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ELECTRONIC MUSICIAN

**10 Tips for Your Next
Album Release**

**8 Virtual Guitars
and Basses Reviewed**

**New Column:
Gear Geek**



The Glitch Mob

Adventurers in Electronica

A PENTON MEDIA
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EMUSICIAN.COM



Carmen Rizzo
Tracks His Latest
on the Road

FEATURES



Cover photo by Dove

COVER STORY

32 CONTROLLER FREAKS

Having built a cult following based primarily on their high-energy live performances, The Glitch Mob finally took time away from touring to record their debut album, *Drink The Sea*, a collection of instrumental music highlighted by meticulously layered synths and pounding, almost cinematic-sounding drums and percussion. *EM* sat down with the trio to talk production, software, controllers, live vs. studio, and much more.

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Although nothing replaces a real player, virtual guitars and basses are surprisingly complex and comprehensive MIDI alternatives that offer a huge variety of sonic choices. We looked at eight such instruments from companies including Best Service, MusicLab, Impact Soundworks, Manytone, Native Instruments, and Spectrasonics.



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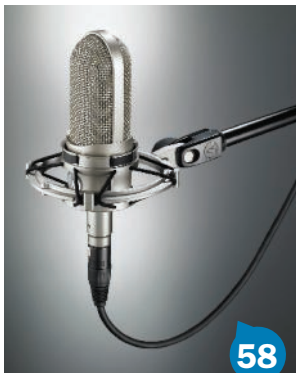


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Photo by Dan Goldwasser

Jason Graves during a string recording session at Skywalker Sound (Marin County, Calif.).

Summing the Strings

Jason Graves' symphonic approach to composing for videogames

In the mid-'90s, composer Jason Graves got his start in L.A. working on reality television, movie trailers, ad spots, and more. He gained valuable experience in working on tight deadlines, and he made a name for himself in the area of symphonic scoring. But he began to feel creatively trapped. So in 1998, he moved back to his hometown of Raleigh, N.C., to break into the indie film world. An acquaintance familiar with his orchestral work needed help on a videogame, *King Arthur* (Konami, Krome Studios, 2004), that required 30 minutes of original music. "The creative freedom I was looking for was handed to me on a plate," Graves says. "After that first game, I started thinking, 'I want to do music for games,' and it just took off."

A few years back, there were limitations on how much space in games was allotted to audio tracks. Is that still the case? The nice thing about music is that it still takes up a lot less space than graphics. You can compress the music down while keeping the overall quality. I'd say the biggest limitation is the developer, depending on how much they're willing to invest in technology to have the music play back in the proper way. In

a lot of games, the music starts and stops, and that's pretty much it. With the implementation itself, from a technical standpoint, there really isn't much of a limitation in terms of what the music can do or what I end up being asked to compose. Some games have four or five or even six different stems of music streaming in real time at the same time during the game, and the game engine is mixing them up and down.

Are you creating multiple stems based on game play?

Yes. Either I'm composing one big piece of music that gets deconstructed into stems, and then the developer can say, "This one track that just has a synth pad and a quiet drum playing, I'll use that for ambient exploring in this area." The other end of the spectrum is they ask for four layers of music that slowly build up in tension or something like that. In the end, I'm responsible for creating music that can be placed anywhere and in different combinations. The more fluidly you can switch between those different stems, the better game-play experience.

With so many different possibilities of game-play, are you scoring to picture, or

do you have a mental image of what the game is and go from there?

Eighty percent of the game music, I get a walk-through, and they tell me, "We need music here, here, and here." The other 20 percent is usually an in-game event, where the timing is never going to change. They both have their own challenges and are fun in their own ways. I love the film and television aspect of scoring to picture and having these hit points handed to you. You know the music has to react in a certain way. The nice thing about in-game music is that there are no hit points; it's literally, "We need two minutes of ambient music, and you can do whatever you want."

Did you have a professional studio designer come in for your home studio?

A friend of mine recommended Wes Lachot. The original reason I was interested in working with Wes is that he lives 30 miles from my house. I wanted to work with somebody I could meet with face-to-face. The fact that he designs world-class recording studios was the reason I hired him. I also had a chance to go to some of his other studios with him and listen to the room, listen to the speakers he was recommending. His

control rooms are known for their really wide sweet spots and flat sound. He's so passionate, too. That's the kind of guy I want to work with.

What speakers did he recommend?

Dynaudio M3As with Bryston amps and crossovers. Wes loves the combination of these speakers with the Bryston crossovers and amps. He's custom-building the acoustic treatment for the room around that particular combo.

Did you install a console?

I transitioned a couple years ago from having an external mixing board and lots of outboard effects to doing almost everything in the box now, which is great. For me, it was a matter of being able to recall everything at a moment's notice. Plus, with really good converters and the emulation software available, it really does make a difference from where it was five years ago.

I've got the Apogee Symphony System with the AD/DAX converters and I also have an SPL MixDREAM analog summing mixer. So everything that I'm recording and playing gets converted back to analog, warmed up, summed together and put back into the computer. It's the best of both worlds: You have the flexibility of digital but you still have the sound of the analog world.

What DAWs do you like to work with?

I use [MOTU] Digital Performer mostly when I'm composing for orchestra. When I'm doing techno or pop for a commercial, then I'm usually in [Apple] Logic. If I'm dealing with live recordings, then I'm posting in [Avid] Pro Tools. [Graves uses the Sibelius notation program.]

What is it about these platforms?

With orchestra, with real detailed composition—lots of lines, lots of massaging continuous controller data, trying to make the orchestra in a computer sound like a real orchestra—for me you can't beat Digital Performer; it's just intuitive and I've been using it for 20 years.

Logic has such a strong pop background with its preset templates, virtual instruments, drum machines, and synths, it just seems naturally intuitive for that style. And then Pro Tools, if you're recording anything multitrack—especially in these big studios, like AIR Studios or Skywalker Sound—they're always recording in Pro Tools. It's easier for me to open it up in that and use the same settings that they have. I can integrate it back into my system without too much hassle.

All three platforms are really capable within their own rights; they have so many options. It's just about figuring out which ones you want to use and which parts of the software makes you a stronger composer or arranger or mixing engineer.

Most of your work is orchestral in nature. Are you recording live orchestras or starting with samples?

Even if the end result is a live orchestral recording, the score gets mocked up in the world of MIDI using orchestral samples. One of the things I've been spending a lot of time on the past few years is my own orchestral sample sessions.



Graves' latest videogame adventure: *City of Heroes Going Rogue*

I'll record my own brass or woodwind or strings, and build custom instruments in [Native Instruments] Kontakt, basically filling in the holes of the commercially available libraries and hopefully getting a more unique sound as a result. There are a lot of projects that don't have the budget for a live orchestra, so it's essential to have the flexibility my own custom sample library affords. I can offer clients something that sounds relatively close to a live sound but they don't have to worry about paying to hire a huge orches-

tra. And a lot of that custom sample work isn't 60 players on a giant scoring stage. I do a majority of it locally with a few select woodwind and brass players.

For the bigger projects, we know going into it that we're recording live orchestra, so I just swap things out: All the MIDI parts get muted and we use live players.

Speaking of orchestral work, your most recent game project, *City of Heroes Going Rogue* (NCsoft, Paragon Studios, 2010), is mainly strings. How did you get involved in this project?

The audio director, Adam Kay, and I have worked together on a couple of other games and we always have a great time. This is an expansion; it's a MMORPG [massively multiplayer online role-playing game]. There was a lot of music in there that they wanted to update and bring into the more cinematic realm. I think that's the main reason why Adam came to me. It was all samples—no orchestra budget—but I used a lot of my custom samples and played a lot of percussion on it. As usual, I started with the main theme; I'm a thematic guy. I was able to take the theme and incorporate it into different parts of the game. There are four or five areas in the game you travel to, so we tried to give each of those areas its own sound, harmonically speaking or with instrumentation.

I was asked to compose a piece of music that would tie in all of our thematic references, our harmonic references, and instruments, and we could extrapolate the rest of the music for the game out of this main theme. I did a 4-minute piece of music that develops and states the theme in a couple different ways, because the whole point of the game is you can be one of the good guys and then you can switch over and be with the bad guys, and switch back. So there was this concept of choice and I was trying to figure out how to musically explain that: There's a lot of musical ambiguity in how the piece ends; it's up in the air. But that's what is great about it because it is something different and that's what always attracts me to a new gig. *