

THE FUTURE IS RINGING LIKE A BELL (BIRD)

The soundtrack of your life.

Text: Rick O'Neil



▶ When I was four or five my family used to take its short holidays on the central coast of NSW in a little town called Budgewoi. It was perfect for us as little kids and only 100ks (about two or three hour's drive) from Sydney. Now I say it was two or three hours away because in those days there was no freeway and the Pacific Highway was long and winding. It's still there if you're curious, only now it's the 'Old Pacific Highway'.

The reason I mention it is because every holidays, either into or out of Gosford, dad would always pull over on a little bend in the road known to the O'Neil family as 'bellbird corner'. For the first few years he would actually stop the car, make us wind the windows down and listen. Sure enough, if we were quiet, the local population of bellbirds could be heard singing their bellbird song. Err... now I know what you're thinking: 'how boring', but trust me, when I was five that was exciting stuff, nearly as exciting as hearing a kookaburra. But I digress...

That bellbird's call is locked in my brain now, stored away forever as perhaps the first thing I can remember hearing that didn't have associations of food or warmth.

As a noise it instantly sends me back in time to our old Holden, my dad with mutton-chop sideburns and my two brothers beating each other into silence so we could hear the secret sound of the bellbird. Try as we may I never actually *saw* a bellbird, I have *still* never seen a bellbird, but rest assured that rainforested corner as you turn down into Gosford on the Old Pacific Highway always rang like a bell for my family, two or three times a year for a decade or more. We never tired of it.

Coincidentally, I was up that way again last Christmas with my wife and kids and just *had* to check it out for old times' sake. When we got to 'bellbird corner', and without saying anything, I nonchalantly wound down the window, slowed the car to a crawl, and heard... well, *nothing*, no bellbirds. None. They must have had the day off for the first time in 100 years, or perhaps they'd moved up to the freeway to where the tourists

are. Maybe they've signed an exclusive deal with iTunes, I dunno. Either way, they weren't around. 'Oh well, that's progress' I thought to myself, as I tried to make it look to my wife like slowing down to 25 and winding down your window every time you drove into Gosford was normal behaviour. And if you're wondering, yes, she did feel the need to ask what I was doing with the window open.

The thing about the audience with the bellbirds was that even though there's probably a bellbird corner on *every* mountain road leading into every town in eastern Australia, that one was somehow *our* family bellbird corner. It was as if the little birds only rang out for us, like they'd waited all year for our holidays and were just pleased to see us... I mean nobody in my school seemed to know anything about them. For a time there my tales of the amazing noises from the often-heard-but-never-seen bellbird concert made me the cool guy in the school yard... kind of. After every holiday, I'd return to school with the same tale of having heard the mythical bellbird yet again, a bit like the guy we all knew in high school who was allowed to go to rock concerts. I mean, anybody could listen to a band on a cassette they'd copied from a mate's LP, but to actually see a band in person... now *that* was cool?

I don't think much has changed. As long as people feel special when they hear music, as long as they make a connection that somehow bonds them to a particular noise at a certain time, people will feel like that sound or that song, that band or that album, now *belongs* to them. If people make a personal connection with something they assume a kind of benign ownership of it, and it becomes part of the soundtrack to their lives. Even if, in my case, it started with a non-descript looking bird that sings like a bell, or perhaps for someone else it might have been the music of U2! Either way, it's the soundtrack to somebody's life I want to talk about here.

THE WHACKING STICK

If one more nincompoop tells me the music business is finished because of the download issue I think I'm going to have to buy a big

whacking stick and swing it around to clear the hallways of all the Stupids. This could take some time, I assure you.

The record companies might be having a really hard time facing the changes that the internet has brought about – and those others that lie ahead – but as I keep telling people, there is more music being made now than at any point in human history! So what's the problem? Oh yeah, I can hear you from here – 'the problem is that the major record labels (who have, for several decades, controlled what music was made and how it was sold) have collapsed and there's no clear solution up and running to replace them. Well, so what, I say!

The old music model saw to it that 98 percent of the artists never made any money anyway, and the lucky ones that *did* had to earn a small fortune to make the sales conference brag sheet. It was just ridiculous and at those odds, hardly a bankable business proposition. Quite frankly, anybody who tells you about the good old days when the labels knew what they were doing, is either fooling you... or just a fool.

Let's think about why we have music in the first place. I mean, really what's it all about... a profit and loss sheet? And what's changed in the last 10 or 20 years? Who amongst us doesn't have a set of songs, events and visions for the soundtrack (or should I say multimedia package) of our lives? We all do, it's just human nature. Today we are so spoilt for choice that by the time a five year old is big enough to lean out the window of an EH Holden and hear that elusive bellbird, they already have an iPod with 2000 versions of Dora the Explorer, The Wiggles or Justin Clark sending them into early tinnitus, and make no mistake they know all 2000 of them!

There's nothing magical about a noise up in the trees to a kid that age any more; they're already saturated with sounds, noises and images. The songs downloaded onto their iPod will be the sounds of that child's life, and at school, like the little bag of marbles of my youth, they will be swapped, traded, lost and won on the whims and fancies of school children – no big business will be welcome.

FEATURING
ACTIV-ASSIST™
acoustic measurement software

TANNOY

THE EVOLUTION REVEALED

- High power bi-amplified active nearfield monitors
- Analogue and Digital inputs
- WideBand™ acoustic performance
- Automated Activ-Assist™ software driven digital calibration



"Probably the best specified, most flexible monitoring system in this price range" MusicTech, June 2005

REVEAL
STUDIO MONITORS

New South Wales

Bondi Intermusic	(02) 9369 3922
City Music (Newcastle)	(02) 4965 4222
Guitar Factory (Parramatta)	(02) 9635 5552
Sound Devices	(02) 9283 2077
Turramurra Music	(02) 9449 8487

Victoria

Arck Multimedia	(03) 9489 8822
Audio Lifestyle	(03) 9417 3344
Manny's	(03) 9486 8555
Soundcorp	(03) 9694 2600

Queensland

Royce Music	(07) 4632 7377
Ellaways	(07) 3359 8266
Buzz Music	(07) 4051 9666
Brisbane Sound	(07) 3257 1851
Mooloolaba Music Centre	(07) 5444 8839

South Australia

Derringers Music	(08) 8371 1884
------------------	----------------

tannoy®.com.au

I don't lament the loss of the simple bellbird song to a kindergarten kid, it's just progress. What I thought was magical, my kids will inevitably think is boring, what they thought was magical, their kids will hate... it's just how it works. And no, it's not that today's music is crap and the kids have it all wrong. It's not that your favorite band's music was magical and they were the last thing of substance left on the earth before the electronic deluge struck, it's just the generation gap staring you straight in the face. Get used to it my friend, it will only ever get wider from here on out.

Kids today are like kids of days gone by, they will be grownups soon enough. The music of their day will be Golden Oldies before you can say Blink 182... err, they're kind of getting old now... what about Fallout Boy.

Remember that old music biz model sales ratio I was talking about before? Well one time in 10, the labels managed to predict what the public would latch onto and pay for. Nowadays there's so much music about that the labels have been found out, nobody wants to buy in to their hyped marketing anymore – well not quite nobody, but it's rapidly coming to that.

So again I say, 'What's the problem?' As well as being surrounded by more music than ever before, more people are now going to see live entertainment than ever before. And let's make one thing clear here, they're also paying *more* for it than ever before! Sure it's not just music they're going to see. It might be a dance thing or a footy thing, a wrestling thing or car thing. You might even find yourself at the old concert hall watching a chef cook chicken soup to a sold-out crowd (yes, I've done exactly that). The point is that people still want what they've always wanted; they want their own collection of songs, images, trends, sounds and smells. We just simply want our senses filled with the things that make our time on earth worth living. (And if that statement isn't an invitation for some clever marketing type in the music game to find a new way to take money off us, then I give up.)

ENGAGED TO BE PARODIED

The bottom line with the music business is this: if a singer grabs a guitar and sings an engaging melody – anywhere, anytime – the average human will stop and listen. Before you know it there will be a crowd and shortly after that somebody will be putting up a fence to start selling you tickets to get in. Somebody else will then record it so everybody unlucky enough not to have been there can share the experience. We humans just like music, we need music – a large portion of our brain is, in fact, devoted to music recognition. We like sounds and melodies and remember them from the time we're just days old. So fuckin' what if your local three-letter acronym record company can't currently work out how to access your bank account – some clever type will figure out how to get the money off you soon enough, while they work on providing you the soundtrack to your life.

Now all this music biz stuff wouldn't be such an issue for me if I hadn't recently read a three-page 'man-bites-dog' beat-up about the state of the music industry, and in particular, the state of EMI records. The basic 'idea' of the article was that the money has gone and now labels have to justify their spending... well, whacko, what's new about that?

So there I was, pulled over to the side of the road in suburban Sydney reading the newspaper article, stopped near a storm drain just next to a footy oval with a small stand of eucalyptus tress growing around it. The trees were trying very hard to look like they weren't planted 15 years ago by some well-meaning greenie, and guess what I heard when I rolled down the window? My old friend the bellbird. I couldn't believe my ears! No subtropical rain forest, no bendy road, no big brother punching me up to keep me quiet, just the dulcet little tones ringing like a bell.

Bellbirds camped by footy ovals in suburban Sydney? Now that's what I call progress.

Rick O'Neil runs Turtlerock Mastering in Camperdown, Sydney. If he finds out the footy oval bellbirds are actually a recording supplied by the local council to calm the kids down... well, let's just say that's the last you'll hear about it. ■