

## Mark Irwin

### *House of shattering glass*

On July 10<sup>th</sup> 1962 the Telstar communications satellite was launched and on that same day live television pictures originating in the United States were received in France.

In October 1962 maverick independent record producer Joe Meek had a massive chart hit with the Tornados' "Telstar". Joe Meek changed the face of popular music and defined the role of the pop producer for decades to come. This paper will examine examples of his work and his pioneering approach to music production.

#### ***Telstar***

It was number one in the UK charts the day I was born (7.10.62). It also became the first single by a British pop group to reach number 1 in the US charts. It was also Margaret Thatcher's favourite record.

*[Audio example: play Telstar]*

*Telstar* (the name a homage to the Bell Laboratories designed and AT & T and NASA funded communications satellite launched on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1962) by the Tornados is unquestionably the best-known recording by maverick pop producer Joe Meek.

Meek defined the role of the independent pop record producer for decades to come and his influence is keenly felt in the genre to this day.

Meek released over 300 records in his short career, 45 of which were top 50 hits. Addicted to slimming pills, obsessed with the occult and attracted to young men at a time when gay relationships were frowned upon even within the music industry, Meek lived the rock and roll life style long before it became 'cool'.

As Andy Partridge from the band XTC said, "Meek spoke to the dead and heard music from other planets, making number one hit records in his kitchen".

Joe Meek persistently endeavoured to create a unique 'sonic signature' for each recording he made.

Audio Engineer and designer Ted Fletcher who worked with Meek at his studio in Islington says of his approach to production, "He was always keen on using unusual effects, and would usually add unusual reverb, or an odd sound effect to make his record stand out from the more mundane recordings from the established companies. One of his favourite tricks was to wrap a few layers of Selloptape around the capstan of the 2-track machine during the final 'dub' to master. This would, of course, speed up the track, adding to the excitement, and with extreme compression, his records certainly stood out!

"There are numerous stories about him recording effects in the bathroom and people stamping on the stairs; most of them are true".

Despite being essentially tone deaf (and thought to be dyslexic) Meek's work brought into being the bizarre and sometimes-surreal soundscapes he imagined in his mind.

Some of his own demo recordings also demonstrate his approach to writing and recording music and include melodies sung in his own curious style.

*[Audio example: play Telstar with Meek Vocal]*

Meek was born on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1929 in Newent, Gloucestershire and after a stint in the RAF and a job working for the Midlands Electricity board, he landed a job with IBC Studios London in 1953 where he worked as chief engineer on the Radio Luxembourg Road Show. His early training in electronics, alongside a fascination for sound recording led him to experiment with recording and audio editing techniques. Joe soon carved out a niche at IBC, his unconventional use of compression, limiting and 'echo' making his work stand out amongst the recordings of the day. This was at a time when engineers in recording studios wore white coats and sought to capture acoustic events with clarity and fidelity, without any manipulation or distortion.

Whilst at IBC Meek worked with; Humphrey Littleton, Anne Shelton, Frankie Vaughn, Shirley Bassey, Petula Clark and Harry Secombe amongst others.

After IBC in 1956 Meek went on to work at Lansdowne Road Studios, which became known as the '*House of Shattering Glass*' for the fidelity of its recordings.

At the same time Meek built his own 'home studio' at his flat at 304 Holloway Road Islington (above a leather goods store, now a bicycle shop) and in 1960 Joe formed Triumph Records which made a series of unremarkable releases with the exception of his *I Hear a new World* EP which although so far ahead of its time it failed to be commercially released until 1991. The original release was marketed as a stereo test disk. Meek said of 'I Hear a New World', "I wanted to create a picture in music of what could be up there in outer space".

Dave Golding who played on this record said of Meek, "At the time we didn't know what he was trying to achieve." This was the quintessential Meek, a man on a mission lost in his own world, seeing no reason to explain his vision to the musicians around him – as Frank Zappa later said, "A composer is a guy who goes around forcing his will on unsuspecting air molecules, often with the assistance of unsuspecting musicians."

*[Audio example: I Hear a New World]*

As John McCready says of *I Hear a New World*, "Speeding up and effecting unused group takes from the studio and layering them with echo and delay, he would add more icing to the cake than perhaps was wise. SFX like scraped combs, bubbles being blown in water, smashed glass, broken clockwork toys, radio interference, backwards tapes and toilets being flushed can be made out."

Meek's highly innovative recording techniques; his use of echo, reverb, equalisation and compression, tape saturation, physical separation of instruments, overdubbing, bouncing and editing have become the standard tools of any producer or engineer and the lifeblood of the modern pop recording genre.

His vision and philosophy have also become central to the pop production cannon. His idea that records must have a 'sound' imparted by the producer that is something more

than the musicians simply playing their music together in a room. As songwriter and long time Meek collaborator Geoff Goddard says, "He felt that the sound was as important as the song and I think he was one of the very first people in pop music to think that way. Today we take the creative input of the record producer for granted. Joe Meek did so much to pave the way for that."

After *New World* Joe teamed up with a benefactor called Major Banks who bought into Joes Triumph label and together they set up RGM Sound (Joes initials) Banks' financial input allowed Meek to work exclusively for himself at 304 Holloway Rd.

Adrian Kerridge (who befriended Meek at Landsdowne) says of the move, "Holloway Road was all about control. Now Joe was really in charge and nobody else could tell him what to do. The pressure was piling on him but he wouldn't have had it any other way".

However, despite having almost total control Meek still had to send his recordings to the majors for mastering where engineers would refuse to cut them due to the elevated levels, complaining that recordings at such levels would damage domestic loud-speakers.

As McCready notes, "Like Picasso walking into a stationery shop with *Guernica* under his arm, only to be told that it might not come out that well in a photocopy".

In 1961 Meek had a huge hit with actor John Leyton and Geoff Goddard's song *Johnny Remember Me* which went number one in the UK for 15 weeks.

[Audio example: Johnny Remember Me]

The industry however, mocked Meek's work. Arranger Martin Slavin wrote in *Melody Maker*, "A recording studio is the place to record. They are there for a specific purpose and they have the best technicians in their employ".

Joe Meek replied in print, "Fair enough, my studio started as a large bedroom but it is now a first class studio in which I have made many hit records to entertain the public, not square connoisseurs who just don't know".

Holloway Road sessions were often chaotic with Meek at the controls of its Tardis-like environment. As Chas Hodges from the Outlaws remembers, "I could hear a girl singing but didn't know where she was. I remember thinking she must have been in the bathroom. I heard Joe saying, 'Oh, the violins have arrived', but I never saw them – they were on another floor in the flat".

Steve Howe (later of Yes) said of recording with Meek, "His studio seemed to come alive when he worked. Sparks would fly in there. He was a performer and an artist. So much more, really, than a record producer".

After 'Johnny' Meek's next major work was *Telstar* with his house band the *Tornadoes*.

*Telstar* set the standard; it defined an age where science fiction though nothing new was turning into science fact. The genius of *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and *Telstar* (1962) mark defining moments in culture when space and technology seemed liberating and when artists imagined what it might be like to travel beyond our planet.

*Telstar* was released in August 1962 went quickly to number one and stayed there for over six months.

When *Telstar* went to Decca for mastering they were '*horrified at its levels of limiting and compression*'.

The final irony is that despite the huge success of *Telstar* Meek hardly profited from the recording. French composer, Jean Ledrut mounted a legal challenge claiming that *Telstar* plagiarised a melody from an obscure piece of his own.

The legal case dragged out and despite further success, most notably the Honeycombs *Have I the Right*, Meek's work seemed to have lost direction. His mental health and finances in a mess he finally shot his landlady after an argument and turned the gun on himself at 304 Holloway Road on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1967.

Meek defined the role of the pop producer, he had vision, and he took risks and above all refused to conform professionally or personally. He strove for a sound that was more than just a faithful recording of an acoustic event; he was one of the first real sonic artists of the modern age.

Ken Pitt, who went on to manage David Bowie said of Meek, "Everything he did in that little tiny studio was an act of faith in something. Music was his entire life".