

Chris Griffin

producer/engineer talks about how iDrum found a place in his studio



Chris Griffin is at the forefront of engineering, production, and remixing in New York City. Recent projects include Madonna, The Corrs, and Janet Jackson. His compositions are regularly featured on NBC, ESPN, and several international networks. Currently, he works in his studio in Manhattan and is involved in production, remixing, sound-design, and engineering.

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-Chris Griffin

How did you end up in New York?

It was a dream of mine to end up in New York. I watched Sesame Street when I was little. I didn't know where Brooklyn was, but I thought it was cool.

I grew up in Georgia. We had miles of farms, trees, and lakes, but not much else. There were some great musicians coming out of there, though, like Mickey Thomas from Jefferson Starship. Georgia has always had many club and bar bands, and the players were always excellent.

I came up playing saxophone in that culture with a mentor who took me under his wing and taught me jazz standards. Later, I went to college to get a music degree. I thought I was going to be a player, and I did play a lot of sessions in Nashville when I moved there.

Unfortunately, around 1995 the market was saturated with saxophone players and there was little work left. From my experience as a studio player, I found that I liked it better on the engineering side of the glass, so I took an internship at a studio to learn more. One thing led to another, and now I'm in New York making records.

Now that you mention it, what happened to the sax? It used to be popular.

I don't know how much Kenny G can take the blame for it, but he did help turn what was the cool instrument of the 60's, 70's, and 80's to something really sappy and girly. That transformation took hold in about 5 years, and soon nobody wanted sax anywhere near their records.

Who would have thought that the saxophone would be relegated to trombone status in 20 years? When I was in High School, it was the cool instrument - Pink Floyd, Rod Stewart, Foreigner...all the rock bands had sax players.

When did you make the move to New York?

I moved to New York in 2003, after living in Nashville for 10 years. I

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was frustrated with how Nashville worked. There's Contemporary Christian music and Country, but not much else. Although I grew up with Country, it just wasn't me. I was made more for pop and rock. The music I listened to just didn't make sense to anybody in Nashville. I would play on a session, and my natural ideas would never jive with what they were hearing.

Thinking my career in music was over, I took a job with Soundcraft and AMEK part of the Harman Pro group. There, I trained producers on a console designed by Rupert Neve. For my demonstrations, I'd bring in a band or a player to simulate what a live session would be like. The cool thing was that I got to do demos for lots of producers I had always wanted to meet.

During the session, I would pull up a set of my drum sounds, for example, and they would ask me how I knew to do certain things. To me, they were just what I knew how to make, but nobody seemed to like them in Nashville. After that happened about 3 or 4 times, I started investigating. My wife and I put together a plan, I quit my job, and moved to NYC. Within 6 weeks I had mixed a Madonna record. Once you get a Madonna mix under your belt, people start returning your phone calls.

How did that come up?

A friend of mine, Josh Harris, was working on a project with Missy Elliott and Madonna, and invited me over. Once everyone left the session, he turned to me and asked me to mix it. Before I got done mixing, the people at the studio were on the phone with Warner Bros saying, "this is the next single." Sure enough, it was. I was just in the right place in the right time.

With the right skills...

Sure, you need the skills, but if you're not in the right place to use them and nobody's asking you to use them, good luck!

You do a lot of things. You're an engineer, remixer, composer, producer, programmer...

Yeah, I need the money!

Which do you prefer?

I enjoy it all - that's the trouble. But if I had to pick one, I would go for the producer role.

Three weeks ago I was engineering a track with John Legend and Kanye West popped in to produce. I was thinking to myself, "These are some of the hottest guys in the business. This is what I aspire to, but I'm not really feeling alive about it."

Even though engineering is where I've got my credits, I'm feeling it more when I'm playing or producing. Because I was ultimately trying to be a producer and make records, I just learned the necessary engineering skills to make that happen.

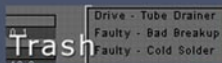
What is your definition of a producer?

I like to think of the producer as the motivating force of the session. The producer is the driver musically, technically, and lyrically. He or she puts the song together by actually producing the song, not just the track, but the whole artful vibe of the session. Some artists might not need that kind of producer, but I enjoy those that do, and we have a great time on sessions!

I'm not really a songwriting-centered producer; I'm more of an engineering producer. I like to really shape how the song sounds throughout the recording process.



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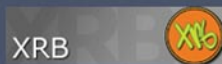
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We listened to your remix of "Shout" and we love how you've transformed the song. Where did the idea for a "Shout" remix come from?

Well, I grew up in the 80's, and that was a big hit. It was part of my consciousness, we all knew that song. I thought I could sing it, so I was drawn to it.

That was what sparked the idea of moving out of Nashville. I've always liked that song, so I sang some vocals and made a track. It ended up getting on a good dance compilation in 2000 and opened some doors for me. People started taking notice and it sort of established my network.

You also did a remix of Angie Paris's "I Wanna Live" that completely re-conceives the song.

Angie and I started talking and found that our ideas about music and life were similar. She asked me to remix the song. The original producer was a great friend of mine, and his only suggestion was to not make it sound like the original. I went in a completely different direction.

In "I Wanna Live," you had a very strong rhythm track, and yet the vocal is perfectly clear. How did you achieve that?

The vocals were the original recordings from the first version of the song. The key is having a great recording to start with. Then, it's very easy to keep it pure and get it to cut through. Even adding all the percussion, the vocal will stay front and center.

You've accomplished so much, but you're able to maintain a modest, unassuming character. How do you do that?

Well, I remember the days when nobody got what I did at all. They'd just tell me to go home. I took a job with Soundcraft because I thought my career was over. The process of being redeemed has been wonderful, and I don't think I'll ever forget it.

On your website you've got some tips about producing. One of them is, "A song is like a cake - three layers of bread, filling between the layers, and the flowery icing on top." Explain what you mean by that.

That's my analogy for a song. A lot of producers will pull up a track and write just any lyrics over it. They don't always understand that the music speaks its own language. As a producer, you have to match the language of the harmonic and rhythmic structure with the lyrics, and vice versa.

The music is saying something on an emotional level that's unspeakable. If you could put this "emotional communication" into words, we wouldn't need music, we'd just write poetry. However, if you make sure your lyrics are saying the same thing as your music, you've got a well-rounded song that comes alive and is going to last. If you don't, people are going to notice something's off, whether or not they can identify it.

It's actually an old jazz thing. I remember listening to horn players play standards where someone would say, "he doesn't know the words." If you play a sad song in a happy or inappropriate way without meaning to, then you just don't know the words. I just took that idea and put it into my production.

Another tip you share is, "Never assume that good music must include lyrics."

Yeah, some of my favorite music doesn't include a singer. Pat Metheny, The Yellowjackets - none of that has any words, but I still get really charged out of listening to that stuff.

Is that something you try to communicate to the people you're working with as a producer?

Most studio players understand this, but some artists require a little more care. After a few good conversations, they pick up on it, because they're already subconsciously in touch with that language. That's why they're artists. It's the radio promotions people I have trouble with. They're concerned about airplay and sales numbers and who's going to buy the record. There's a bit of a disconnect there.

So what is sellable is not always artistic and vice versa?

Think about all the great indie artists who are making excellent art but can't sell a record. For example, Aslyn from England has a great record, but I don't think it did very well. It kind of embodies Elton John, ELO and the Beatles and I really like it. I think it's the record of the century, but nobody bought it.

We understand you've been using iZotope's iDrum. What do you think of it?

At first, I didn't think I really needed it, but then when I got into it, it was very familiar. Much like the TR-808, it makes you program in a certain way. It's really quick for getting my ideas going, so I can layer sounds. I can pick a snare drum and tweak it out and then add another one on the same pattern. I don't have to hook anything up, and I can still have plenty of sounds on their own separate tracks. It's really useful and quick, plus you can play with it on the plane and then later throw it into your Pro Tools session.

So you find having an imposed structure useful?

The main thing I like about it is that you can just make a pattern, and then go through your whole drum library and set up the sounds. Any file you've got will play. I haven't had anything that will do that, so when I was able to pull those drums up that quick, I knew I had a place for it.

Have you been using any of the other iZotope products?

Spectron has become my new favorite. You can do some freaky stuff to a drum loop. The whole idea of using a drum loop is chopping it up, changing the sound, and making it yours. Spectron really helps with that because you can completely change the tonal character of a loop.

I remixed a Kelly Clarkson song recently and pulled a loop off one of BT's sample CDs. Of course, he has a very identifiable sound, so I needed to make it my own. Spectron did that for me.

To learn more about Chris Griffin, visit syntheticmess.com. You can also listen to some of his recent music at myspace.com/syntheticmess.