READER'S PROJECT

PETER BENNBORN PROJECT

Peter Bennborn produces jazz and funk in collaboration with musicians from all over the world. We asked him to share his story.

I started playing the piano at the age of 11 and immediately became more engrossed in making my own music rather than playing that of others. In my teens I played on my Wurlitzer, sometimes with my friends, recording sessions with a cassette recorder. A lot has happened since then ...

Once I got more active a few years ago after the music had been more or less dormant over an extended period, I updated myself of the current technology and software. I was attracted to the idea of using a recording software – in combination with software synthesizers and effects. Stability and portability were important elements, acting as an extension of my creativity while maintaining a focus on the music rather than the technology. I subsequently chose to work with Propellerheads Reason.

I produce all types of music – whatever takes my fancy. My starting point is probably jazz, which for me is a wide expression for all that swings, but with space for improvisation, interesting harmonies and a sentiment somewhere between Swedish melancholia and Brazilian bittersweetness. However, I am also influenced by my classical piano schooling to compose pure piano pieces, albeit happily composed through improvisation. Variation is the spice of life!

While I initially only created pieces based on chord progressions I developed on the piano, my inspiration today comes from a melody line I wake up with in my head; a drum rhythm; a sound patch on the synthesizer or a sentence. From there I work my way back to the chord structure. I often decide on the genre

before the actual inspiration hits me. I simply decide to make a piece of Latin Jazz; Jazz Funk; Rock or whatever it may be. The inspiration for this in turn often comes from something I've heard and liked.

Last autumn, a friend invited me to see Chaka Khan at the "Hamburger Börs" venue in Stockholm. I had no expectations but Chaka was on top form, accompanied by an extremely tight band. Her delivery of Rufus' old hit "Butterfly" was brilliant - a modern version with a smooth backbeat. This inspired me to such an extent that I decided to make a soul-funk song in the spirit of Chaka Khan. I broached the challenge by breaking down Chaka Khan's version of "Butterfly" into its individual elements. What I primarily retained was the number of beats per minute – 90 bpm – and the rhythm and baseline in a combination that I was seeking for my song. With this as the foundation, I was inspired to improvise my way to chords, rhythm and various lyrics to accompany the music. Step by step, with the chords in the verse and the song in the chorus, I developed a feeling for the comprehensiveness that I was looking for. What I had been humming on for the chorus became the working title of the project: "Never turn Me Down". With this phrase as the starting-point, I worked my way backwards to lyrics which, albeit shallow, fit the track. The creativity was flowing, and "Never Turn Me Down" was soon completed. It was a product of software synthesizers and my singing, and good quality in terms of sound. However, it was only a draft as there was so much more to attain musically.

Unique possibilities

Last year I came across the possibility of collaborating over the internet. As a hobby musician you sometimes miss the jam sessions of your youth and the communal creativity that can transpire. In addition, I've also been very aware of the limited possibilities to emulate real instruments with a synthesizer, including the feeling and variation of a drummer; the bleat of a saxophonist; or an


Peter's home studio is based on Reason 7 and Balance soundcard. Dynaudio DBM50 for monitoring.

electric guitar solo. Furthermore, I was convinced that current day technology could create unique possibilities for cooperation between musicians.

I joined SoundCloud at the start of 2011, primarily to have a copy of my music on the Cloud and to make my music available to friends and family. For 2012, I set myself a target to collaborate with musicians through SoundCloud. I picked up the courage to contact a saxophonist in England to replace my synthesizer saxophone on a jazz funk track. The collaboration was a revelation. I will never again play the saxophone on the synthesizer! It made me realize that the music I had created with emulations of real instruments were, and remain, blue prints. Nothing can replace the feeling, the whim and the unexpected that a fellow musician can contribute.

Since last year, I have collaborated with around 30 musicians from across the world – from USA to Australia: drummers; bassists; guitarists; vocalists; horn blowers etc. To have conducted a musical project with a number of individuals captivated by the
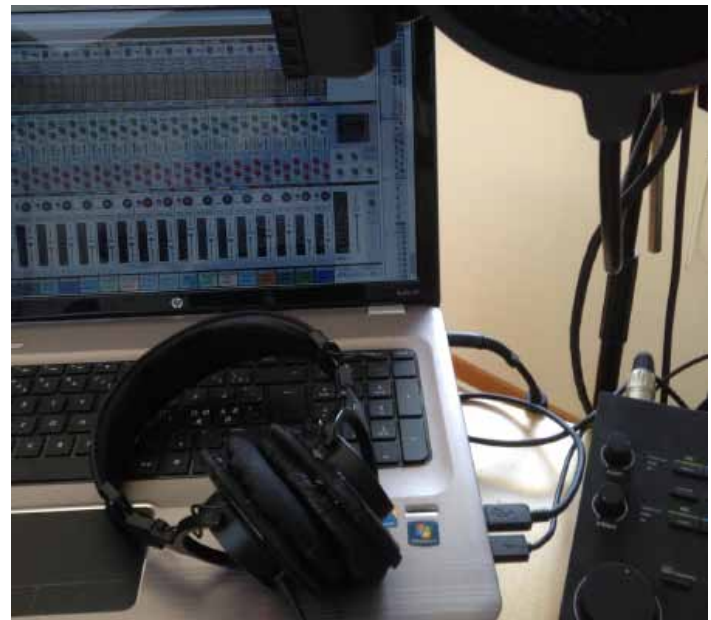
A laptop with Reason 7 delivers all synth and piano patches.

Peter's equipment

Soft ware: Propellerhead Reason 7
Audio interface: Propellerhead Balance
Keyboards: Ensoniq KS-32 Weighted Action MIDI Studio, CME M-Key, Akai Professional LPK25
Microphones: Supreme CU-1, Sennheiser e815S
Monitor speakers: Dynaudio DBM50
Headphones: Sony MDR-V6, Sennheiser HD580Pro, Etymotic ER-4P

Peter chose Reason 7 because "stability and portability were important elements, acting as an extension of my creativity".

same passion for music is reminiscent of a spiritual experience. You feel a deep connection with people you've never met and never spoken to.

No limitations

Today there are no limits to the ability of hobby musicians to express their musical creativity. The comparatively cheap hard and software that are available, coupled with access to musicians across the world via internet, mean you can realize projects whose quality is only limited by your ability to mix and master as well as the musical competency of the contributing musicians.

For this particular project, I already knew from the start who would be my collaborators based on the character of the song and the instruments I had in mind (including drums; bass; guitar; and vocals complemented by my synthesizer). I subsequently contacted the bassist Jonny here in Stockholm; the drummer Walter in Florida; Daniele the guitarist in Italy; and the vocalist Michelle – a Filipino living in Belgium. I sent over my demo and they were all game. The next step was to prepare a package for each musician in the shape of sound files (the demo excluding respective musician's stem as well as solo stems for each instrument and vocals), notation and chords as well as the lyrics. The packages were distributed through Dropbox which I use to exchange files with musicians across the world.

Subsequently, I communicated my ambitions for each part. To Walter in Florida I sent various examples of the back-beat I was after, everything from a simplistically expressed "dum-da, da-

When mixing, Peter targeted an airy sound stage with heavy bass and drums.

dum-da", to YouTube links to various obscure 70s funk bands.

Individual bass stem

For Daniele I indicated the space for riffs and solo, and then referred him to 70s funk. I sent Jonny an elaborate "slap bass" loop that I had compiled and was pleased with, and then asked him to adopt the same sound as Nathan East. Jonny did not agree. I quote: "The current bass part doesn't groove. It just sounds like a keyboard player trying to emulate a bad perception of slap bass, something most people think is the equivalent to funk." Working on this type of project is naturally a matter of give and take, allowing the person who knows his instrument to best interpret his part, while still staying close to my vision. With the right musician, it is exactly this that ensures that the sum is greater than its parts and

that the final product is often significantly better than if I had held the reigns too tight.

For Michelle, who normally sings musical covers on Sound-Cloud, I sent various Chaka Khan tracks to give her a feeling of the sexy and gritty sound I was looking for. One after the other, my musical companions reverted back to me with their respective stems which I integrated progressively in the mix. I settled for a complete stem for the whole drum set instead of working with individual stems for bass drum, hi-hat etc. As per my preference, I obtained several different stems, complementary and alternative, for bass, guitar and vocals. Everyone had delivered. Walter had a subtle, tight back beat. Jonny had managed to highlight the swing I was after, but on his own conditions. Daniele, whose heroes are Joe Satriani and Eddie Van

Halen, had achieved a potent fusion of funk and rock as expected. Michelle had done her homework and more – it was sexy, gritty and included a number of delicious backing vocals.

The mixing began. My goal was to maintain an airy soundstage with heavy bass and drums and other instruments clearly crafted with the vocals floating on top - a clean, non-muffled sound with an element of grittiness in the presentation.

On the outset, I normally work in 96 bit/24 kilohertz. If the project becomes too CPU draining I scale it down to 48/24. The work file size for this kind of project can easily reach two to three gigabytes, which also was the case for "Never Turn Me Down". As a rule I cut the lower frequencies with a high pass filter; nothing goes below 20 hertz and bass and drums reside by their own below 100 hertz. Further, I

"Sen lägger jag på och lägger på, så till slut blev det över 90 kanaler"

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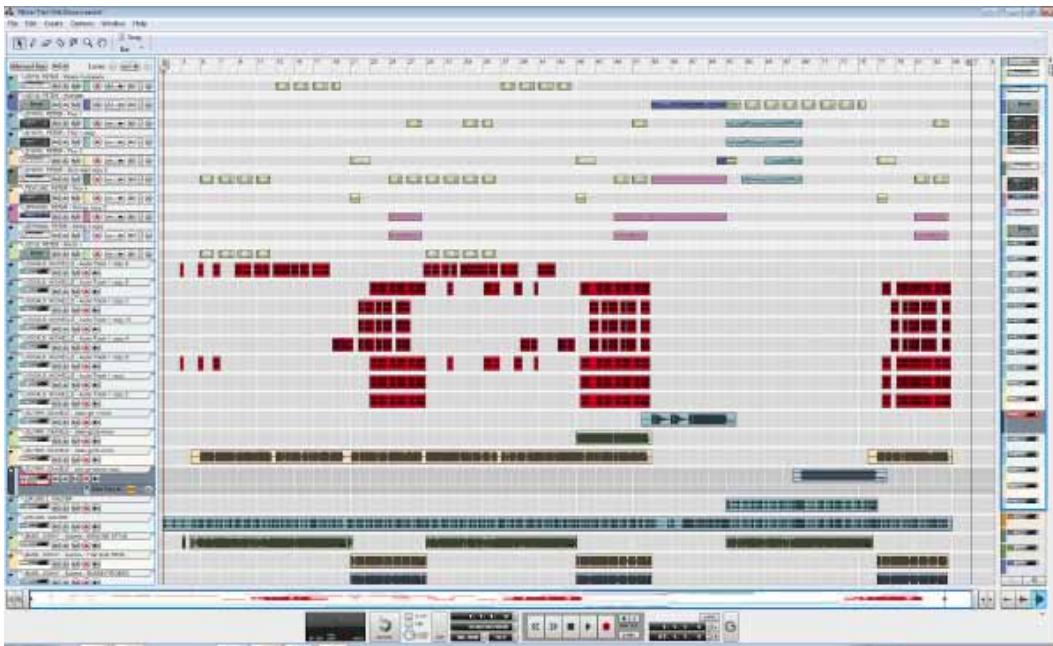
Mastering was carried out with the use of the Master Bus Compressor, MClass Compressor and MClass Limiter.

Peter uses microphones Supreme CU-1 and Sennheiser e815 S.

use each mixer channel's built-in compressor and a number of send effects; reverb, eco, delay and chorus.

Walter's drum stem was of high quality. I raised the 6 kilohertz and 80 Hertz frequencies with circa 8-9 decibel and changed Q at 2 kilohertz to 1.80, to further elevate crispiness and punch in the drums. I also added two different reverbs for airiness. Normally I parallel process the drums but didn't need it this time around, but for solo part between 2:40 and 3:22 where I reinforced the drums with a parallel drum channel, with insert effect preset "Stock-

holm Drum Compression", also with a boost at around 80 hertz.

Jonny, who is a dedicated bass player, worked diligently on the bass sound; five separate stems, a combination of new and old strings, sub-octaves in the chorus and different techniques (slap bass/palm muted). Subsequently it sounded great and really reflected the limitation in playing funky bass on keys. I let the bass (in mono) be panned center as one should, channel compression on and a touch of reverb and chorus to further warm the tone of the bass. When I had created the proper balance between bass and drums; the

"back bone" of the track, I adapted the rest of the instruments and the vocals.

Daniele sent me four different stems. I cut them all at circa 80 hertz and added a good amount of reverb, delay, echo and chorus to give the guitar body. The solo guitar centered, funk guitar to the right and rhythm guitar to the left.

The synths were constructed by a number of different layered sounds in varied combinations and double-ups; different piano, mono and poly synth, strings and texture patches – all in all 9 different patches. My playing style was about accentuating rhythm rather than to drown the track in synth layers, with the targeted airiness in mind.

The solo is built up by three synth patches combined; "Synth Trumpet Lead" and "70's Soloist" centered and "Tubes of Krylon" panned all the way to the right, spiced up with loads of chorus, echo, reverb and extended stereo imaging.

A main focus was the vocals. Normally it is way more interesting to have an engaged, vocal performance included in a track, than not. Michelle had sent me 5-6 different stems; alternate main and secondary stems and choir stems. I spent a lot of time meshing it all together, among other things cutting out brea-

thing sounds. All stems have amounts of different reverbs, echoes, chorus and delay as well as a number of insert effects presets (different eq/compressor combinations) for the final eight separate stems, all cut at circa 150 hertz in order to attain the sought after "zip" and air.

A last measure was to add another, grittier guitar to rough it up a little bit. I contacted British Jerry, who turned down touring with "Krokus" in times past. He put together some rough riffs that I added to the second verse as variation.

More than the parts
I added a measure of Reason's Master Bus Compressor in order to warm up the mix. The mastering chain consisted of an MClass 8 Band Parallel Compression preset and an MClass Limiter. The end result was better than I expected and had hoped for. Everybody added something extra and unexpected that elevated the sum beyond its parts.

The abovementioned sequence sounds like a relatively straightforward, linear process. However, as the initiated know, the compositions must be listened through many times in various environments until the desired sound quality has been attained. It has to sound as good in the studio monitor or the mixing headset as it does in the big stereo, the car, the reference earphones and the mobile phone. In addition, the contributors gave feedback from the 1st draft (after all parts had been received and the first mixing/mastering had been done) and alterations were made until everyone was satisfied. In conclusion, you could say that it is the conception of the music that is the focus for me – not the technology. I rely a lot on standard sounds, and my own hearing as I am an audiophile who dedicates hours to listening to reference recordings.

Music is a passion. The technology sets no boundaries for your vision, which can reach unknown heights through collaborations. You are currently living in the ultimate era to maximize the potential of your musical creativity. So, go forth and create!