

This is Studio Radicals, a new podcast series that celebrates the musical pioneers who are breaking new ground in their field. I'm your host, Kate Hutchinson – join me and dCS Audio as we meet with some of music's most innovative minds, exploring how leading music producers, composers and engineers approach their craft.

Our next guest knows a great riff when she hears one. Catherine Marks is a hugely sought-after producer, mixer and engineer who has worked with some of indie-rock's finest. They include Wolf Alice, Foals, The Big Moon and US supergroup boygenius, aka Phoebe Bridgers, Julien Baker and Lucy Dacus, and Catherine is no stranger to punk royalty like Rise Against. As a producer, Catherine's job is to tap into a band's sound and help unlock their imagination – and sometimes she'll even pull out the dressing-up box to get herself and the artists in the mood.

Catherine Marks: I want to be able to enjoy every day that I walk into the studio and I love what I do, so why can't I bring that enjoyment to the process? So that's the number one priority. Number two is make a banging record.

Kate Hutchinson: Speaking of which, Catherine won a Grammy for Best Alternative Music Album with Boygenius for their 2023 debut *The Record*, an album full of stunning harmonies and emotional highs and lows. She's always keen to drill into the essence of a song and find the elements that really make it really stand out. She says she's always looking for...

Catherine Marks: What is the thing that hits you in the chest, or makes you jump up and down and want to dance, or or makes me cry, or any sort of emotion that elevates it and pushes it over to being something so unique. And takes it out of like, Oh, that's good. Oh, that's f\*\*\*ing amazing!

Kate Hutchinson: Catherine was born in Melbourne, Australia, but a chance encounter in Ireland in her twenties changed the course of her life forever, and she went from studying architecture to pursuing music production. She tells us about it from her laidback space at Eastcote Studios in west London, with its neon sign saying 'Let's Get Weird' hanging above her desk. Next to a pinboard she calls her Wall of Dreams...

Catherine Marks: I had always wanted to work in music when I lived in Australia and all through school, but I didn't know what careers you could have other than being a performer, and I had terrible stage fright. So it started in London, I moved over from Australia in 2005 and started making tea in a recording studio.

Kate Hutchinson: And not just any recording studio but that of seminal producer and sound engineer Flood, who has worked with rock heavyweights like U2, PJ Harvey and Nick Cave.

Catherine Marks: I met him when I was studying architecture, and I did a year out in Dublin in 2001, I think it was, and I happened to be friends with people who knew him, and I met him through them at a Nick Cave concert. And we became buds, and I just kept badgering him to give me a job. But yeah, he sort of gave me advice about, if you want to do what I do, then go

back to Australia, finish your degree, join bands, write songs for other people, see what it is that you want to do, and then we'll see where we're at. And so it wasn't until after I'd finished my degree, which was 2004 that he was like, 'Well, I've got a job, potentially a job for you.' But it was like, you'll be the assistant to the assistant, essentially.

Kate Hutchinson: What about what was the main takeaway and thing you learned from being in the studio with Flood, even though you were just making the tea at that time?

Catherine Marks: I learned loads about the dynamics of being in a studio, the relationships between the people who are in the studio, between the producer and the artist, the producer and the engineer, the engineer and the artist, the assistants. Managers, record labels, how all that sort of works, just really observing. You know, when a record label comes in and the artist is really nervous, and what the producer does to alleviate those nerves and to not make it feel so intense that could not that could potentially derail a moment. When you're in the middle of a process, you want someone just to say, 'Yeah, this is great. Keep going.' You don't want someone to come in and analyse and say, 'Well, I don't know about that snare drum.' So, yeah, it's, how do you deal with those kind of moments?

Kate Hutchinson: So you were studying architecture, and then when you finished that degree, you said you moved to London. I mean, did you see parallels between what you were doing with architecture and music production?

Catherine Marks: Not until I started producing, I think. And not at all conscious. I tend to see music in three dimensions. So even though it is not a physical thing, when I close my eyes, I want to be inside it. How does it look? How does it make me feel? Which is often what you do when you're creating spaces, designing spaces, is how do you want this to make you feel? How will you exist in this space? So I guess in the sort of oral sense, how do I want this to make me feel? And, yeah, and just the way that I see music as well, and when I'm recording or working with a band or an artist, it's building that three dimensional space. I want it to be tactile.

Kate Hutchinson: What's the process like when you start working on a project with a group of people? Maybe you've never met before, maybe you've got a pre-existing relationship with them, and you're starting to work on a brand new record.

Catherine Marks: It can vary, but commonly, what I'll tend to do is... there'll be lots of conversations leading up to even just starting the record. So whether they're in demo-ing stage, or they've got the demos. And then there's lots of discussions about, how do we want this album to feel, to look like, where do we want to do it? And then there's a lot of rehearsal and pre-production, where I'll be in a rehearsal room with the band, and we'll go through the songs. It's also a great way for us to get to know each other and then also get on the same page of what we want to do to the record, or how we're going to record it, looking at how the guitarists play off each other and how the drum groove feels with the metering of the vocal and little things like that. And we'll all make little tweaks. And then at the end, you have agreed on something, and it's infinitely better, but you're not sure why. But it's still exactly the same as it was. But there is

some little moves that have made it, whether it's a kick drum pattern, or the way that something is strummed. And also just looking at transitions between sections and then going into the studio, and then that experience of being in the rehearsal room is sort of an extension, but by that point, everyone kind of knows what I think is, you know, how the song should be, and then it allows time and freedom to experiment and explore stuff a little bit. All the little details have been worked out. So then it becomes about the big picture.

Kate Hutchinson: What lengths have you gone to to really drill down into unlocking that the emotional core of a song?

Catherine Marks: There's a good example of this, it's not necessarily the emotional core, but it's a feeling of something that I'm looking for that I don't think has been achieved yet. And the example of that is 'Emily I'm Sorry', from the boygenius record that I worked on. And there was a transition from the first half of the song to the second half of the song, where the song sort of goes off click, and breaks down and then builds up again. It was literally, by feel, how long this should be. And I remember Phoebe sort of referred to it as my white whale, because I think just every day, little by little, for about 10 days, I would just... I'd listen to it and work on it before everyone came to the studio, or at the end of the day, and it was such a tiny little thing that just pushed me over the edge into insanity, a little bit. But we got there in the end.

Kate Hutchinson: We've got to talk about boygenius. That process sounds really interesting. What did you do to get to know each other?

Catherine Marks: We had one Zoom, and some text messages back and forth. And then I arrived in Malibu, and we started the process. And it was just slowly getting to know each other. I think it was sort of the first few days before we'd recorded anything, we did a lot of talking and talking about the songs, and they were still finishing the songwriting, so they were having a lot of discussions. And I just listened.

Kate Hutchinson: How much did the lyrics on that record guide the production?

Catherine Marks: So much.

Kate Hutchinson: Ah, I'm so glad you said that! OK.

Catherine Marks: There were so many amazing phrases in that record that informed particular moments and how we would treat those moments. On, yeah, on all the songs, I think. There's a great one from, I think it's from Leonard Cohen, where Lucy sings 'existential crisis'. That lyric has just always stuck with me, and then on 'We're In Love', Lucy played that song... she arrived the night before everyone else arrived, and she played me the start of the idea. And I was like, it has to go on the record, but you need to finish it. And I didn't know where it would go. There was a little melody that I thought she was gonna repeat. She never did, but how it ended up so perfect. But it was a kind of a love song to the band, really, to Phoebe and Julian. That song could have been built up a lot, but just the purity of her just on a guitar and singing was just so

powerful. So that's basically how we recorded it. It was just her sitting in the control room, me and her, and I think the take that we ended up using – either you can hear her crying or me crying at the end of it.

Kate Hutchinson: It really jumped out at me. The lyric 'Stripped down to our skin', because it made me think, this track is really stripped-back. And also on Leonard Cohen, the lyric that jumped out at me was 'How the light gets in,' which, you know, is a Leonard Cohen-ism. But at that moment, the production felt so lambent. There was all this sort of light, shafts of light, coming through it almost. So it really felt that some of the lyrics had provided these flashpoint moments for the production.

Catherine Marks: So nice that you say that – 'cos I think the record actually feels like every song feels like there's moments of shafts of light streaming through, like when I'm listening to it, there is a sort of bright, shining light, almost heavenly-like coming through all the songs. But then it also takes me back to that control room, and the light coming through into the control room.

Kate Hutchinson: You mentioned the studio. It wasn't just any old studio, it was Shangri-La studios in Malibu. What was it like, kind of walking into that studio and saying, OK, right? You've got to make it your own in some way.

Catherine Marks: So it's residential, so we were kind of living there, but it's weird. It's a house, basically, a beautiful, big house with actually a very beautiful studio in there. A big live room. And the actual house itself, it's all white, and there's not really any – I mean, there's some couches, but there's not a lot of places to hang out. So it all leads you into the control room. So the control room actually is really cosy and lovely. It's got natural light. There's some bench seating with lots of cushions. It just drew us in and meant that we always kind of wanted to be in there. That was our hangout space.

Kate Hutchinson: You won a Grammy for that record, one of three that boygenius won in total. How did that feel? And how did you celebrate yourself?

Catherine Marks: Every day I'll pet the Grammy as I walk out of the studio or something. I think initially, as it always seems to be when I win awards, there's a moment of, Oh gosh, I don't feel worthy. It's horrible, and people should not feel like this, but there was a period where I didn't feel deserving of those things, and they would have a reverse effect. But I guess it's the older I get, or the more experience I've had, the more I'm forcing myself to enjoy those little moments. And one of the things that actually meant a lot to me was when the Grammy arrived, I met some friends who don't work in the music industry for dinner, and I took the Grammy out to dinner with me, because I knew that they didn't take that for granted. And I didn't want to take it for granted, not that I did take it for granted, but I wanted to enjoy that experience. Because it is such a big thing.

Kate Hutchinson: So risky taking it out for dinner, you could have left it in the Uber. Imagine!

Catherine Marks: It came in a really big box, so I took the box with me as well. It's hard to forget.

Kate Hutchinson: It sounds to me like the role of a producer is, in some ways, to be the best people person ever. And then also the magic is in the air floating around in the studio, and you're the one who's keeping it up in the air like a balloon, almost.

Catherine Marks: That's a really lovely way of putting it. I mean, I wouldn't go that far, but it does sometimes feel like I'm trying to extrapolate. You know, when you work with an artist, often I'll choose them because I love something about them personally, or there's something special in the way that they perform, or in their personalities, which feels really unique and identifiable. And I want to draw that out. I want to extrapolate that and then put that into the performance, and then hopefully make that come through the speakers, sonically. So yeah, if all that stuff is – it isn't a tangible thing, but it does feel like I'm pulling it from various places in the ether. But I think I'm more reactive to *them*. So it's coming from them. I'm just sort of helping enhance it, I guess.

Kate Hutchinson: Didn't you say also that you get people to write something on your board in your recording studio?

Catherine Marks: Yes, so rather than having a whiteboard where you tick off, you know, drums, done guitars, done all that sort of stuff, I like to put up a lot of butcher paper, or big sheets of A1 paper and call it the Wall of Dreams. You write down the song title, and then you come up with ideas about what you want to record on the song as you're going through, and you can cross it off. But also other random ideas, and I just tape up the A1 paper all around the studio and have markers everywhere, so people can just go up. Whether it's draw pictures, or a song they thought of. It could be something random, like 'Backing vocal effect from so and so's song in bridge,' or something, just little ideas like that. Often you come back to it and you go, Oh my God, what was I referring to there? What were we supposed to do? One of the albums that I did recently in LA, one of the things that went up on the Wall of Dreams was, 'Don't forget to record the power drill,' because there was a power drill lying around in studio, and someone picked it up, and I was like, My God, we must record that on one of the songs. So that went up on the board. So it's just things like that, or 'Twinkly rainbow fairy dust sound,' or random things like that.

Kate Hutchinson: Who was the drill sound for? And did it make it onto the record?

Catherine Marks: The drill sound was for Rise Against and yes, it did make it on the record. It was the very last thing we recorded, and I think it was on a song called '40 Nights.' And it happens in a really chaotic moment. It might not have been '40 Nights', it might have been another song. And even in the marker on the Pro Tools session, it's got sort of 'Chaos moment'. So they're doing pick scrapes on their guitars, and we've processed those pick scrapes through delays and reverbs and weird little pedals that make it sound like it's going backwards or whatever. So this drill just enhanced the sound of the chaos. But it was a lot of fun.

Kate Hutchinson: Oh, the way you describe things, it just makes me think of, you know, you're in your lab trying to figure out which sounds and processes work with this.

Catherine Marks: I actually have made a record where I wore a lab coat the entire time. And goggles.

Kate Hutchinson: Like it was your own sort of sound laboratory.

Catherine Marks: Yes (laughs).

Kate Hutchinson: It sounds to me from what you're saying that your creative process, or the process in the studio, and what you're bringing to other musicians is very playful. There's a huge sense of play there.

Catherine Marks: Yeah, I want to enjoy the process. I want everyone to be able to enjoy the process. That's so important to me. But also, there was so long where the hours were so long and it was hard, and there'd be tension, and I'd witness the tension between the producers and the artists and the engineers, and it just felt horrible. Not all the time, but sometimes I was like, we're giving up so much to do this job, sacrificing so much, I want to be able to enjoy every day that I walk into the studio. And I love what I do, so why *can't* I bring that enjoyment to the process? So that's sort of the number one priority. Number two is make a banging record.

Kate Hutchinson: Can you tell me about some of the most interesting creative processes that you've been involved in. I mean, *The Big Moon* sounded very fun.

Catherine Marks: Yeah, that was one of the most fun records that I've ever been a part of. We actually made it in this building at Eastcote. And we really wanted to make the record together. They had a very small window. And I think I was supposed to be going on holiday or something just before. I was going to the Bahamas to visit a friend before I was going to work with the Manchester orchestra for the first time, and I said, Look, I'll forgo my holiday, but I only have essentially eight days to make this album with you. We'll do a load of pre-prod before, and then we'll just go in and bash it out. I said, it's going to be fun. We're going to make it feel like we're on holidays, and we're going to get it all done. So we all came in in Hawaiian shirts, and the girls bought leis. We had blow-up palm trees and flamingos, a blow-up monkey and a banana

Kate Hutchinson: So it was like pressure, but make it fruity and fun.

Catherine Marks: Yes, but it was also about managing everyone's expectations. We knew that we only had a certain amount of time to make it, and the girls were a lot of fun. They were really well-rehearsed. They knew exactly what they wanted as well. But there were lots of inanimate objects in the studio as well that someone would bang, and it would be like, Oh yeah, let's record it, you know. There was no lengthy discussions about, should we record a match being lit at this particular point on 'Bonfire'? I's just like, yes, absolutely we should. And then we would

just do it. It was fun and free, and I think the album sounds like that as well. But they also have a great sense of humour. So I think their sense of humor came through in that record as well.

Kate Hutchinson: I read that you like things nice and noisy. How do you achieve that in production?

Catherine Marks: I think my new one is, I like it scrappy. And I don't know what I mean by that either! I think it's just it's not polished. It's still rough around the edges. Again, it's that tactile thing. What I love to put in albums is what I call alien sounds. So that doesn't mean extraterrestrial sounds, but sounds that are alien to the particular genre that I'm working on. So if it's kind of heavy rock, put a little twinkly synth in there somewhere that follows a guitar lead or something, but it just sort of tickles, it's not like a main feature. You've really got to hunt for it, to hear it, and it'll just add something. It's a bit unfamiliar, but it enhances that particular moment. So I like marrying sounds that shouldn't work together, I guess. It appeals to my sense of humour.

Kate Hutchinson: A lot of the musicians that you work with are – it's fair to say – are making fairly loud music. There's a lot of guitars. There's a lot of shredding, big riffs. How do you balance that when it comes to music production? So it's not just all slapping you in the face, to use your phrase.

Catherine Marks: I don't know if this is correct, but to me there's perceived loudness. So it's something that feels like it has an impact. In order to make something dynamic, does it come through the performance? Do you think about that beforehand? I think less about it being really loud, and more about the perceived loudness and impact. That's often what I'll think about. You know, the way a chorus lands. I also love things like – Ethan Gruska came up with this, but he talks a lot about scene changes. Going from something extremely one thing to extremely another, so really loud and then really quiet. And a hard stop, no sort of like beautiful cymbal decay or a reverb decay. It's just: hard stop, new moment. Which could be really bare and really minimal to something that is maximalist and huge.

Kate Hutchinson: So do you enjoy creating that drama?

Catherine Marks: Yes, drama is an excellent word. Yes.

Kate Hutchinson: How would you define the role of a producer today?

Catherine Marks: The role of the producer is, I would say, changing and constantly evolving, and it's so fluid and kind of has to be all these things encompassed into one. Songwriting, engineering, mixing, mastery, all the kind of roles. What a producer ultimately does is facilitates the artists that they're working with, and guides them into creating something that they've always wanted to achieve, I guess. I mean, that would be the kind of ultimate goal. And through that there is a lot of personality management, analysis, psychology. The technical stuff is important, but I think that's sort of like 10% of it. That's just a given. I'm so reactive to what is

going on in the room at that particular moment. People feeling really excited about a particular song, then I'm just going with that song. And letting them guide me into where it needs to be. And in turn me guiding them into helping them where I think they're trying to go with it. And, yeah, so it's like a matrix.

Kate Hutchinson: Is there anything else that you're striving for in terms of sound and quality overall?

Catherine Marks: When I'm in the studio, working with an artist, the thing that I'm looking for is the thing that makes me feel something. So you know when something's like, 'Oh, that sounds great, or that's a good performance, perfect, you know, no mistakes,' but what is the thing that hits you in the chest, or makes you jump up and down and want to dance, or makes me cry, or any emotion that elevates it and pushes it over to being something so unique, and takes it out of like, 'Oh, that's good.' Oh, that's f\*\*\*ing amazing. I want to be feeling that all the time.

Kate Hutchinson: What if something doesn't hit you like that yet?

Catherine Marks: Then I keep hunting for the thing to make me feel like that. Sometimes you have to let something go, and maybe that's just it, you know. It's like hearing a demo of a song, and you can hear the potential in it. I always want to achieve a song's potential. I want the artist to experience the song or the album in the way that they've always imagined it, but better.

Outro: This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Kate Hutchinson: Yes, you've been listening to Studio Radicals. This episode starred Catherine Marks. Studio Radicals is co-produced by dCS Audio and me, Kate Hutchinson, with audio production and editing by Holly Fisher. The theme music is by Anna Prior. Coming up next, we're in the middle of Hollywood with Ebonie Smith. "The Ebonie Smith sound is unorthodox, it's left of centre, it's moody. It's a lot to do with soundscapes and it's not trying to be pop. It's serious, and it's cerebral." Head to [dcsaudio.com/studioradicals](https://dcsaudio.com/studioradicals) and you can listen to playlists featuring all of the music we've talked about in the series and hear more episodes too.