the end of the day you get two tenths of sweet F.A."

Do you think things have improved substantially for the artist from those days?

"I'm sure it's a lot fairer than it was. Back then it was nothing for an artist to be getting six or seven percent [of retail price] royalties. I don't think there would be anybody operating on those percentages now. Now it's gone to PPD [published price to dealers] but it's probably closer to 12 to 14 percent, maybe as high as 16 depending on who the act is. I'm talking about this part of the world. I know there are some bigger deals floating around the globe."

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the New Zealand scene?

"The strength is there are a lot of people down here prepared to do their own thing, and I don't think they clone as much down here as in other parts of the world. New Zealand is really interesting because it gets all the British culture coming here and all the American culture, and kind of an amalgam of that ends up as something that is intrinsically New Zealand, musically. That's the positive, on the creative side.

"On the negative, because the market is so small and because the people living here have never had the opportunity to go to other parts of the world, they don't know the level they have to take their music to, if they want to compete and break into the international market."

How does the New Zealand musician compare to the Australian? Is the 'she'll be right' level much the same?

"Just because Australia is a bigger market and it's a bit more intense in Australia, there is a 'she'll be right' attitude in Australia as well, but there's bigger numbers there, there's more money to be made, so it cranks up the level of professionalism, so the artists tend to try a little bit harder."

Being Sydney based are you surprised by how many New Zealand residents you work with?

"It's probably by accident that I've been involved with a lot of New Zealand acts. When New Zealanders get into a position where they want to talk to someone to manage them on an international level, quite often I get the record company or the artist getting in contact with me because I am a New Zealander. Some days I wish I had more, because I look at some of the acts in New Zealand and think I could really help, but I can't because I don't have the time.

"A lot more bands would break offshore if they took a really serious approach to it. For

example, in Australia, there's many times when you see New Zealand acts who you really think have potential to do business there, but they come over once or twice and come back here and because they don't break, they say, 'We tried it and it didn't really work.' Firstly you've got to have a game plan in place, a strategy. You've got to hold to it and what that will involve is going there three, four, five, 10 times. I hear New Zealand artists say, 'It is so expensive and how do you fund that?' The bottom line is that *Crowded House* had to go to England six times in 12 months to break the English market."

Do you still see Australia as the stepping stone for any New Zealand artist to get to the rest of world?

"No I don't and a lot of New Zealand artists are pissed off that Australians think you should go to the rest of the world via Australia. But it's a big job, the bands that do use Australia as a stepping stone with a conscious decision that it is going to be a learning process to get to the rest of the world, they've got a better chance than the bands that try and go direct. It's a big world out there and the resources ... [phone goes]



Six trips to the UK for *Crowded House* would not have been cheap.

"No, We had three tonnes of airfreight. We were travelling with between six and 16 people each time. That's quite substantial. There was a commitment made on behalf of the record company but there was a huge commitment made on behalf of the act. It's really taxing, wearying. Talk to Neil Finn about that."

A lot of that support is not a Xmas present from the record label. The tour support is recoupable, isn't it?

"Yeah, some of it they do as promotion, but wherever they can within that 60 page contract, they'll be trying to claw as much of it back as they can, as recoupable tour advances."

At the moment there's a glut of releases globally. Is overseas success more hit and miss in this environment? Is success going to be a fluke or rocket science?

"A bit of both of those things. Nobody's got a formula, if they did the record companies with the really big acts, or the managers with all the big acts, or the big acts themselves would never miss putting out a record that went to Number One all the time.

"If you want to succeed internationally you have to be really committed, passionate and

put 120 percent into what you are doing and keep working really hard at getting it right. There's a lot of people in the music business who are in music because they don't want to get a real job. I'd suggest they get out of the music business because they are not going to make it."

Who decides whether you've got a hit? Is it the artist, the manager, the record company, the media or the public?

"I think on the front end, in the initial stages, it will be more than the artist, it will be the A&R guy, the record company and the manager. The artist will probably feel good about everything they do, or otherwise they wouldn't do it. But those other three people have some objectivity to listening to a record, they are listening to it with the same ears that the general public are listening to those records with. Music is about selling emotion... if it makes them feel good, there's a chance it will do the same thing to a radio programmer, and when it goes on the radio it will do the same thing to the general public."

Do you know when your artist has given you a hit song?

"No, I don't think anybody knows. If it triggers a response in you, what that does is it pumps you up, and makes you committed to pump everybody else up. What tends to happen where people appear to be more successful than others, is they either have the ability to pick winners or they have the ability to trust their responses, and with a lot of energy and commitment chase those instincts and really go out there and try and get a result."

With your artist roster you've had some massive successes and, probably, some massive failures ...

"Do you want me to tell you about all the acts that have fired me over the years ..."

No, I don't want a list ...

"I've been involved with artists, for example Anna Christensen, an artist Sony Australia were totally committed to and she's an amazing singer/songwriter, really talented. This woman couldn't help but fail because everything you tried to do for her, she wouldn't listen, she wanted to do it her way and she kept shooting herself in the foot. You find there are a lot of artists like that. I don't understand why an artist hires a manager and then doesn't want to listen to what they say or at least trust them to help guide their career. I think managers have a place. It's not just someone to write out the cheques and make sure that the crew are paid the right wages. You create a team environment. The key to it is, there are three major players — the artist first and foremost, the record company and the manager. The manager is a conduit between the act which I see as the creative energy and the label which I see just as a business. And trying to be the conduit between the creative end and the money end, you're a catalyst, it's a bit like trying to mix oil and water, unless you've got a catalyst in the middle somewhere you can't blend those two things."

Where an artist fails, is it just that they're with the wrong label?

"No, I think a lot of artists unknowingly are really destructive of their own careers. Sometimes they genuinely make mistakes. There are artists that have made mistakes, that have been given a second chance and they've got it right. But there are a lot of acts that never recognise what they're doing

wrong. They keep doing the same thing believing they are going to get a different result. What's that famous quote. Isn't that the definition of stupidity, doing the same thing all the time, expecting you're going to get a different result."

With the international success of your acts, would you say that a multi-national label being committed to that artist was important?

"Yes, absolutely. I said before, there are three players, those people are all reliant on each other. Any artist who believes they can have success without a really strong record company or a manager putting their business together is fooling themselves, and any record company who thinks they can have success without any artists on their roster and any manager who thinks he can be king shit without having an act or dealing with a record company is kidding themselves. All those people are reliant on each other. Any one is reliant on the other two. The music business is quite egotistically balanced. What I see happening a lot is you see one of those three players, stand up and say 'I did that!' — 'The reason that act is successful is because we're a bloody good record company' or 'I'm a shit hot manager' or 'I wrote a fantastic song.' The bottom line is any one of those players on their own could not get that result. You need all three of them doing it together. But make no mistake about it, you need a great act and you need a hit song. You could be the best manager in the world and the best record company in the world but if you haven't got good talent then you can never have international success. I'm really just a back room operations person for good talent."

In New Zealand you have artists saying 'I need a manager but I don't want them to have a percentage of anything.' For a young band what would a fair percentage be?

"It depends how the manager comes to the party, in some instances [young] bands include the manager as a member of the band and they split the proceeds equally ..." [a phone call]

"There's a great book written by Donald Passman *The Music Business*, he's now Neil Finn's lawyer in America. There's an American and a British version. Music lawyers, all over the world use it as their text book. I'd suggest any artist or manager get a copy of it. It's in plain, simple English, not legalese. It tells you about percentages you should pay your manager, your agent and what deals you should do with record companies, publishers.

"A general rule of thumb is managers take 20 percent. There are managers who take more and managers who take less. One of the most contentious issues is whether managers should commission recording budgets, video budgets or tour support. In all instances we don't do it. If things are being used as expenses to advance the artist's career then managers shouldn't be getting considerations. If the artist is getting financial income in all instances the manager should be getting commissions."

That would include song publishing?

"Yes, song publishing, performance income, record royalties, miscellaneous income. If a manager manages an artist's career and takes the artist to a level where they are truly successful, and suddenly everybody wants to know about that artist in terms of having a book written about them, or

Strangely Normal

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