

City boy meets great outdoors

By JUDITH LACY

When English musician Andy Ross was asked to compose a piece of music about the Australian drought, he never expected to discover farmers are "artists of the land".

Feeling ill-equipped to comment on the drought, the "ignorant city dweller" asked to meet some farmers.

Having lived in London most of his life, Ross thought farmers were "simple-minded people" who worked hard.

In New South Wales sheep farmer Graham Stone he found a farmer using creativity to overcome the lack of rainfall, including feeding his sheep drought tolerant native saltbush which he grows.

Ross, now living in Sydney, made a film about Mr Stone and his farm. Shot in 2008, *Well Beyond Water* was first shown publicly, other than on YouTube, at the Reel Earth Environmental Film Festival in Palmerston North last month. It won the best short film award with the jury saying it is "an engrossing and appealing film which captures the optimism of people who think outside the square".

The filming started as a bit of fun after Ross' mother encouraged him to video his trip, but it "got out of hand".

Ross said Mr Stone has started to view his relationship with the land as a dialogue, seeking its response.

He discovered farmers are artists of the land.

"They taught me a lot when I was there, not just about farming, but through their attitude to things."

Ross sees *Well Beyond Water* as an optimistic film about creative processes driven by passion not fear.

"I'm no more an artist than Graham the farmer is even though that is what I'm labelled."

An artist is someone who sees things clearly and processes what they see. They are visionaries with long sensory tentacles.

Ross, the father of two teenagers, hopes the film will spark debate and put the spotlight on problem solving.

He does not want *Well Beyond Water* to be insulting to farmers who cannot change as Mr Stone has. But it was important to start asking questions about how to stop that happening.

The problem is more about the inability to adapt than a lack of water, he said.

Filming was a slow burning exercise as relationships were formed.

"I didn't want them to think I'd come here to exploit them to make a film," he said. "It was only after the third day I had the courage to start pointing it at them."

Ross has always had an interest in technology and his experience as a record producer meant he was good with gadgets and soon mastered using the camera.



Adapting: Englishman Andy Ross's first film explores unfamiliar territory – the Australian drought.

Photo: FAITH SUTHERLAND

► ANDY ROSS' MUSICAL BACKGROUND

- Got first guitar at 13 and went professional at 18.
- Guitarist with pop group Immaculate Fools.
- Split with band to pursue career as record producer.
- His guitarist session work clients have included Paul McCartney and Tori Amos.
- Dad Ronnie Ross was a jazz saxophonist who played with Miles Davis, Frank Sinatra and the Beatles. He also taught David Bowie the sax.

The comparatively low cost of cameras has opened up the medium. "Anyone has a voice now when it comes to making films and that's a very exciting prospect for those people who might want to say some-

thing through film. Technology is now allowing that to take place without it being prohibitive like it used to be."

Ross was in Palmerston North last month for the film festival, visiting schools and talking at Youth Space. He has been to New Zealand several times and after London says the "peace" here is lovely.

The people are relaxed and gentle and the environment has a soothing effect on him. New Zealanders have a much greater awareness of the need to look after the environment – eco schools are unheard of in England.

and nano technology.

He said the early part of his career was "ego led" and not about connecting with people. He had a brush with fame, with a small film, when he was in the band Immaculate Fools. People did not necessarily want to know him, but wanted to connect with the glamour.

Now he wants to connect with people and believes his film creates a resonance between him and the audience. Oh, and if you are wondering, while he wrote the music for *Well Beyond Water*, he never wrote the piece of music he was commissioned to do.



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