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REMIXING “BLUE GLOVE”

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Demian Shoemaker
and Suzanne McClean
of “Emma’s Mini.”

<http://magnatune.com/extra/cubase>

When we were putting together the second edition of this book, my editor contacted the people at Magnatune (www.magnatune.com), an innovative new record label, about allowing me to remix one of their artists’ songs and then post the files on their site so that you can follow along. It’s thanks to Magnatune that you can hear not only the before and after versions of “Blue Glove,” but you can even download the Cubase SX 2 project file and audio that I used to make my remix. The archive will be about 20 MB to download, so it’s not exactly small, but if you go to <http://www.magnatune.com/extra/cubase>, you can hear not only the remix, but also the building blocks that created it.

The artists who were kind enough to give me one of their songs to remix, Emma’s Mini, describe themselves as “electronic pop with a rock edge.” I don’t think there’s much rock

edge left in my version, but I do think it’s a useful example of what can be done with a track in Cubase. Nearly all of the effects are the stock effects included with SX 2—I did use a few freeware plug-ins that I’ll describe as I’m going along, and I also did a little compression on some tracks using the Universal Audio UAD-1 plug-ins that I own. All synth parts are from the included synths.

Emma’s Mini recorded the song with an integrated hard disc recorder—not in Cubase. Demian Shoemaker, one half of Emma’s Mini, transferred all of the audio files to a computer running Cubase, and sent me a CD of the whole project. I wound up using only a little of the audio they sent me. Because the original track was not made in Cubase, the web site only has the project file and source audio files for my remix. Still, it’s not hard to hear the differences between the versions by listening to the before and after MP3s.

The song

The original “Blue Glove” is driven mainly by the female vocal, a strong picked bass line, a four on the floor beat, and some fairly heavy guitars. Of the original tracks, I kept only the vocals. I also decided that just to challenge myself, I wouldn’t put any guitars back on

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the track. Guitar is the only instrument I play well enough that people will pay me for that skill on occasion, so to make myself work harder with Cubase, I didn't use guitars. The track clicks along nicely at 113 bpm, which is a bit out of my comfort zone but fits the song very well. I usually work at very slow tempos, and if a track gets above 130 bpm, I start to think in half time, but as much as I like my dub tracks, working at 56.5 bpm (half of 113) is way too slow for me.

Because of the no-guitars rule, I had to do a little rearranging of the song. The lyrics of the verse go right up to the last beat, and the original has a four-bar descending guitar figure that introduces the chorus. Because I had to chop out that guitar part (shortening the song while doing so), I had to rearrange the chorus a bit. Also, I had to do a few things to get everyone ready for the chorus since there is no pause in the lyrics before the chorus starts.

The other major change is the solo section that in the original was a guitar solo. Of course, this didn't sit well with the zero-guitar rule, but I had a few options. I could have done a big, swirly, synth thing, kind of like a trance tune, or I could have played a different solo. However, I chose to keep only a few parts going and to rearrange the beat for a rhythmic breakdown instead.

Beyond that, the song is pretty standard, with intro, verse, chorus, verse two, chorus, solo, chorus out.

The parts

The song opens with one of the most prominent parts of the song: the electric piano part. Because Cubase has no built-in electric piano, I had to use a different source—in this case, a sample patch in Reason. I loaded a Rhodes Suitcase piano from a commercial Reason ReFill called Dirty 'Ol Relics and

played a simple descending E-minor to C-major figure. I routed the sound via ReWire to a stereo group in Cubase, but rendered the audio and put it on an audio track in SX 2 for you to hear. It's still routed to the Epiano group, so you can turn the effects on and off to hear what's been done to the dry sound. The sound goes through a delay, then a phase shifter, and then a filter. The delay is one of the few third-party effects in the mix; it's a freeware effect from Voxengo (www.voxengo.com) called TempoDelay. Grab it from the Web site if you are a PC user; if you're a Mac user, open the first insert slot on the Epiano, add a Double Delay effect, and open the effects preset called PianoDelay. It will get you pretty close to what was in the mix.

The rhythmic part of the mix consists of a group of drum and percussion parts from a couple of sources. The main beat was programmed using the ReDrum module in Reason; I rendered it and put it on its own track for you to hear. It's a simple beat that, if slowed down, would sound more hip-hop than anything else. The percussion parts are a very prominent shaker that goes through the whole song, a conga loop, and a tabla loop. All three of those parts are from commercial loop CDs, and I edited them and time stretched them in Live. Because of this, they are rendered as a single stereo so I can stay on the right side of the law.

The bass line was played by me and recorded through my sound card. The bass is so ancient and lo-fi I'm not willing to admit it here, but I tracked it through a SansAmp Bass DI. The verse line is looped, mostly to keep the size of the file download reasonable—if I had my way, the bass would have been one of the live tracks, providing a little variation from the heavy looping. The chorus bass line is actually the verse bass line edited. The batteries in my SansAmp ran out, so just to have some-

thing to work with, I edited together a bass line. After a while, I got used to it and kind of liked it, so I left it as is.

The verse vocal was treated pretty heavily with a Step Filter plug-in, VST Dynamics (acting only as a limiter to catch peaks), and an effects send to a delay. The original vocal certainly sounded great, but I decided the filtered sound made it pop out a little more. I think because the frequency range is a bit limited, it makes the ear seek out the vocal a little more in the mix.

The chorus vocal consists of two parts. One is a part of a line from the harmony vocal that I cut out to be a discrete part. That short line goes through the SX vocoder in external mode, meaning that one channel has the carrier and the other the speech. In this case, the speech is the vocal itself, and the carrier is an a1 VST instrument being triggered by a MIDI track in Cubase. The MIDI track is called VocodeCarrier; you can experiment with other vocoder settings and carrier tracks for fun. To use the vocoder as I used it here, the tracks need to be panned hard left and right and sent to a group. I named the group Vocode, and after the vocoder insert, the signal goes through a DoubleDelay plug-in and a single band of low-pass EQ, just to get rid of a little of the screech.

The other parts in the song are an arpeggio driving another a1 synth, a pattern-sequenced line driving yet another a1, and various other little snippets of sound played here and there.

The arrangement

The structure of the song is the classic pop song pattern: intro, verse, chorus, verse two, chorus, bridge (solo or something), chorus out. A short description of each section follows. One point to keep in mind is that we have been trained over the years to hear music in

chunks of 4, 8, 16, and 32. Thus, I often do something—change the drum beat, filter a part, and so on—to reinforce the changes that take place in a song at those points.

Because this is an electronic-oriented song, I started the intro with a comparatively non-rhythmic part, to make life a little easier for the DJ trying to fade it in. The first heavy dose of the tempo is the shaker part, which starts at bar 10 in the SX 2 arrangement. Four bars later, the very quiet arpeggio starts at the same time as the drum beat. The only resonant filter plug-in with Cubase is the Step Filter, so to make my life easier, I just set the filter cutoff and resonance flat and used mix automation to control the cutoff point of the filter. Automation also turns off the plug-in just as the first verse starts.

The first verse is the one part of the song where the electric piano drops out, and where the bass line first comes in. I think this helps the vocal pull the ear a little more. The conga part also starts here.

The electric piano makes a (hopefully triumphant) return in the first chorus. The chord changes are different in the chorus, but use the same two E-minor and C-major chords. Because the harmony is so simple, I was able to move the main lyric (the one that isn't vocoded) ahead in time, putting the vocoded part first. Something you may want to try when playing with the mix is moving the vocal parts around in the chorus and changing the vocoder to see if you can find a better sound than I did.

The second verse is almost identical to the first one, save that the Rhodes is back in the mix. I thought there had been enough popping up of new parts and sounds, so decided to give the listener a break and return to familiar ground. This is also the one section of the song where pretty much everything is going on at once.

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The second chorus is, once again, fairly close to the first chorus. The tabla part comes in for the first time here; I faded it in so that it's at its highest level about halfway through the chorus. Also, just to keep things a little interesting, I used automation to change some settings on the main vocal filter and bumped up the feedback on the delay as well.

The bridge, breakdown, or solo section is after the second chorus. In the original, there was a guitar solo, but in my version I decided to make the changes rhythmic. Some of my favorite electronic music makers in the world are a bunch of fabulously creative drum'n'bass DJs and producers. Some of them have started doing really creative stuff with heavily edited, very computerish beats next to their dance floor crushers. I'm new to working that way but decided in this song to try my hand at it. I gave myself the first bar of the rendered file and decided to edit and process that loop for as much rhythmic variety as possible. None of the drum'n'bass guys need to worry, I think, but it's interesting in a sample mix like this to try to make the most of the editing tools. You'll notice a lot of crossfades, processed snippets, and other editing tricks if you look closely at this section. I like the play between the tabla, shaker, and edited beat in this section.

The chorus-out section is used to fade out some of the individual tracks, ending with only the shaker and the vocal. Again, ending the song with these parts would make it easy to mix this song with another track, and a tempo change could even be added in a DJ set using the final delayed vocoder.

Your mix

You can do whatever you want to this mix, of course, but here are a few suggestions that might be helpful, and that also point out what I think are the strengths and weaknesses of this mix.

First, I've taken a song with a fairly uplifting message (free yourself!) and given it a slightly spacey, moody, minor-chord feel. Is that really appropriate for the tune? Is there a better way to build the arrangement and parts to match that message?

Next, did I choose the right basic beat for the song? Would a four-on-the-floor beat sound better? There isn't an open hi-hat in the whole tune, so are there ways to improve the beats?

Look at the arrangement; by cutting out the guitar figure that introduces the chorus, did I crowd things too much in the mix? To be honest, I think I did, so I made some changes in the verses to signal to the listener that the chorus is on the way maybe a little sooner than expected. Also in the chorus, is the electric piano too similar to the verse? Again, I think it might be, and if I were to work more on this song, that would be a place I would check.

Big, big thanks to Emma's Mini (and to John Buckman at magnatune.com) for letting me use their song for this exercise. Check out their other tunes at www.magnatune.com when you have the time.