

Brian Transeau, AKA BT – dance music visionary, enthusiastic film scorer, and prolific beta tester – cusses Midi, loves software synthesis, and uses two 02Rs as digital patchbays. Christopher Holder listens.

T's eyes lit up when I approached him brandishing a copy of AudioTechnology. "This is a gear head magazine for techno dweebs, right?"It didn't take long before it became clear that BT (christened Brian Transeau) definitely counts himself among the ranks of the aforementioned dweebs. That's his speciality. He spends countless hours designing sounds and programming synths, he beta tests for Emagic, Creamware, and Digidesign (among others) and he's been known to wade into his ProTools rig to the point where he doesn't surface again for days. The result is some of the most sublime dance music around, as well as a burgeoning film scoring career – he scored Doug Lyman's Go, and the soon to be released Gene Hackman/Morgan Freeman vehicle, Under Suspicion.

BT is definitely one of the few 'follow me' dance producers in the world today, and the others (Sasha, Paul Van Dyk, and Moby) he counts as close friends and collaborators. His latest release, *Movements in Still Life*, happily puts the 'progressive' back into progressive house music. It's well produced, there's genuinely good musicianship evident, the vocals are strong, and the beats and programming are obviously painstakingly crafted. If you had any doubts then read on. Actually before you read on, know this: BT is a garralous, friendly Yank, not a tight-lipped, suspicious Pom – bear this in mind and the following story will make more sense.

BT: I haven't used Midi on one of my recordings for five years now. Every one of the tracks have been 100 percent done in audio. I manually time correct everything, almost in the same way that (Steinberg's) ReCycle or (Sonic Foundry's) Acid does for you automatically. I play lines and sequences into ProTools and make every-



thing literally sample accurate - I'll take the waveform and cut and place the notes right on the beat and stretch the note to get the next note right on the following down beat. I do this on every 16th note on every bar, on every track, on every song, and have done for five years.

Christopher Holder: Did you and Midi have some sort of falling out? What's the problem?

BT: I've had these T-shirts made for me and my friends which says, 'Fuck Midi' in huge letters. Why? Because it's so shit. It's a slow protocol, man, your mouse is faster! It can't keep your track in time. It's a totally bogus protocol that should have been done away with years ago. Until we start to go optical, or Firewire... anything man... at least put modem cables in the back of our synths, that's faster for fuck's sake. And the thing is with dance or any club music is that all these Midi timing problems are exponentially exaggerated when you put it in the context of a club. If your kick drum and your bass is flamming [i.e. they're not dead in sync], you might let it pass when you're monitoring on your NS10s, but in a big space like a club you will hear that flam pronounced tenfold.

We did a test, and the Emagic guys will kill me for telling you this but fuck 'em, they're cool guys they'll understand (and I love Logic by the way!). We generated a 16th note metronome click at 120BPM from my Korg Trinity, which as far as Midi goes is reasonably accurate. We fired the click off to a [Emagic] Unitor 8 using a USB connection, and we recorded it to ProTools. I wish I could show you the garbled mess that this Unitor 8 sound file looked like. We were getting clicks at close to 100ms out of time. 100ms! And this is at 120BPM using a fucking metronome! Try using Midi to anywhere near its supposed capacity? Forget about it, it's all over the place, completely pear-shaped. Also we found that running Midi off your modem serial port is a lot more reliable than USB. People don't know this, but USB is like 10 times worse than a standard serial port hookup. Everyone will tell you the exact opposite, but if you don't believe me, then test it yourself. [NB: AT concurs that a USB connection will indeed be slower than a serial port hookup, this much is generally accepted by 'the experts'. It should be noted that BT's experiment has nothing to do with any unreliability on the Unitor 8's part. In fact, the Unitor 8 is generally accepted as one of the tighter Midi expander/sync units around – CH.]

I'm turning a lot of my friends onto this problem. I've got them setting up 'hybrid' systems now. For example, I've got Sasha doing half audio, half Midi. He'll be doing a bunch of stuff off his Akai MPC3000 and will actually sequence off that and run it live in tandem with vocals, and instruments, etc. in Logic. Which is a lot tighter than just doing it all as Midi.

CH: Especially when you're aim is rock solid breakbeats.

BT: Totally man. It can't happen. Dance music's backbone is the kick and

bassline - whether it's house, techno, drum&bass, whatever. House music generally uses a straight up 'four on the floor' kick pattern, and the bassline is mostly off the beat, so you don't have so much of a problem with the flamming thing. Listen to breakbeat tracks, and you have these huge subsonic basslines with a thinner, punchier sounding kick drum, which you hear more in the low mids rather than as a sub sound. The flamming on that combination is stupid when you listen to it in a club. For that

reason I still have friends who are working off Ataris, and the timing on those are a lot better than a PC or a Mac. Much, much better. This Midi problem needs to be addressed and sorted out.

CH: You mightn't have used a Midi lead in five years but I notice from your album sleeve that you're into your software synths.

BT: Yeah, that's where my head's currently at. My dream is to have all my synthesisers as plug-ins. I want a Korg Trinity plug-in, an ARP 2600 plug-in, a EMS VCS3 plug-in... And the good thing about these software synths running under ProTools 5.0 now, is that they can be addressed by ProTools with its Midi functionality – it's

sending Midi clock to your plug-ins – so they all lock and they're sample accurate.

CH: Talk to me some more about software synthesis. I think there's still a level of suspicion about how good it is.

BT: The best software synths are as good as any hardware equivalent – synths like the Vibra 9000 from Koblo, the Access Virus or Reaktor by Native Instruments are amazing. Also, even though I'm a Mac guy, I've set up a PC to primarily use for a lot of weird software synthesis. I have a program called Plas Modular. But there's a bunch of them. Another thing which I've really been into in the last year or so is granular synthesis. I'm big into that shit.

CH: Did you go for Symbolic Sound's Kyma granular synthesis workstation then?

BT: No, but I know a guy who has one. Bill Rust, who runs a company called Spectral Noize, who do sample CDs. He's one of these guys who sits for days programming in code. I've gone to his house a couple of times to do sound creation days. He's just brilliant, that Kyma can do some stunning shit – barber pole filters... things you can't do anywhere else.

CH: Is that where you get that odd stuttering, shuddering vocal effects on Mercury and Solace?



BT: That one is different. I timestretched the end of Jan's vocal, cut it up into slices, banged it all together as one audio file, exported that out of my computer as an AIFF file into my Kurzweil K2500 sampler and put a two octave pitch bender on it. No, the program I use mostly is Reaktor which has got some insane granular synthesis-style stuff on it, and there's another one, which Richard

['Aphex Twin'] James put me

onto called CDP. It's an obscure program with this horrible user interface, but some of the most unbelievable sounds come out of it. The effect is like particles or clouds – traditional grain synthesis stuff – but a different means to an end. Very strange sounds.

CH: I know that when I visited Autechre [Warp Records' purveyors of techno-style weirdness] they had some bizarre software they were into.

BT: Those guys use a program that they don't tend to talk about much, and it's something I use as well called Superglider. You program in commands using a more rudimentary form of C++. Superglider has got other strange features, like what they call 'spawn generators', where a random event can spawn a series of other random events. So you can program the most random,

mutant sequence of events. You might start with a basic building block, like a sine or a saw wave, but you can build incredibly sophisticated oscillator sync sounds which use multiple sync points. The sounds I've got out

of Superglider are absolutely stunning. Between that and grain synthesis, that's really where my head's been at. You can hear my granular synth work on the vocal in Dreaming. I've shagged that vocal left, right and centre with Reaktor and CDP. And you have these mad particle clouds which will appear in stereo for a second, that I'll sweep around or O-sound [3D stereo enhancer] them around and they're gone. You'll hear reverse vocal trails that will pull up into the vocal, followed by stutter edits and then revert back to normal again.

CH: I think your album works where others don't, in that the tracks don't just end up sounding like a collection of plug-ins. In short, I think that plug-ins can overshadow the song.

BT: I totally agree with you. It's about finding ways of using these tools so that a) it feels like it should happen, b) it compliments the composition, and c) so you can't tell what you've done it with. That's why some producers are funny about telling people what their tools are. but I don't believe in that at all. I sit for hundreds of hours making my own

> patches, programming my own stuff, and I know my tracks will sound different to x, y, and z producers who use the exact same gear. So I think it's really productive for us to talk about what we're using, then kids can check it out, and that's how we keep getting cool new music. They'll find out something new to do with it. CH: Other plug-ins you're getting into?

BT: There's a bunch of programs that I like, especially standalone programs. One's called SoundHack.

This is something to definitely look into. It does some weird spectral extractions where you can split a sound up into its component harmonics, and get these ghosted sounds. You run a loop through it or a vocal and you get

this... It's an intangible thing, you've got to check it out. And it does this other "haven't process called phase vocoding which is one of my favourite things in the world. used Midi in Reaktor does something similar using grain synth, but this is more on the timeone of my stretching tip. But what it does isn't a linear time stretch, it takes and stretches recordings for all the harmonics differently, so you get this spectral blurring. It means you can five years take a 0.5 second sample and make it 30 minutes long. You know how severe time stretching sounds metallic? Well, this is a beautiful flowing cloud of sound.

now"

CH: So if you had to summarise, how has the whole software studio way of working changed things for you?

BT: For starters, putting together a track takes me twice as long. Only 18 months ago a track would take me five days to finish. But now that I'm working almost entirely in audio I have so much more control over the end product, and tracks take longer. If you listen to a track like Madskillz, it's physically impossible to do that sort of editing if it wasn't in audio. There's a vinvl scratch

solo, which is composed of four takes of scratching, which I've taken and effected. I've made over 2000

slices, something ridiculous like that, in a 16-bar period. I'll take a head of a scratch, do 16th note triplets with a fade down and fade up so it doesn't pop, batch process that so it's a new file, flange it, put some lo-fi effect on it and go to the next thing. Next, I'll put a delay throw on it... and it's mad, you couldn't possibly do all that except in audio. That's my world now.

CH: The new album relies heavily on breakbeat rhythms. Can you talk us through the process of putting together one of your breakbeats?

BT: What I do is start with a couple of loops. I'll grab something off vinyl, or a loop I've recorded live, whatever it is – I'll take it off a DAT or out of Sonic Foundry's Acid program. I'll settle on a tempo I'm working at, experiment with some loops and get a vibe happening. I'll dump each loop one by one, via the S/PDIF output on my PC's Creamware card, or from my DAT via AES/EBU into ProTools. Once it's in ProTools I like to EQ every part of the loop. Especially if you're coming off vinyl, you don't want any 40Hz or 20Hz rumble. So I'll shelve off the extreme low end, then I'll compress the loop as a whole and cut it up into its component pieces - kick drum one, kick drum two, open hi-hat, snare etc. Then I'll take those pieces and EQ the bass out of the snare and hi-hats, but leave the bass and the kick drum alone. Then I'll bounce all the constituent parts back together and time correct them. After I have four or five loops like that I'll start using plug-ins and get

into some weird shit, or I'll use a Mutator or Sherman filter bank, and put together a rhythm from there. At this point I usually bounce all the various rhythm lines down to two or three stereo tracks, so if I want to do some crazy edits after the track's been arranged, I can save time by not replicating the edits over and over.

CH: How have you got your studio set up?

BT: My whole studio is patched digitally, including my samplers, everything. I've got two Yamaha 02Rs and I basically use them as digital patchbays, which is terrible to say, but I love going digital.

CH: What digital protocol are you mostly using?

BT: A real combination, which is why I needed a weird digital patchbay, which interfaces between all of the various digital flavours. There's some optical, some TDIF stuff, some S/PDIF stuff, AES/EBU, everything. Interfacing isn't the problem, the hard part is word clocking the whole studio. So I've got a Black Burst Generator from a company called VAC. It's a little \$200 box which feeds RS-170S spec'ed 'black burst' into a MOTU Digital

Timepiece, which in turn sends clock. That's my house sync, it sends clock to all the digital gear.

CH: Finally, have you got an inspirational story about how you got your first break in the industry?

BT: Yeah, I have one of those. After studying music at university I became a teaboy at a studio called Rust, in Hollywood. That was a great experience. One night a producer called Hurby Luv Bug, who used to produce all of Salt'n'Pepper's records, was working on some stuff and his E-mu SP1200 sampler broke. My biggest piece of gear at the time was my Akai MCP60, so I piped up and told them I had my drum machine in the car and maybe I could help. And he was like, 'fuck off kid', but I insisted. Hours later, after they couldn't get a rental, they finally let me get my MPC60, and I ended up doing programming on a couple of tracks for that record - big ones, like Respect Yourself. I never got a credit for them, but that was my first gig. I think that's the way it is for most people starting out - I'm not resentful about it, it's paying vour dues. AT

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• Reaktor: www.native-instruments.com

- SoundHack: http://shoko.calarts.edu/~tre/tech.html
- CDP: www.bath.ac.uk/~masjpf/CDP/CDP.htm
- Vibra 9000: www.koblo.com
- Access Virus: www.digidesign.com
- Kyma: www.SymbolicSound.com