

THE MASTERS OF THE REMIX

By Joe Brown

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It's not the singer. And it's not the song either. More and more, it's the remix that makes a record a hit.

And the remixers, those techno-whizzes who combine musical art with electronic science to create dance floor alchemy, are the latest stars in pop music.

A remix replay:

When head B-52 Fred Schneider released his self-titled solo album in 1985 it went nowhere -- fast. But with the B-52's recent re-ascent Schneider's profile was on the rise too, and he decided to see how his baby would fly in 1991.

"Fred Schneider," by now, was six years old, ancient and obsolete in the speed-of-sound world of pop music. So Schneider handed the master tapes over to remixer Michael Vail Blum -- who remixed "Keep It Together" for Madonna -- for a sonic makeover. Released this summer, the album climbed to No. 85 on the Billboard chart. Not a smash, but it didn't reach the top 200 the first time out.

"This was an album that was made a few years ago, and the sounds were kind of dated," Blum says. "It had an older drum machine sound, and that would be death on the dance floor. So we replaced the drums. And in the dance remix process, the engineer could take delays and create new grooves from what was going on. So if you've got, say, a tambourine part and you put an eighth-note triplet delay on it or a quarter-note triplet delay, you get different kinds of feels happening.

"Some remixers take the tapes and just return with something and say, 'This is what you get, like it or not.' In some cases that's great, because a remixer is an artist himself, taking what's there and creating something new. But in most cases, I find that it's preferable to get the initial concept of what the artist or band wanted and then take it from there and try to extrapolate, take it one step further."

Or three steps. Or six.

The remixed bag:

The two-sided vinyl 45 has been replaced by the CD super-single, which frequently offers three or more remixes of the original song, and runs at an average length of 30 minutes. Prince recently released a determinedly blue CD single, "Gett Off," complete with four remixes. And "Elephant Box," the debut single by

Prince protege Ingrid Chavez, comes with a six-pack of mixes: the album version, "Elephant House Mix," "The Solo," "Bee Bop Mix," "Full Pass Mix" and "Dub Box."

Folk-pop singer Suzanne Vega introduced her 1987 album "Solitude Standing" with a wispy a cappella story-song called "Tom's Diner." Last year, the puckish British dance group DNA "sampled" Vega's entire three-minute song, grafting her catchy "dee dee dee dee ..." chorus onto an electronic groove, and had a surprise international dance hit. DNA's pirating caught Vega by surprise, but she later granted the group permission to market the remix commercially. "Tom's Album," which features a dozen versions of Vega's ditty, remixed by a variety of artists, will be released in late September on A&M, Vega's label.

The British rock bands Happy Mondays and Primal Scream handed over their shaggy, rambling rock tracks to ace British remixer Paul Oakenfold and got back streamlined synth-and-soul opuses that were related to the originals in title only. After the startling success of their remixes, both bands changed direction and began making dance music -- with guitars.

Remixes have also changed the course of radio programming. Washington's urban-contemporary WPGC (95.5 FM) began a nightly program called "Club 95" featuring club deejays mixing live on the air and found its ratings rocketing to No. 1.

The influential German synthesizer outfit Kraftwerk, whose chilly, spare electronic rhythms inspired a generation of hip-hop beatmakers, recently readdressed its body of work in an album called "The Mix," which consists entirely of radical reworkings of familiar Kraft-works, from "Autobahn" to "Music Non Stop."

Artists and marketers have found that remixing can put a new spin on a greatest-hits package, give the artist a breather and provide the label something for Christmas season sales. Since the Pet Shop Boys' success with their remix albums "Disco" and "Introspective," everyone from the Cure to Chaka Khan to New Kids on the Block has released a remix album.

To a remixer, everything old is new again. And everything new is new again too. Often before a record is even released, remixers revamp and return it in such an altered state that the artist might not recognize it.

"I'm always fascinated by someone else's perception or interpretation of what a song should be like," says Frankie Knuckles, disc jockey, record producer and one of the industry's undisputed remix-masters. "No two people will take a song in the same direction. That's what creativity is all about."

A "mix," in the vernacular, is the final recorded product after all the separate instrumental and vocal tracks -- from eight to 48, to more than 100 in the hands of Trevor Horn, producer of Seal and others -- are combined with instrumental balances and dynamics and special effects.

When the original mix is finished, an artist or producer often approaches a remixer and says, "Give us a remix that's 'house.'" Or "an extended R&B mix." Or "a new jack mix," or "a hip-hop Miami style mix." Depending

on the remixer, it can be an entirely new production, with new instrumentation and new vocal arrangements, through sampling (electronic "borrowing" of a recorded sound) or calling the artist back in.

"Sometimes there are four or five different mixes of the same record all on one 12-inch record or CD-single," says Wresch Dawidjan, whose Dupont Circle store, 12" Dance Records, specializes in dance music remixes. "One mix might make one crowd happy, another mix might make another crowd happy. That way, if they get enough mixes on there, they figure they'll cover all the bases."

When a song becomes relatively popular, Dawidjan says, the professional remix services -- there are more than 15 of them across the country, including D.C. deejay Regee Wilson's Discotech -- will make their own versions of it.

Take Crystal Waters's maddeningly catchy "Gypsy Woman (She's Homeless)." Please.

"Almost all the services remixed that one, so there were at least six or eight different mixes available. Some people were buying all six!" says Dawidjan. "But it gets a little confusing sometimes, because someone will come in and say, 'I want the remix of Crystal Waters,' and you have to say, 'Oh? Which one?'"

Today music collectors will often buy a record not because of the artist but because so-and-so mixed it, he says.

"Dave Morales is very popular right now, and Shep Pettibone still seems to be popular. And of course C&C are very, very popular -- they really put their stamp on Lisa Lisa with 'Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em.' These remixers have little cycles of when they're really hitting. They capture the sound of what people want at the moment."

In the past decade, as dance music has evolved from alternative phenom to major-label success, formerly behind-the-scenes figures such as deejays, producers and remixers have become audio auteurs. Remixers Frankie Knuckles, Arthur Baker, Jellybean Benitez, Larry Levan, Steve "Silk" Hurley and Shep Pettibone are becoming the Spielbergs and Lucases of dance music.

Robert Clivilles and David Cole -- the C&C behind the New York neodisco group C&C Music Factory -- have concocted a string of Top 10 crossover hits, stamping their trademark stripped-down, sample-heavy sound on Natalie Cole ("Pink Cadillac") and, more recently, Lisa Lisa. And the Basement Boys, a trio of Baltimore deejay-producer-remixers, have had a series of hits with their local discoveries, from Ultra Nate's slow, sultry "It's Over" to Crystal Waters's sleeper smash.

"Most of these guys are deejays -- it's almost a prerequisite," says Arthur Baker, the man mainstream rock stars such as the Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen turn to when they want a song remixed for a crossover dance hit. These guys have huge record collections and a deep and wide musical knowledge. But most important, they're in the clubs, and they know what it takes to make the people scream."

New York-based Baker, whose first job was as a record clerk, replays remixing's beginnings in a call from London, where he's working on Al Green's next album. "It started back in 1978 with guys like John Luongo, who started with two copies of a 45, using editing to combine the vocal and instrumental and basically rework the record to extend it. Luongo began adding extra percussion. But basically, in the beginning, whatever was on the original record was all you had to work with."

Baker takes credit for being one of the first remixers to actually alter the integrity of a record. "When I heard Springsteen's 'Dancing in the Dark,' I conceived of it as sort of a reggae kind of record. I was working with a live version, and the drumming was a bit off, so I brought in a studio bass player and substituted it for the original bass track. Bruce was great -- he was behind it all the way, and it was the remix version that they wound up using in the hit video."

After that, he says, every sound on a record was fair game for remixers.

"I also did the Rolling Stones' 'Too Much Blood,' " Baker says. "Mick Jagger gave me the tapes and left for Peru, so I went to work on it. When he came back, I said, 'Do you want to hear it?' and he says, 'Okay, but I just hope you didn't put horns and girl singers on it and all that.' And, of course, that was exactly what I had done. His objection was that the Stones had used horns and black girl singers a decade before. But on their next album {'Steel Wheels'} you noticed it was full of my ideas."

Like many remixers, Baker has progressed to making the music himself, and is readying an album called "Give In to the Rhythm." "The idea is to make it like a night at a club where they play all sorts of dance music," he says. "This is an overview of dance music in 1991."

Frankie Knuckles, known as "The Godfather of House," just stepped out with his own solo album too. Knuckles is a maestro, a Quincy Jones of the production board, and his first single under his own name, the instrumental "The Whistle Song," is currently an international dance club hit.

Knuckles left his native New York for Chicago in 1977 and began working as a deejay in that city's Warehouse disco -- thus the term "house music" -- combining instrumental breaks from different songs, then adding synthesizers and sometimes new vocal tracks over an exhilarating, nonstop, bass-heavy rhythmic pattern. Now he's back in Manhattan, working Saturday nights at the Sound Factory nightclub and maintaining a full schedule of remixes and production jobs.

His first remix was "Let No Man Put Asunder" by First Choice. "Most of the tunes I loved were coming out of New York, but they wouldn't always work on my dance floor, so I would have to restructure and rework them to make them work for me," he says. "Soon other clubs and parties were promoting themselves, saying they had 'House music.' "

When Knuckles moved back to New York in 1988, he began getting assignments to remix tracks by the Pet Shop Boys ("Left to My Own Devices" and "I Want a Dog"), Chaka Khan and ABC. His latest remix projects include songs by R&B-dance divas Vesta Williams and Adeva and the single "The Pressure" by Minneapolis gospel choir Sounds of Blackness, originally produced by the infallible Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, producers of Janet Jackson, Alexander O'Neal and others.

"I turned that track completely around," Knuckles says from New York's Quad Studio, where he does most of his remixes. "I got rid of everything they had and started over again. Which is really kind of scary, when you consider whose material you're working on. But they wanted me to give it a completely fresh idea. Now it's a big dance thing. And they're really happy with it.

"And I'm doing Lisa Stansfield tomorrow," he says. "I'm remixing the first single off her new album, called 'Change.' What I got was a demo on a cassette. ... It was all stock keyboard sounds. But the spirit and essence of the song was there, so what I'm going to do is bring all that out of it, make the most of it. I want to make it work for the dance floor as well as for the radio and the adult contemporary set."

Knuckles says he gets called in when an artist wants "a much more lush, sophisticated feel" on a record. "Now, if a rap artist like De La Soul is looking to capture a certain younger market, make it more dance-floor friendly," he says, "they'll call up someone like my partner, Dave Morales, to mix it. Dave has a history with hip-house tracks -- he's worked with Technotronic and Stevie V. Plus the crowd that he has to play for at Red Zone is generally into a lot of stuff like that, so he can capture just what those guys would be looking at for the dance floor."

Though remixers can help a track sizzle on the floor or burn up the charts, they rarely share in the resulting rewards.

"I think remixers now are analogous to what songwriters were in the '50s," says Richard Wolf, half of Wolf & Epic, the hot new kids on the remixing block. "A remixer can go in and do a remix of a record, {but} they get paid very little money, virtually nothing. The remix then goes on to become the video and the hit, to go on and sell millions of albums for the artist. ... It's like the old days when somebody in the Brill Building, in Tin Pan Alley, paid you a thousand dollars for your song and they took all your rights. That's illegal now, they can't do that now. Remixers don't get Grammy Awards -- they don't even get their names in the dance charts in Billboard."

Wolf & Epic of Los Angeles, who had a No. 1 hit with their remixed version of Bell Biv Devoe's "Do Me," are finishing an album of BBD remixes, including "Word to the Mutha," a track that qualifies as a full-fledged New Edition reunion.

"We use the finished record as raw material," says Wolf. "We get the original tapes, and we just completely reproduce it. In the case of Bell Biv Devoe, we got them in here to do new vocal tracks, and brought in {former

New Edition members} Bobby Brown, Ralph Tresvant and Johnny Gill to sing on the new section. Then we have players come in and overdub. So the relationship of the record to the remix is like a song demo to a record."

Wolf, a Juilliard-trained songwriter and producer, and his partner, Bret "Epic" Mazur, originally a club deejay and drummer, didn't even use the original master tapes when they remixed a Prince track called "Horny Pony."

"We just sampled what we needed from his vocal," Wolf says, "and created a whole new instrumental track to back it. Prince didn't participate in his remix, but he said he's very happy with it. And our team just did an urban remix on Seal's 'Crazy.' {Seal's label} came to us because they wanted airplay on urban contemporary radio. I don't know what Seal thinks of it. I could totally understand if he didn't like it."

Wolf says he'd love to get his hands on tracks by L.L. Cool J or Sonic Youth. "And I'd love to do Bob Dylan. He's a classic -- Dylan can do anything. We could get Bob Dylan a dance hit."

Wolf himself has been through the remixer. "I wrote a song five years ago called 'Throw You Down,' which was produced by Richard Perry for Thelma Houston. Nothing happened with it. Then these remixers, Musto and Bones, did a brilliant remix on it, and it became a No. 5 dance record. Now, I was a songwriter and I had nothing to do with the production, but I was happy, very grateful for this remix."

No one, so far, has attempted a remix on Knuckles' hit single "The Whistle Song." And he's proud of that.

"Well for one thing, it's an instrumental, and it's very hard to remix an instrumental," Knuckles says. "And I think everyone was a little scared to try and touch it anyway. Which is good. When you can come out with a song and it's so perfect that nobody wants to touch it, remixing it and changing it in any kind of way, I like that. I like that a lot."

New Mix on an Old Song

A sampling of some familiar (and not-so-familiar) tracks in remixed form:

"Ain't Nobody" by Chaka Khan, remixed by Frankie Knuckles. (To hear a Sound Bite from this album, call 202-334-9000 and press 8166.)

"Private Idaho" by the B-52's, remixed by Daniel Coulombe, Steven Stanley and Paul Wexler.

"Monster" by Fred Schneider, remixed by Michael Vail Blum. (To hear a Sound Bite from this album, call 202-334-9000 and press 8167.)

"Domino Dancing" by Pet Shop Boys, remixed by Lewis A. Martinee, Rick Alonso and Mike Couzzi.

"The Robots" by Kraftwerk, remixed by Kraftwerk.

"Pictures of You" by the Cure, "Extended Dub Mix" by Brian "Chuck" New.

"Policy of Truth" by Depeche Mode, "Capitol Mix" by Francois Kevorkian.

"Express Yourself" by Madonna, "Shep's 'spressin' Himself Re-Remix" by Shep Pettibone. (To hear a Sound Bite from this album, call 202-334-9000 and press 8168.)

"Surfer Girl" by Phranc, "Aqua & Pink Mixmaster Mix" by Roger Greenwalt.

"Tom's Diner" by Suzanne Vega with DNA, remix by DNA. (To hear a Sound Bite from this album, call 202-334-9000 and press 8169.)

"Do You Wanna Funk" by Sylvester, house remix by Lee Adams.

"Gett Off" by Prince and the New Power Generation, "Houstyle" remix by Steve "Silk" Hurley.

"Crazy" by Seal, "Do You Know The Way to L.A. Mix" by Robin Hancock. (To hear a Sound Bite from this album, call 202-334-9000 and press 8170.)

"French Kiss" by Lil Louis & the World, "The Songbird Sings Extended Mix" by Lil Louis.

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