

Remixin': mixing business with leisure

The remix has become an essential tool for label marketing departments, turning top remixers into stars in their own right as they lend cutting-edge cred to artists. But even remixers-of-the-moment face familiar problems: getting a break, maintaining a career after the incendiary phase, and getting paid.

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BACK IN THE DAYS, a 're-mix' meant the original engineer or producer had been asleep (or perhaps too awake) at the faders. So maybe it was the look on my face that made the Geffen A&R representative hurriedly reassure me it was a 'special CLUB remix' of my Top Ten Billboard Chart success in his hand. I'd never heard of the remixer, Francois Kevorkian, but I could tell by the way his name was uttered he must be someone special, at least to the mid-1980s NY club scene (resident DJ at Studio 54.)

I fixed on my best Delphic gaze as we listened to my first experience of a dance remix: lots of big kick drum, some dub-type delays cutting in and out, and rather crude 8-bar edits – nothing to worry about there then – it didn't sound like anything that might be played on a radio! I must admit to a late night revisit to the control room, to check that mix by Francois. Cranking up the monitors, I could imagine late night clubbers dancing and not getting their ears bent out of shape by those guitars I'd EQed for the radio. It wasn't tricky – was this something I should get into? – nah ... probably a passing fashion.

Francois is now a legend in DJ/remix circles, he's remixed Ashford and Simpson through Mick Jagger, Diana Ross and U2. He opened his own recording facility (Axis Studio) and despite masterminding Musique's disco-aberration Push Push in the Bush he's still respected by the deck-jocks of today.

Francois came to New York in the mid seventies: '... I fell upon pretty hard times in the winter of 1976. So I found a job and got hired by this really big club to play the drums on the dance floor while the DJ was playing.' The DJ was the renowned Walter Gibbons, the inventor of the 12-inch (10 percent by Double Exposure – the very first of its kind), so Francois had a unique chance to watch this pioneer at work.

Twenty years on and tracks are not just remixed and edited, but completely repurposed (sometimes bearing only passing resemblance to the original). Labels have little incentive to show restraint as remix expenses are generally fully recoupable from artist's royalties, and remixes frequently have better grooves than the original – like the Murder remix of Jennifer Lopez's Ain't It Funny.

Remixes are sometimes essential to break a track, as with Al Stone's overhaul of Danii Minogue's Don't Wanna Lose This Feeling/Groove. Still, remixers themselves are under-represented and under-protected compared to recording artists and producers. The normal route into the field is to work 'on spec' for no money.

Armand Van Helden, a titan of the current crop, describes how he started. 'I met up with Neil Petricone from X-Mix, the remix service. He goes: "We're looking for help, but we can't pay you." And I said, "Well, I'm down." So Neil had a studio, and I went over there, got

in, and that was it. That's also where I started getting into the computer stuff, I can rip up Sound Designer!'

X-Mix is one of the more prominent US remixer management companies. X-Mix also release compilations, distribute labels, run a school for remixers (XMix University), as well as representing stars of the scene like Armand, Junior Sanchez, Felix da Housecat, DJ Sneak and Todd Terry.

In Europe there's hardly any specialist remix management, Howie Martinez believes his Alchemy agency to have been the first of its kind in the UK. But even having a large stable of remixers doesn't make it any easier to deal with labels. 'It's who's hot, who's flavour of the month. That's all it's based on,' explains Howie. 'You get some A&R people who truly understand how remixing works – taking a track and styling it for different markets – but generally it just comes down to who's hot, who's flavour of the month. We represent a guy called Ewan Pearson and three years ago we couldn't get him arrested, this year we've turned down 40 remixes for him from every label. This was as a result of a remix he did for one of our own artists called Freeform 5. Ewan was named remixer of the year and subsequently he's done Beck and Goldfrapp remixes.'

This sentiment concerning flavour-of-the-month syndrome is shared by Guy Bolland, UK remix manager for duo Chamber (Doug Hart and Paul Freegard) and Squint (Wesley Clarke). 'There are certain key artists, like Massive Attack, who will pick up on guys like Akufen to remix their tracks, and they tend to really have their fingers on the pulse. Generally you'll find A&R people will just look down the Cool Cuts Chart and say "right, they've mixed this, that and the other, they're the person of the moment!" And the Danny Tenaglias or Armand Van Helden of this world suddenly go through this massive exposure of being the business at the time, and will milk it and pump up their fees to such an enormous level because they know that their records are going to be played in all the key clubs the label wants to get to.'

Despite remixers frequently being used as proxy producers, having points (a percentage of sales) on a remix is still a rarity, even top stars work for a fixed price per track. Armand Van Helden tells it like it is: '...it's because the amount of time and phone calls you have to put in to collect your points is a nightmare. Even for an artist signed to a label, it's a nightmare. They will hold out 'til the very last minute until you're about to sue them. And it's just a game that all the labels play. It's a part of major label business. Their whole thing is: "Don't sweat nothing until the dire last minute – until we're about to go to court." That's how they work. So me and my manager finally said, "F*** all this drama



Van Helden



Pearson



Kevorkian



Nevins

trying to get paid! Let's just set the rate high to compensate, and just get it flat."

Normal practice is to start work for pitiful money in the hope of a massive hit, then jack up the fees like crazy. Jason Nevins is another mixer-of-the moment, with a list of credits from Aerosmith through Madonna and Justin Timberlake. He famously remixed Run DMC's *It's Like That* for US\$5,000, only to see his mix go on to sell over 3 million.

Nevins came up with the idea of re-crafting *It's Like That*, and shopped his demo to Profile (who had rights to the original). He then got the gig from Sony to remix Run DMC's follow up single *It's Tricky* and, despite having no direct stake in the success of *It's Like That*, countless other opportunities have subsequently come his way because of Run DMC.

'You can make a lot of money with it and it's fun because you get to work with different artists, so that's probably why I wanted to do remixes,' says Nevins now, but warns: 'I've been asked to do some artists that I really don't think are good to do. I think you have to be very careful because people really take notice of it plus the fact, if you do an artist that people don't really like, they may not buy the record anyway. So it's a combination, you have to do the right song with the right artist.'

Howie Martinez of Alchemy concurs. 'That's the whole point of having an agency – we've been offered 50 tracks for Ewan and we've picked 10 of them, 10 mixes for different reasons. The idea of having an agency was to try and secure a bit of longevity by doing different kinds of projects, different mixes, to try and create some stability in what has generally been perceived as quite an unstable part of what producers do,' he says. 'Sometimes they're hot, sometimes they're not, but what I can try and do is create a sort of hunger for mixers. Like with Ewan now, we've stopped him

doing mixes until the end of the year.'

A very few remixers have succeeded in managing themselves and extending their own careers, generally by cultivating an aura of mystique and sticking to a narrow sub-genre they can carve into their own image. Kruder & Dorfmeister are a pair of studio-tokers from Vienna, it's over 7 years since the release of their DJ Kicks remix compilation, but their credibility has remained high, and their names have become synonymous with a particular blend of lush, downtempo, dubby electronica.

They've sold hundreds of thousands of *The K&D Sessions* double remix CD on their own G-Stone imprint, but the main trick to their success has been in turning themselves into artists, and in avoiding audience overload by diversifying with individual side projects *Tosca* and *Peace Orchestra*. Jason Nevins is now turning himself into an artist as well, with his *I'm In Heaven* (featuring Holly) creating a buzz in airplay charts across Europe.

A bigger slice of the points pie was the motive for many hip-hop artists in the US to leave majors for indies, or to form their own imprints (from Dr Dre leaving Death Row Records to form *Aftermath* to Del The Funky Homosapien leaving *Elektra* to release via his own *Hieroglyphics Imperium*). Commissioning remixes is a way for majors to tap into the vibe without the strain of a development cycle. It's easy to see how this scenario could lead to a boom and bust for the main protagonists.

Armand Van Helden describes the process. 'I was doing mixes... for about US\$25,000. And that's high, but pretty much what the best people were getting. But what happened was, I wanted to do a hip-hop album, and I said, "I don't want to do any remixes. Set the price crazy high so nobody will bite." And people bit. So, we were like, "If they're going to bite at US\$30,000, let's go

to 35. And then if they're gonna bite at 35, let's go to 40." And that's how it ended up.'

Howie Martinez accepts that this is inevitable. 'They are playing the industry at its own game. If the label is stupid enough to pay US\$35,000 for a mix, then good luck to Armand – take the money, mate! I can't imagine it will do his long-term career any good – but good luck!' Martinez is attempting to bring management tools already established for artist and producer representation into the scrappy world of the remixer. 'I try and insist the remixer has some sort of continuing income in case his remix starts really generating money. If the remix is synchronised to an advert, and it's earning money for the artist, then I think it's only morally fair that the remixers have a slice of that pie. One of Ewan's mixes got licensed to a Pringles advert. The artist and the label were going to get all that sync fee. We argued with the publisher and the label, that as the artist wouldn't have received any money at all without our remix, Ewan was entitled to a percentage of the income that is generated from that. With independent labels I insist on it – I won't let any independent label not sign off on our agreement.'

Guy Bolland sees remixing as a possible route to career-improvement. 'It's hard to get hold of the parts and tracks, but it's a really useful exercise for an engineer to progress his career. For example, the people doing the Sugarbabes record approached maybe a dozen guys just to generate beats – only beats – for the record. Then there's the classic thing of just getting hold of the a cappella – the Missy Elliotts of the world – and putting it through some filters and cutting it about.' Martinez also encourages his less experienced remixers to do on-spec work for established artists. 'It gets their names around A&R departments, and it looks good on their show reels. There's nothing worse than sending out show reels of underground independently-signed tracks that no one has ever heard the originals of. If the remixer is working with a track that is familiar, then everyone can understand what the remixer has brought to the mix.'

There is, however, a rather dark shadow over the remixing world at the moment. Until recently, demand has been driven by the need to include extra value tracks with single releases. The move to online downloads (*Resolution v2.6*) and the EMI propelled two-track/£1.99 single initiative, threaten to shrink a large chunk of the market.

'I think it will virtually destroy remixing,' warns Howie Martinez. 'You've got to remember remixes are 100% recoupable against the artist's royalty, so this will leave a remix on its own as merely a promotional tool. Lots of remixes do make it onto a more commercial format. As a manager of a band I'm totally in favour of two track singles, but as a remixer's manager I'm a bit apprehensive about the future.'

For those who have already chiselled their names into the register of remix legends, there will always be 'B to C' (back to the clubs). As I write, Francois Kevorkian is playing a 4-hour set at Amsterdam Studios (Cinetunes zal deze avond een exacte replica van studio 54 nabouwen!!) ... to gain VIP admission to this replica of legendary Studio 54 (possibly absent the bathroom garnish, if not the mirror ball) Francois allowed punters to guess his age (49). 'It's the ultimate slacker gig,' said Francois of Djing. 'There's no drums to carry – just a box of records – and you get paid, there's no rehearsal, it's great.' ■



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