



MICHAEL BRAUER

On Playing Your Mixer Like an Instrument

by Jon Regen

5 WAYS TO BRAUERIZE YOUR KEYBOARD TRACKS

"This is what I wanted," beams the multiple Grammy-winning mix engineer from amidst the glow of his NASA-sized collection of vintage outboard gear at Electric Lady Studios. "I wanted a job where I'm totally responsible for my success or failure. If a mix sucks, I'm failing."

It's hard to imagine that as possible. Brauer has applied his sonic sizzle to recordings by Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Coldplay, John Mayer, Ben Folds, and Paul McCartney. Brauer's mixes brim with kinetic energy, as if they're performances in their own right. "I had to find a way to turn the console into an instrument," says the former drummer. "This turned out to be way easier than playing drums, because I only had to use two hands, as opposed to two feet and two hands!"

"I stopped drumming because although I didn't know what I wanted, I knew what I *didn't* want—to be playing six sets a night in a bar at 50 years old. I didn't want to own a music store or sell gear. I had recurring nightmares about such things. It was like a Hitchcock movie."

Brauer's fascination with recording began while he was still drumming. "In the band, I recorded all our rehearsals using just a couple of mics. I learned to balance sounds simply by having various people hassle me about what they couldn't hear. On the road, I recorded our shows. I was also the sound guy—I'd have all that gear next to me."

A recording course at the Eastman School of Music set Brauer on his way. "I had no idea what anything meant—wet, dry, EQ, cardioid, omni, out-of-phase—but I wrote it all down. I wanted to know if I could still be musical. I didn't want to be a drummer, but I still wanted to play. One night, [legendary producer] Phil Ramone was around, and I'm watching him move his hands, and thinking, 'Wow, he's *playing* the desk!' A light bulb went on."

Magic at Mediasound

Brauer would cut his teeth at the revered midtown Manhattan recording facility Mediasound, housed in a converted church on 57th Street.

"I started off in shipping," he says. "Mediasound was where guys like Bob Clearmountain were at the time. Shipping was like being an intern—you'd deliver packages to record companies and do odd jobs. I was 25 years old and starting all over again, but I didn't care. I knew what I wanted, and I was in heaven. After 5 P.M., I offered to help on sessions. Harvey Goldberg and Michael Delugg took me under their wings and became my mentors. I basically lived at the studio. Not long after, I got hired as an assistant engineer, got assignments to do little overdubs, and eventually, to engineer my own sessions. Right from the beginning, I just sat at

the mixing desk and felt like I was a puppeteer, like I was controlling all these musician marionettes.


"It was all about learning the 'instrument,'" he continues. "My biggest problem back then, ironically, was that I just couldn't hear compression. I'd ask people and they'd play me different compressors, but I couldn't hear the difference. Then one day, it just *clicked*. I thought, 'Wait a minute, this is about an attitude. And *tone*.' I learned how to transfer that irreplaceable spontaneity of being in a killing band, using different pieces of gear and the console to bring songs to life. I wanted to make records that felt like they were being performed onstage. That was my approach right from the get-go."

Brauerize

Brauer's signature sound began with improvising multi-bus compression under fire, and grew into a stable of techniques he collectively calls "Brauerizing."

"I learned the traditional way of mixing," he says, "where you pre-compress a source, then bring it up on the console. No matter what you did with fader, up or down, it was compressed at a given level. Then we'd mix into a stereo compressor, and that worked well for a long time. Until I was mixing Aretha Franklin's 'Freeway of Love.' Narada Michael Walden, the producer, wanted way more bottom end. As I added bottom, the vocals got smaller, because compressors react to lows more than to highs. So I'd try to bring the vocals up, and the bass would get smaller. Nobody else seemed to be having this problem, but I was, and it was terrifying. I had to find a solution.

"I was working at Right Track Studios in New York, and they'd just gotten an SSL 6000, a movie console. It had three stereo busses, from which you could choose, then sum to the final stereo bus. And I thought, 'This is like being in a band. The drummer and bassist can get a sweet sound without the guitarist or vocalist pushing them around. I immediately started thinking about doing different things to each bus. That was the beginning of what I called multi-bus compression.' Other Brauerizing techniques include parallel compression, where a signal is multed to two channels—one compressed and the other unprocessed; and sending a lead vocal to multiple compressors, then blending their outputs to taste on separate tracks.

On page 46, we'll show you five ways to Brauerize your own keyboard tracks, then take you on a tour of his enviable signal chain. Brauer's parting advice: "Music is always changing. I can't mix records today the way I did five years ago. You have to do the opposite of what you're comfortable doing. The mind has to stay fresh." 

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Video: Mixing master class with Michael Brauer.



Tons more gear photos from Brauer's studio.



Extended interview on our site.

5 WAYS TO BRAUERIZE YOUR KEYBOARD TRACKS

1. Elton John Shimmering Piano



Try a Universal Audio LA-2A compressor, or its Powered Plug-In equivalent for your UAD card, on piano, then boost frequencies around 8kHz with a Pultec or similar EQ.

2. Ben Folds Piano



Treat the piano as above, but also boost EQ frequencies around 4kHz, to impart a brassier sound.

3. Distorted Organ



Try a tube overdrive processor

to inject realistic grit into your clonewheel sound. Brauer likes Thermionic Culture's Culture Vulture. In the software

realm, amp modelers such as IK AmpliTube work wonders if used judiciously.

4. Woozy Wurlly



To compliment the percussive nature of most Wurlly parts, try adding delay to impart added rhythmic interest. Universal Audio's UAD replica of Roland's RE-201 Space Echo is great for recapturing that vintage vibe.

5. The Rhodes Less Traveled



Recreate the revered Dyno-My-Piano Rhodes sound by adding a heavy dose of EQ, boosting frequencies around 2,500Hz, and attenuating some of the lower mids.

GILLIGAN'S TOYLAND

(1) TASCAM DV-RA1000HD High Definition Audio Master Recorder. (2) Waves L2 hardware limiter. (3) Sonnox OXFORD SUPRESSER. (4) iZotope RX software interface. (5) DRUMAGOG 5 software interface.

"Our platform is Pro Tools HD8 on a Mac Pro," says Brauer's assistant, Ryan Gilligan, "with 24 channels in and 64 out to our SSL 9000J console. The stereo out of the SSL goes to Rack 5 [at left] for processing with stereo compressors or EQ's. Rack 5 runs into a Pendulum PL-2 limiter to catch odd transients, then an Amek box that distributes the mix to monitoring on the desk, our Prism A/D converters, and Pro Tools for a backup print. We capture the main mix on a **TASCAM DV-RA1000HD** (1) fed by the Prism. A second Prism stereo out with independent sample rate feeds our mastering chain—a **Waves L2** (2) hardware limiter and prototype Z-Systems limiter printed to an Alesis Masterlink. Everything in the room is clocked by an Antelope Isochrone Trinity."

What about plug-ins? "The first plug we find indispensable is the **Sonnox SuprEgger** (3). I use it on nearly every mix for de-essing and removing plosives or guitar squeaks. Another tool that makes my life easier is **iZotope RX** (4). It's unreal how it can remove unmusical noises without affecting anything around them. I'm also looking forward to **Drumagog 5** (5) by WaveMachine Labs."