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Mallboy: Case Study of the sound and music for an Australian feature

FIONA EAGGER, VINCENT GIARRUSSO & PHILIP BROPHY in conversation

DEFINING ROLES IN PRE & POST PRODUCTION

Fiona Eagger: You might be wondering why a producer is discussing sound design. A fair enough question. I suppose that question relates to your understanding of what a producer does. As the word producer can relate to a variety of roles, I can only answer that question in relation to what being a producer means to me.

An important role of both the producer and the writer/director as a united entity is to channel and stimulate everyone’s creativity into making the same picture. A film becomes its own beast. You have to allow people or guide them to have their own relationship to it. I do not believe in those immortal words “A film by …”. I do not believe that singular ownership of a film is the reality of film making. When you get film making right, it is a creative, exciting and challenging collaboration between key people.

So I’ll talk about the basics of film making – and sometimes I think people can overlook the basics – in order to preface our discussion of the collaborative aspect of Mallboy’s soundtrack. What is a film? It is a story told through a series of images and sounds on film and then shown to an audience – it’s not that difficult. As we know, sound makes up a large percentage of the ‘film experience’. This would seem fairly elementary to me. Then why is sound design in film mostly left to post-production? Is it an afterthought? Obviously not. Even though physically the sound post-production is not done until after the film is shot, the planning, the conception of sound is a crucial part of writing, budgeting, pre-production, production and story telling.

In the very early stages of Mallboy, the director Vincent Giarrusso and I went through each scene in the script and discussed the following points of each scene:

- How was the aim of the film reflected?
- How did that scene promote the plot?
- What was the performance and character opportunity within that scene?
- What were the visual opportunities?
- And – importantly – what were the sound opportunities?

This process then feeds back into a number of areas. Firstly, it creates a joint understanding of the film between the producer and the director; secondly, it determines the budgeting and planning of the production; and thirdly it affects the selection of the heads of department.

Sound was very important in the writing and the conception of Mallboy. In terms of selecting a sound designer, we wanted someone who knew the potential of good and thoughtful sound design and what it means to a picture; someone with an idea of how sound can be used in both abstract and concrete ways to tell a story. The technical aspects of being to deliver on time and budget are also important. I’d worked with Philip Brophy on Only the Brave, and his credentials in understanding the potential of sound design are obvious. Philip had an all-encompassing role in the sound of Mallboy. He was involved in the song selection, the recording and producing of the score, as well as the sound design and overseeing the sound post-production.

In pre-production there were other basic, practical considerations that had to be dealt with in regard to the sound. In Mallboy there are many scenes where the characters are watching television, or the television is on in the background. We had to work out how we were going to deal with sound issues there. Then there were songs like Suzi Quatro’s Can The Can for which we had to obtain music clearances. And then there were scenes that required sourced background music, such as the long party scene and the fashion parade scene. We had to work out how we were going to deal with these in a practical sense in the filming on location, as well as how they would be handled in post-production.

**Vincent Giarrusso:** Being a musician and performer in The Underground Lovers, I think about music all the time. I hear melodies all the time. When I was writing the script for Mallboy there were certain recurring melodies that would play in my head. I thought about those melodies as I was writing – imagining the scenes with the music, but not really knowing how I was going to record or arrange that music. I admit that I even thought of the hokey string section doing the big schmaltzy number and stuff like that. But I also thought about what we call the ‘sourced music’, like the many songs in the long party sequence and how
they reflect one of the characters being stuck in the past. So while writing the script I was thinking about music in a variety of ways.

In terms of having thoughts about sound while I was writing the script, I only knew I wanted the mall to sound like a mall. That is, I wanted to recreate that sensation of when you walk through the doors of a mall and you get this rush of echo and noise. If you let yourself go, you can hear that the sound in that space is going wild; there’s stuff happening all over the place. It is dense and engulfs you. I knew we had to get that feeling somehow in the film. Yet an important thing about the sound was that it had to be naturalistic whilst conveying that it had been taken out of context. So in the film, the sound of the mall is not just natural, it’s hyper-real. But really, I just had vague ideas about the sound while writing the script, and didn’t think about sound or music again until post production. In pre-production we had meetings about sound, but to be honest I couldn’t think about it in greater detail at that stage because there was too much else going on.

Having known Philip’s work in his other manifestations as a musician, I was very comfortable with him designing the sound and producing the music. The music for Mallboy was composed by Glen Bennie and me (founding members of The Underground Lovers) in the same way that we compose music for our records. As we’re composing, we’re never really sure about what we are making at the time. Like, you never let on too much to your musicians and producers about that. It’s very similar with film music: you kind of know what you don’t what, and in collaborating with others you get everyone juiced-up and moving towards the final piece of music. That’s the same experience I’ve had with writing music for albums. While making Mallboy it become clear to me that the process of taking a film through all the various departments works in a similar way. It’s hard to explain because it is very organic and very much a process of collaboration.

Philip Brophy: The focus of this session is to highlight issues of collaboration, negotiation, compromise, and interfacing between a range of roles carried out in the production of a film’s soundtrack. Film composers or sound designers may think they work in isolation, but they don’t. Your craft and equipment and work methods might be your own, but all your creative ideas have to be channelled through other people. I always encourage film composers and sound designers to be as experimental and inventive with their ideas as possible, but that’s only the start of it. You then go on a process of collaborative negotiation to figure out ‘what is best for the film’. That’s a phrase Fiona has taught me on
many occasions. As a sound designer, you may have a great idea, but you have to question whether that idea is suitable for the film as a whole or for a particular scene, or for a certain tonality or direction of the film.

The great thing about working with Fiona is that she has an expanded notion of what it is to be a producer. She did not particularly stick with either the temporal divisions or monetary divisions which usually govern a film’s break-down into pre-production, the shoot, and post-production. Granted that all productions have to be managed in that manner, in *Mallboy* many opportunities arose that allowed for a deviation from those divisions. Even though these deviations may have been slight requests on my part – like having meetings during pre-production about how the sound would be mixed in post-production – the fact that Fiona would OK these requests ended up having enormous ramifications for how the sound and music worked in concert with the editing.

For me, working on *Mallboy* was a test to see whether my sound design theories could be put into practise on a professional feature film that wasn’t overly experimental or intellectual – the kind of thing with which I am normally associated. Most importantly, I wanted to see if I could effectively employ a radical approach to managing the complete sound post-production, and still achieve a respectable, industry-standard, non-alienating film.

There are very few directors who are also musicians. I don’t mean those directors who did a bit of jazz piano once and can maybe play a few notes. I’m talking about someone who has worked in recording studios and toured a live show, and dealt with all the different creative processes which arise from composing solo, performing live and working with a band. And it’s the rock and pop industry that gives people that experience; you don’t get it elsewhere. Having someone like Vincent, from the Underground Lovers, move into making a film is such a rich opportunity to see what kind of direction comes from someone with that kind of background. On *Mallboy* it worked beautifully because I could use a lot of shorthand with Vincent in terms of talking about mixing, cross-fading, equalization and things like that. It allowed a more expanded means of dialogue.

But that is not to say you can’t have that with a director who is not attuned to music or sound or hasn’t had that experience before. If a producer recognises in the beginning the importance of how the composer and sound designer can talk to the director, then the producer can usher that in, even at pre-production stage and also during the shoot. It may
only require having a few sessions where you just play a bunch of records amongst each other, to get a sense of your tastes and preferences, and what you each think is an interesting sonic period in the history of record production. Those simple discussions can have profound effects later on when you don’t appear to be directly influenced by them. There’s always an incredible pressure in sound post-production due to time running out, and that’s when you need to become a bit more automatic and instinctive in your dialogue with other people, and if you had just a couple of meetings before hand to attune everyone to orientations and preferences in sound and music, the dialogue in that final pressured period could be better. Frankly I don’t know how sound designers and film composers can do their work when they’re meeting a director or producer after the picture has been locked off. You would be coming in very cold to that situation.

Fiona Eagger: And you’re usually running out of money at that point, so the pressure is increased. You’ve got very little flexibility on a production level.

Philip Brophy: It is issues of production management – not simply artistic sensibility - that create flexibility. It comes no other way.

NEGOTIATING THE PURPOSE OF THE SCORE

Fiona Eagger: Quite early on in Mallboy is a sequence where the lead character Shaun and his gang of friends are looking over their backyard fence at a neighbour called Mad Frank – a senile old man who they regularly stir. On this occasion, egged on by the kids, Mad Frank moons them – much to the kids’ disgust. Shaun, however, is seen to be more upset by this than the others, saddened as he his by Mad Frank’s unfortunate state.

A music cue was originally placed over the close-up shot of Shaun watching Mad Frank, and its placement led to much debate about that sequence and the film as a whole. We had decided that a lot of the music in the film would be driven by Shaun’s emotional state, creating a framework on which to hang the music cues. This was clearly a scene where you get an insight into Shaun’s character. So it was an obvious spot for a cue, but from my viewpoint, two things worked against this as a cue spot. Firstly, it was quite clear from his performance that you were getting an insight into his character. I thought we did not really need music to do the same thing the performance was doing. In such a
situation, music sometimes can flatten a scene. Secondly, the audience would be just getting into the film at this point, and I wanted the first part of the film to have a certain energy before the audience gets into the guts of the story. The signature theme for Shaun is quite melancholic, so actually putting that music cue there was going to bring the scene down. And really, that was working against the film as a whole.

So even though you work out these general parameters for the music, and then you decide that the first cue you place is not going to work, you’ve got to be flexible. As a producer, you need a relationship with the designer, composer and director so you can have quite a rigorous debate about whether you should or shouldn’t use a cue. And we did have quite a rigorous debate about that one.

Vincent Giarrusso: We decided that the image was giving you the information at that point – this close-up of Shaun at the fence. You didn’t need it forced upon you that there was some depth to this little rascal. It was enough just to see it there in his face. We could then pull out all stops later on, so we held off on those sort of melancholic music cues.

Apart from the general parameters about the score which we discussed, other music had to be considered. The signature theme for Shaun we viewed as an ‘internal’ piece of music. Other music was more ‘surface’ in that it was more about his external life: hip-hop beats and stuff that he gets from the radio and peer pressure. We used that ‘surface’ music early on to drive the scenes and give them more energy – which is what we needed at the start of the film.

Philip Brophy: The debate initiated by that particular cue placement was not necessarily a debate over cue placement, but an interrogation of the ‘map’ of cues throughout the film. In the in end, Fiona was right on this. It may have been good to have put the cue there to give a bit of personal insight to Shaun – to let you know that the kid is not just a little mongrel, but that he is thinking a bit. My preference for the cue being there was based on me being too concerned about that very point. Fiona’s point was about the overall experience an audience would get coming into the film as a fresh story. Her concern was to not have an audience thinking so early that it’s a melancholic-downer kind of film, because we needed to save that for later in the end where things are considerably sadder. So the idea was to keep the energy level up at that point.

This is something that film composers and cue placers and music editors have to be very aware of. When you read interviews with film
composers there is always a lot of talk about *synchronising* music to individual and separate scenes, but very little discussion about the totality of a score or a film. In *Mallboy* we were very flexible with the cues and their placement *because* we were very aware of the totality of the score and the ‘map’ or cues. When Vincent and the film’s editor Mark Atkins were doing the rough-cut, they did a series of cue placements. We had all the recorded sketches of the cues, and then Vincent and Mark placed the cues in a certain configuration. But that first placement of the cues was exceedingly melancholic throughout the whole film.

**Vincent Giarrusso:** It was too much.

**Philip Brophy:** So then we tried to formulate a better ‘map’ of cues following lines of counterpoint – like placing sad cues when characters are actually happy, and leaving silence or sound or their face or performance for moments when they’re truly sad.

**Vincent Giarrusso:** One of the big differences with *Mallboy* is that we recorded sketches of the score. We recorded many themes and versions of themes, then chose the ones that we liked. And then we edited the film to the music, rather than edit the music to the film.

**Fiona Eagger:** The music informed the edit. Obviously you edit a film for the story and the narrative, but by having the score there whilst editing we enabled a very interactive process.

We made a choice of editing on sprocketed 16mm film. I think it is probably much easier to edit on an Avid or Lightworks non-linear video system, but by editing on film we could go and screen an edit and get an actual feature film experience. We tried to have as much sound and music in the early stages of the edit so that we could also assess the soundtrack at a screening. It meant it was a very intensive time for Philip as well as the Mark and his editing assistants.

**Philip Brophy:** My experience is that the flexibility of this particular process – which involves more discussion between people rather than sticking to a technological platform – is a million times more flexible than anything I’ve ever encountered in the ‘Digital Environment’. People working with non-linear systems will go and on about how you can do anything and place any sound and any image anywhere, but at the end of the day those people tend to not explore any radical use of those options. They often end up doing predetermined and predictable things; they don’t
engage in any real dialogue with others, nor negotiate ways of being flexible. Technology doesn’t do that; talking with people does.

**Fiona Eagger:** I also think sometimes if you’ve got too many options, you actually try everything without actually thinking through what you’re doing.

**Vincent Giarrusso:** Because you’re cutting film and magnetic tape, you don’t want to be half-arsed about it. It’s a huge process to cut and then stick it all back together, so you’ve really got to talk it through before you make that cut.

### DEFINING AN APPROACH TO THE SOUND DESIGN

**Vincent Giarrusso:** Early in the film is a scene – four shots, covering the mother making her bed, Shaun playing an arcade car game, and the mother and two daughters crossing a road on their way to the supermarket. There’s no dialogue, and you mainly hear external sounds: the sounds of sheets, the arcade game, cars. Yet the scene is not naturalistic; it is very stylised – almost ‘Lynchian’. By the same token, it is quite subtle because it does so many things within the one sound piece by linking the three main characters: Shaun, his mother and his father. Nothing is said; it’s just the sound and the image. Even though the sounds are external, the scene creates a very internal moment. It’s like a psychic connection between these three people that you click into straight away.

**Fiona Eagger:** It links the father even though he’s not visually present. It was decided that the father should be represented in the sound world through cars. A lot of the film has the characters walking; nearly everything is in the distance at the mall: they walk there and back. There’s not much about people getting in and out of cars, so we located that aspect of travel with the father. So there’s a subconscious connection with the father through the sound which is carried throughout the film.

**Vincent Giarrusso:** Philip presented us that section of sound design early on in the sound post-production of the film, and it took us all by surprise. It set up other moments like that later on in the film, and we could see whether that approach would work.

**Philip Brophy:** Very early on, when I was still configuring my computer system for the sound post-production of the film, I had this particular
scene up, and I just tried a few placements of sounds to check how the
system was running. Now whenever I do placements of sound – that is,
putting up a sound against an image to check matches in its duration,
density, tonality, etc. – I always play with putting things too early or too
late, or extending them beyond the scene or starting them before the
scene. I never time things obsessively and match them perfectly, which is
what sound editors tend to do first. So with these sounds deliberately
‘displaced’, I then processed them further on my sampler into 3 channels
and put them together. When the sounds were combined, they formed a
strange kind of orchestral gesture which shifted vibrantly through the
surround sound space. Listening to it, I thought it might be too weird.
Like, I’ve just grabbed those sounds and done this gratuitous processing
to them, not fully thinking things through.

But then I thought I’ll play it to Vincent and Fiona and gauge their
response. As it ended up, it was very good for me to have done that
because it set a level as to how ‘unnatural’ the sound could be while still
matching the naturalism of the film. In fact that’s the only scene where
we really go so ‘unnatural’ with the sound.

I think it’s a good idea for a sound designer to pick a scene in a
project early on and try something out like this. Don’t think of servicing
the job; just loosely improvise something that may please you in
someway. Preferably try a scene where you’ve been inspired by the
images or whatever. And then early on rather than later, play your sound
sketch to the director and producer casually just too get an idea as to
what kind of ball park they are looking at playing in. Doing it with that
scene in Mallboy was productive because it circumvented potential
problems later on. It helped us clarify this idea of the relation between
the characters’ internal worlds and their external world, and a lot of
things started falling in place with the sound design after that. And they
weren’t just ‘my’ concepts of sound design: once again, they were part of
our discussion about the mall, and what Vincent was saying before with
his ideas about this internal/external world of the characters.

Fiona Eagger: We all loved that scene, but while there was a temptation
to do the whole film like that, it wouldn’t have served the story. We
acknowledged that the reality of the world and making the sound of its
spaces was important. We could only go so extremely ‘unnatural’ on rare
occasions. Mallboy is a semi-realistic film. In terms of its naturalism it
has been equated to the movies of Ken Loach and people like that. The
film is different than that, but its naturalism became important for Philip,
too, in terms of creating the sound of the mall, the house, and the other sound environments.

**Philip Brophy:** Another important aspect of the sound post-production management greatly facilitated this approach to improvising and shifting between internal and external. *Mallboy* had around twenty-five hours worth of location dialogue and atmosphere – a standard amount for a feature shoot. Post-production sound recordist Jenny Sochackiy recorded about seventeen hours worth of sound environments and sound effects – and that is *not* standard for feature shoots.

Basically, I designed the sound a bit during the shoot and mostly during the rough cut. I then charted the film after viewing the fine cut. From the chart, I had broken the film down into 78 environments, specific to the sound design. From, these I drafted a list of sound effects and atmospheres which I got Jenny to record:

- 9 internal sound effects (tight stereo)
- 2 external sound effects (tight stereo)
- 2 internal sound effects (MS stereo)
- 9 internal atmospheres (tight stereo)
- 9 external atmospheres (tight stereo)
- 14 internal atmospheres (MS stereo)
- 37 external atmospheres (MS stereo)

I was then able to freely draw upon this incredible library of sound effects which were very specifically focussed on the sound of Northern suburbia. The great approach Jenny takes to recording sound effects entails her not just going out and grabbing something on the list, but letting the tape roll while she is recording. From the large-scale environmental recordings she’d made, I was able to go through them and grab all different bits and pieces. And through that, I was able to try letting a piece of her recording play that little bit longer and carry over into the next scene, or start the whole sound earlier and do an advance-fade. That approach added an incredible degree of naturalism to the sound design, because I wasn’t multi-tracking a whole lot of sounds to fabricate atmospheres. I was literally allowing the sound to breathe a bit; to occur more naturalistically.

One scene which demonstrates this entailed the sounds of parklands. Now, my memory of parklands is not just of birds and dogs; it’s also of kids on mini-bikes and the occasional gunshot. And sure
enough – Jen ended up getting an single gunshot in her recording, and we’ve actually used that in the film. There’s one scene where in the distance you hear what sounds like a car exhaust backfiring with gorgeous outdoor acoustic reverb on it. That section of tape is just playing out naturally: it’s got all the birds, but it’s also got bikes and a gunshot. You don’t notice it when you’re watching the film. It’s not as if you think: Oh my god, what was that gun shot? In fact no one even commented on it. It seems natural because – and this goes against the conventional way in which suburbia is still sound-designed in movies – suburbia is very noisy. It’s full of interference. Maintaining that sense of noise in both the outdoor suburbs and the inside mall was crucial to building a realistic base for the sound in Mallboy. Establishing a specific library of sound effects recording and not using pre-recorded CDs will allow you to free yourself up to do a more interesting sound design.

PRODUCING AND MIXING THE SCORE

Vincent Giarrusso: There is a music cue in the film that runs over four or five scenes, each with different characters involved, but centred around Shaun and his gang sniffing glue and wandering through the mall. It’s a good example of the edit of the film following the musical performance of a cue. The music is basically Glenn playing guitar through an amp and me on effects, each of us performing simple and subtle changes. The sound textures are integral to the scene, as the guitar is mixed with the sounds of trucks, birds, creek and mall. They mesh as one. There’s a real beauty in the rawness of keeping the music simple and mainly having the guitar present. For me, the feeling is really druggy, and it really puts you in the mood and into the characters.

Fiona Eagger: This cue is in contrast to the music cue I mentioned earlier – with Shaun looking over at Mad Frank, where we didn’t use a cue because the performance and the sound were doing the same thing. At the point where this glue-sniffing scene happens, the audience is in the film. It was a decision to say: Yes, let’s go for it, let’s get the performance, the music, the vision all creating this sort of internal world. I think it works on that level of integration. Sometimes you want a tension between what the vision and the sound are doing, but this scene is an example where everything is in sync and it works to be a complete moment.

Philip Brophy: This scene also results from having developed the score sketches during the edit, and this is probably the scene that best
demonstrates the potential of this method. It works entirely against the
convention of a director sitting down with a composer and doing what
they call a ‘spotting session’: *We need sad music here, we need chase
music here, we need music to symbolise his mother here, etc.* The
composer then goes away and does what the director asks. Then it fits or
doesn’t fit, and then there is negotiation from that point on, whereby the
process is to deliver a series ‘spots’. Actually I was very scared that
Vincent and Glenn were going to go all ‘movie-soundtracky’ and think:
*Oh right, now we’re composing music for a film, so we’ll abandon
everything we’ve ever done as guitarists and synthesiser players in
Underground Lovers and pretend to be ‘film composers’.* As score
producer, my main aim was to make sure Vincent and Glenn did *exactly*
what they already do really well, and not deviate from that. I wanted to
make sure they imported that into the film.

The best way to facilitate that was to start recording music whilst
still rough-cutting. Across two weekends we recorded the sketches that
Vincent and Glenn had composed. And it was very important that we
recorded all those sketches without looking at any images. It was like we
were recording an album. Most of that material appears in the film. It
was recorded live onto 8 tracks of a DA-88. It’s all done with multiple
microphone placements so that we could directly import those early
sketch sessions into the final score sessions. All the electric guitar tracks
involved three mike perspectives. Even when it sounds acoustic, it’s
coming from an amp. We’d have one mic on the front of the amp, one
mic in the back, and one mic sticking, say, in a metal heater two metres
away. The sketches were all recorded in a garage space with concrete
floor and a high wood ceiling – very live and reflective.

In the final score mix, I placed the front mic track to the left, the
rear mic track to the right, and sent the off-amp mic track to the
surrounds. This generates a very acoustic, naturalistic ambience, but it is
rendered though an unnaturalistic tri-configuration of a spatial recording
of a single event. Its density and fullness doesn’t come from being multi-
tracked in the conventional sense. The sketches were also important for
instigating the surround-sound recording of the music, as the music was
never recorded in stereo, but always mixed into three channels due to this
film being Dolby Surround (left, centre, right, mono surround, and
subwoofer information).

So that process was very important and getting that in at this stage,
even though it was tense time wise, trying to do that whilst trying to do
the film and everything.
Vincent Giarrusso: I think the sketches worked to our advantage because they informed choices we made along the way. If it wasn’t sounding right early on we wouldn’t have gone with it. We were fortunate in that the sound, tone and ambience of the sketches were just what the film needed; we didn’t need to go anywhere else with the music.

Fiona Eagger: I think Vincent and Glenn’s music worked also because the melodies had been in Vincent’s head for years. He had those melodies when he was writing it, so it’s not surprising that it worked so well. Even at the first point when it was recorded, we knew it was right for the film.

Why was it ‘urgent’ to record score sketches when you were so close to the end of the rough cut? A lot of the time in film making and television, we just put some temp music – pre-existing songs which we put in there until we get to put the proper score in place. Why did you need to place those score sketches during the rough cut?

Philip Brophy: I was very much pushing not to use temp music, and to get Vincent and editor Mark Atkins to use the sketches as soon as possible, so that they could start listening to Vincent’s own music rather than someone else’s. Those sketches were very important for providing long stretches of music for Vincent and Mark to move backwards or forwards against a scene.

Fiona Eagger: I think it can be really dangerous using temp music because the edit is so all-encompassing: you’re living and breathing the film twenty-four hours a day. Once you put songs in, you get used to them. When you finally edit in part of the actual composed score, you go: Oh no, I liked the Peter Gabriel song there. I think temp music can misinform the cut as well, and I think it’s dangerous to start playing around with too much other material that you’re not really planning to put in. Once you just get used to it, you want it, and then it colours what you do after that point.

EDITING AND POSITIONING SOURCE MUSIC & SONGS

Vincent Giarrusso: There’s a big party scene, smack bang in the middle of the film, where a number of issues were raised in regards to sourcing the music. I had one song in mind while writing the script, which we
used for a sequence where a group of characters dance to Suzi Quatro’s *Can The Can*. The party goes for eleven minutes on screen, but it covers a period of five hours in the story.

**Fiona Eagger:** We obtained the clearances for the Suzi Quatro track in pre-production. Around the same time, Philip had suggested using some Lobby Lloyd & The Coloured Balls for the party sequence too – which was appropriate for the era of the characters – and then we had clearances for two more tracks. We were thinking: *Great, we’ve got quite a lot of music here: party sequence solved.* But we failed to consider that you need sound to help the audience understand that the eleven minutes of the party sequence actually spans five hours. We’d got enough sound to cover the party in terms of screen time but not in terms of the narrative. Also, having two Lobby Lloyd tracks was fantastic, but then it created a sameness and it was making the continuation of scenes boring. We were suddenly in post-production going: *Oh my god – we need more music, where are we going to find the money? Music clearances take months to do.* You can think of a whole lot of extra songs and replacement tracks, but they still have to fit the scene and your budget. So a wide range of issues were raised by the party sequence, and we could only learn from experience. We pulled it off, but we were lucky..

**Philip Brophy:** A vital issue which should govern music supervision is plausibility through historical and sociological accuracy. The Lobby Lloyd tracks are from the early seventies and are very much in the Australian skin-head boogie style of the period. Other tracks from Ram Jam, The Saints, The Angels and others cover the mid-to-late seventies. With the music supervision we had to figure out: *OK we need something that’s slightly dated but cool to these people; something that’s maybe a bit punky but it’s gotta be macho, because boogies biker yobs in the late seventies called punks poofers.* All these sentiments had to be musicologically and culturally figured out. As a music supervisor, you must be aware of what it is to be a *consumer* of music. Your track selection has to embody and reflect the taste, sense and even politics of the characters who are listening to it onscreen. And then your overall selection of tracks should make up a kind of ‘map’ which socially posits and roots the characters in accordance with the story.

Yet even though that map might make sense, dramatically it might not perform so well at key moments. The mood might be wrong for the scene. Or – as music editors have often commented – you might play a scene by itself with a song and it is great. But what is the effect of that scene with that song *after* you’ve had two other scenes before it with their
own songs? It’s the aggregate and combined effect that determines the development of that map. The only way to work it out is to keep shifting the tracks until you get it right.

Surprisingly, the real problems in music editing in the *Mallboy* party sequence arose in figuring out how to finish a track at the right time without it sounding chopped-off or unresolved, and then how to start the next track – especially when there was no jump cut in time. Things like: *What’s the point at which we actually start the party music? Why does it start there? And how does it start without interfering with them talking in the following scene?*

**Fiona Eagger:** An equally frustrating problem is in having a song which will last for a considerable bit of action, say, sixty-five seconds. But you’ve only cleared sixty seconds worth of that music, and if you use another five seconds you’ll have to pay for another thirty seconds, and that doubles the budget. You have to ask yourself: *Is that five seconds worth it? Or could you use another song?*

Some of the ways around it might have been in pre-production to have nutted that through a bit more: work out a potential palette of music for a scene, and start checking out the music clearances quite early. At that stage you would know that of the ten songs you had selected, only some of them would fit the budget. In *Mallboy*, we had to keep on replacing music for these reasons. I certainly learn a lot from that experience in terms of budgeting and what you have to do in pre-production in terms of even some of the basics of sound. Another thing that happened too is that, we thought the Lobby Lloyd song was right and so we did a thump track.

**Philip Brophy:** One important sound issue which was discussed and instigated during pre-production was the use of some thump tracks. Thump tracks are still not used a lot, and I don’t know why. I’ve even been on other projects where I’ve done thump tracks and then they just didn’t bother using them. There are many different ways to produce and employ thump tracks. An original version I believe was developed by Chris Newman for *A Chorus Line*. Basically you have a piece of music to which people onscreen are meant to be responding – as in listening to it, dancing to it, even slightly swaying to it. You take that track and roll off all the frequencies above 40Hz which leaves you with a deep, heartbeat-like thumping drone. That would vaguely give you a sense of the timing of the song, and it can be played back on set or location – on a stage, party, bar or whatever – while you record the location dialog of the
actors. Because when you get back in the studio, you roll off everything below 40Hz of your location dialogue recording, which roughly leaves the frequency range of the human voice. The recording is never purely silent, but once you put in other atmospheres you don’t even notice what ever little bits of low level noise might have been left from the re-EQd thump track bleeding into the vocal mikes.

It’s so important to do this in any kind of scene where there’s a party and a group of people yelling and interacting – especially if they’re improvizing and talking over each other. It allows you to keep the naturalistic dialogue performances and the energy of a group of people. It’s fair enough to ADR just two people together, but to recreate the interactive energy of a bunch of people is far more difficult, whereas it happens so easily and naturally on location when everyone’s vibing off each other as performers.

An even better reason for using a thump track arose with Mallboy: we did one for a song which we ended up not using. If we had recorded all the dialogue with the song playing in the background – no matter how softly, for the actors to move in general time to the music – we would have been stuck with their dialogue track containing the music bleeding through. It would have been a nightmare to clean up and gate, and even worse if we tried to ADR it.

Where you are going through the process of budgeting and finding out these sorts of issues, did you work with a single music publisher as a music supervisor? What sort of relationship did you have with the business end of the music, to help you get through those decisions?

Fiona Eagger: Philip was the music supervisor, so part of Philip’s job was giving us suggestions of the music that could be used. Then we would discuss them amongst ourselves. Given the fact that we didn’t have a lot of money, we had to do all the music clearances ourselves. We didn’t hire anyone to do that. I can understand why you would get someone to do it, because I think it would make it a lot easier. It’s very laborious and you waste lots of time waiting for responses. There are two sets of rights you have to acquire to use a song in a film: the publishing rights and the recording rights. Because of our limited budget we didn’t get ancillaries for a lot of the source songs. That’s how we tried to keep cost down. But if you’ve got the budget and you can hire someone to do your music clearances for you, I think its really worth it. And to do it as early as possible, so you know what are your possibilities when you’re doing the edit.
Philip Brophy: There’s industrial reasons of expediency and budget management to go to a music publisher and have them act as a music supervisor. That is the commonly done thing in heaps of Australian films now: you go to a record company – in fact, a number of record companies – and you get the A&R people from the different companies to compete with each other and deliver a complete package of tracks for the whole film. But that is actually not music supervision: that’s A&R bombardment. All you get is those party tapes that record companies send to potential film producers. That’s all very well, but someone at the end of the day has to make some kind of holistic decision for the service of the film as opposed to for the service of the soundtrack album. That’s what I’m speaking of as a music supervisor. There are many kinds of music supervisors who are all important in their own way. But for this project, it didn’t need a party tape soundtrack. It needed songs for the film.

Fiona Eagger: We did get some lists like that; we did ring some publishers and say: OK, tell me what you’ve got for this amount. And they faxed us through lists, but it ended up just wasting time. I think it’s much better to work out what you want, and then try and source it.

Philip Brophy: After positing Lobby Lloyd and everyone agreeing that he would be great for the flavour of the party, there was an idea to have one Lobby Lloyd track featured: Mama Don’t You Get Me. Out of the party sequence’s eight songs, it’s the only song which operates as score. That is, it comes up in volume as the other sounds fade back.

The song features sounds like a theremin but which is in fact an early use of guitar synthesiser. Its combination with the straight-ahead boogie is quite unique. It was thus an ideal track that combined the musicological tone of the era – it fits the biker lifestyle of the people in the film – with a sort of trippy feel, as it appears in the party as everyone is getting more and more stoned. This unique tone of the song was then extending by mixing its ending with some of the score elements that Vincent and Glenn had done with guitar. The resulting scene features a morphing or mutating between the two. You can’t really tell what is the original source song, what is the music cue, and what are actually the sound effects coming through. They all blend and blur into each other.

What greatly aided that sonic fusion in many, many moments through the film is the fact that the music Vincent and Glenn done was never clearly music per se, but something that always bordered on being
sound, on being noise. The production of the recording and their performance foregrounded and privileged electric guitars with feedback, fuzz pedals and amps – not to gratuitously signpost fucked-up yobbo energy, but so that the score could function as a textural palette for the film, rather than a series of conventionally composed cues. Very often there are bits in the film that appear to be sound atmospheres, but they’re actually bits of reverb or fuzz of the guitar. The score was treated in a very malleable way.

**Vincent Giarrusso:** At the end of the party sequence, we had Roy Wood & Wizard’s *See My Baby Jive* as two women fight. It worked a treat. But …

**Fiona Eagger:** We could get the rights to use the song from the publishers, but they couldn’t locate him for absolute confirmation of usage. We knew he was somewhere in England or Scotland, and we were trying everything, asking anyone that might know him if they knew of his whereabouts.

*Was that the track that you rehearsed for the fight scene?*

**Vincent Giarrusso:** Actually, we rehearsed with a Lobby Lloyd track that now is in the final mix, so it was OK to go back to what we used. The Wizard track had a different texture, and it was good to hear that. Within the party sequence, there is an Australian strain, an English strain, and an American strain. We wanted to cover that in the representation of music from that era. But it was OK that we ended up using the Lobby Lloyd track that we had rehearsed the fight to.

**Fiona Eagger:** It also worked out well because while *See My Baby Jive* had irony and it was more cinematic, we didn’t want to take the audience out of the film. At that point, using the Wizard track would have come across as a more obvious choice, whereas I think the music we used puts you more with the drama of the moment. And that’s where you should be, because the fight is the emotional climax of the film. So I think it was probably fortunate, in the end, that we didn’t get to use Wizard.

*Once you tracked down the rights for a song like that, did you then have the option to cut-up and reassemble the track in whatever form you want? Or are there stipulations regarding the way in which a track must appear?*
Philip Brophy: Mallboy involved a lot of music editing. A track like The Angels’ Take A Long Line has been cut up into six beats, four beats, half a verse then a full chorus. It’s all timed to not get in the way of the action; to make sure when the chord changes it’s in a wide shot; to position cymbal crashes away from dialogue and so on. But a track like The Saints’ Know Your Product came to us with a very clear stipulation that we couldn’t cut it in any way whatsoever. They were cluey about that, and it may be that more and more composers end up doing the same. Even though I’m a composer myself, I don’t think it’s necessary, because with good music editing you can chop things up seamlessly. So a lot of the songs have been cut to fit as music, but The Saints’ track had to left whole. It certainly posed major problems in getting it to fit properly. The only way we could effectively get out of the track was to have one of the characters with her back to the camera appear to rip the record off, scratching it in the process.

Music editors traditionally are editors who are musically trained, as opposed to just responding to rhythms in a sonic fashion. In the old Hollywood system, if a music cue suddenly had to be eighteen percent shorter, a music editor would be the person who would harmonically and rhythmically made sure that the cuts of the truncated cue still made musical sense. Otherwise you would have someone with no musical ear just going in and cutting away, creating sudden changes in key and beat. The craft of the music editor still exists today in all sorts of ways, be it with scored material or sourced material.

Fiona Eagger: The whole party sequence entailed an enormous amount of juggling, rationing and stretching what available material we had. In scenes occurring outdoors while the party is still raging, we didn’t use any key songs just as background. So for those scenes Vincent and Glenn recorded backing music.

Vincent Giarrusso: We pretended to be a boogie band – which was very difficult to do – and just recorded bits of music like that, so we could have them in the background for those outside shots. As we said earlier, we simply didn’t have enough in the budget to obtain the rights for so many tracks.

Music publishing is always a difficult one. I had to clear one track which was an Underground Lovers’ track. That’s how stuck we were for music! So I ring up the publisher – who should be working for me of course – and I said: Look, I made a film; we’re really stuck; we’ve got no money; we need some music for thirty seconds. It’s in the background of
a party; there’s a big scene going on; you will hardly know it. I just want to use a B-side of an Underground Lovers’ song that we released in 1995. No one bought the single; no one knows it exists; can we use it? And the publisher says: Yeah, sure. So that was OK, but then two days later we get this bill: they wanted five grand for it! So I’m on the phone going: Why do you want five-thousand dollars for a B-side? And they’re going: Look, we don’t want to sell you short. We don’t want to sell your music short. And I go: I’m in the band! And I did all the fuckin’ music for the film! And they’re still going: No, no, you can’t sell yourself short.

Fiona Eagger: We negotiated the figure down, but we did have to pay.