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Blair Uses ReVoice On Ronson

Recording and Mixing Engineer Joshua Blair recently completed work on Mark Ronson's Coca-Cola Olympic advertising campaign song and single *Move To The Beat* (See Final Cut, page 34). During work on the campaign, Blair tested new SynchroArts software ReVoice PRO. ReVoice PRO is a new audio processing program for professional audio editors, which supports the efficient use of two unique automated processes – Audio Performance Transfer (APT), and Realistic Doubler. APT first captures features (timing, pitch, vibrato, and level) of a 'guide' audio signal. It then transfers the user's selection of those features to a target or 'dub' signal with a different performance. The transfer process incorporates SynchroArts' VocAlign technology.

Realistic Doubler creates a natural sound double track in seconds, and provides controls for modifying timing variations, formats, and vibrato. It also supports extreme parameter variations to create special effects.

Synchro Arts suggests that ideal applications for ReVoice PRO include automatically creating 'tight' double or multiple tracks from multiple takes; modifying the inflection of spoken phrases from one actor's takes to match another take or even a different actor; or creating one or more realistic double tracks from a single input track.

www.synchroarts.com



PAUL MAC talks to Mark Ronson, Joshua Blair, and Jon Clarke about inspiration for the greatest athletic beat.

Association with the Olympic Games brings kudos to brands, and very few brands are as big as Coca-Cola. You only have to look at the Coke Zone website to realise just how committed the company is to the Olympics, and amongst the top billing is the new *Move To The Beat* song and associated TV advert. This project saw Mark Ronson team up with Vocalist Katy B for a track inspired by and – to a large extent created with – the sounds of athletes and their sports.

Mark Ronson kindly agreed to speak with Audio Media about his work on the project, along with Engineer Joshua Blair, and Ben Firth and Jon Clarke of Factory Post, where the ad was mixed.

Coca-Cola approached Ronson with the initial idea to travel the globe recording Olympic athletes, and introduced him to Director Kim Gehrig – who was to make a documentary about the project – and Dennis Baxter,

Ronson approached these elements with the same respect he gives to a fine vocal recording, reasoning that, "If someone I had a lot of respect for came into the studio and recorded a vocal, it's my job as a producer to make it sound the best that it can. I felt like it was the same with these athletes."

To emphasise these recordings in the track, he went about creating 'hero moments', where the athletes come to the fore and contribute their own particular signature to it. Ronson: "When I was watching Dayaan [Dayaan Mohammed Jaffar, Singaporean archer] – his steely determination in pulling back his arrow, I instantly thought of *Lord of the Rings*, where the guy's saving the girl in slow motion and pulling back and releasing the arrow... So there's a moment in the song where it breaks down, and there's this hyper-realised sound of this scratch of the arrow against the bow."

For the arrow flight and impact, Ronson had all the angles covered. "Something I learnt from Dennis is that instead of putting eight mics along the trajectory, if you only put three, 20m apart, you get this sound as the arrow flies across, which becomes a bit more exciting. On the archery targets we put contact mics as well as directional

mics, and then a boom above it, and we ended up getting this sound from the arrow hitting the target, which is as big as any 808 kick that I've ever sampled... So that kick is in the whole track."

Starting Line

The track actually started with a demo created in the studio with Katy B and some generic table tennis and basketball sounds. "I probably thought it was decent at the time," he says of the original demo, "But now it sounds two dimensional."

Then came the original sounds themselves. These, and Ronson's experiences with the athletes, inspired the song. "The song didn't really take shape until the original sounds were in. They started to dictate what the tempo was and what the emotion of the song would be. So it was really important that we went out and got some sounds."

Much of the subsequent studio work on *Move To The Beat* was done at Metropolis, London. "We did a lot of work there," says Ronson, "Tom Elmhirst mixed the record there, tweaking every bit of it to the last minute; and Joshua Blair, the Engineer that I work with in England – we were in there forever tweaking it. We did all the vocals in there... And we recorded the live drums at the Way, which is a studio out in Hackney [London]."

The extensive tweaks were often down to the way the sports sounds interacted with the rest of the track.

Sound Designer for the 2012 London Olympics, as well as many other Olympics and sports events all over the world. "The idea of the project was exciting," says Ronson, "And the opportunity to be part of the London Olympics was also one of the main factors..."

Baxter gave Ronson some valuable advice on location recording and, in particular, capturing the sounds of sports men and women. Then Ronson went off in search of inspiring activity.

Inspirational Audio

He could, of course, have scoured existing libraries for likely sounds, but that would not have given him the insight that he obviously values. "If someone had given me some hard drive with 8,000 sounds on it, I don't think I'd have known where to begin... If I wasn't standing there next to Darius Knight, the table tennis player, while he was training and seen him grunt or have him explain to me why he makes that noise to throw his opponents off, I probably wouldn't have had a personal relationship with that sound."

Kseniya Vdovina, the Russian sprinter, also featured in the song, both out on the track, and in a more controlled environment. "We put her on a treadmill so her heart rate went up to 120 bpm, which is the tempo of the track," explains Ronson. A microphone was put in a stethoscope and he recorded the result. "Her heartbeat is actually the main pulse that goes through the whole track."

Coca-Cola

MOVE TO THE BEAT



- "There'd just be days and days of moving every single little hit around... it's certainly more difficult being limited to things, because I'm used to sampling sounds from this thing and that thing, and it was just like, 'just do sports sounds.' And also having nothing in the track that would overpower the sports sounds, because that was the directive, that's what had to shine through. So it was definitely a battle. It took us three days to get the right keyboard sound for the arpeggio that wasn't stepping on the sports sound... Just stuff that you spend time in the studio doing."

Music Makers


Jon Clarke was the main mixer on the project at Factory Post. The music came to this stage as a set of stems, with four different drum tracks, samples, and also the separate sports sounds. In addition, the advert needed crowd sounds, sound design for camera moves, helicopter noises around the stadium, and branding audio for Coca-Cola.

Thus Clarke had some leeway to work with the picture – emphasising different elements as the camera shots changed. "It was a case of working with the picture and dropping some things on one shot, whatever was in the foreground we would try and draw the attention to that."

Clarke also reports that very little was done to the actual music – basic stem mixing and EQ for TV.

The crowd noise was actually recorded at the Olympic Park gig that Ronson did to create the picture for the ad. "One of the briefs was to keep the crowd as true to what was there on the day," says Clarke. "So most of the crowd sound in the ad is stuff that was recorded on the day. It's location recorded sound that we've made a bit nicer and got to fit the picture as well as we could. A lot of the screaming when you cut to close up shots is people there on that day going a bit crazy for Mark Ronson."

The track was still being developed at Metropolis while post was in progress, so Factory had to work with Metropolis to keep changes up to date. Clarke: "We did a few back and forths with Mark's engineer, when the track was being developed a bit further along the line. We're both using Pro Tools, so it's easier to send stuff... it was just literally a session file – and we've all got the same audio, so we shared PT sessions quite a bit."

Coca-Cola is currently working on an installation at the Olympics Pavilion, called 'The Coca-Cola Beatbox' which will offer an interactive experience inspired by the *Move To The Beat* campaign. 

INFORMATION

The Way Studio: www.thewaystudio.com
 Metropolis: www.metropolis.com
 Factory Post: www.factory.uk.com
 Coca-Cola Coke Zone: www.cokezone.co.uk
 Joshua Blair: www.joshuablair.com
 Prism Sound: www.prismsound.com

JOSHUA BLAIR

Joshua Blair works with Mark Ronson in the UK, and engineered the bulk of the *Move To The Beat* studio work. Blair kindly agreed to talk to Audio Media about the technical side of the project.

JB: "There was a lot of EQ and compression from UAD stuff, and a lot of outboard – old quirky things. We basically raided the toy cupboard at Metropolis for any weird and wonderful reverbs and old harmonisers and things like that, things that had lost favour with people, weren't really useful in modern music any more, and we thought great, we'll have that because it's a new sound to try out and see how it goes."

"So there was some old KT DN780 that was kind of really grainy... So grainy it was almost a delay kind of thing. We used that on the archery sounds. It was kind of free range... Making different sounds and hyping them up as much as we could – making them odd as well to stand out against the normal run-of-the-mill people running down a running track kind of thing. ... It was really cool because we did just get to go for what we wanted."

PM: So it was a big sound design job, as well as a musical job?

JB: "Essentially it was, for lack of a better term, a whole bunch of sound design, which was great; but we also had music as well, so we couldn't just go and make it a complete sound design concept. Mark was really determined to make it musical – to be able to dance to it. That was his main thing."

"...We loaded a lot of it into Native Instruments Machine – like an MPC, a drum machine kind of thing. In that way he did bring the human element back into it and make it more hands on. So I did a lot of programming of that, and Mark bashed out some beats on it, and we fiddled with it again in Pro Tools..."

"When we started the song, we only had one loop from the Sydney Olympics, I don't know where he got it from but it was running – you're right beside the track where the girl runs in on the springboard and vaults onto the mat. That was on a loop. That was the bedrock for the whole song. I'm not sure if that's how the song started in Mark's mind, but when I was involved, that's basically all we had, and some drums. And then we put all the keyboard parts and stuff over that, and it's gone round and round from that, and then all the other bits and pieces were added to it from there."

PM: What did you use for recording Katy B's vocals?

JB: "The vocal path was all Prism Sound Maselec gear. Mark wanted a really pure and great vocal sound for Katy – he wanted to make her sound big and exciting, yet intimate – bigger and better than anything anyone had ever heard from her."

"We managed to make a whole vocal chain out of their gear – the mic pre, EQ, and compressor was all Maselec, through Prism Sound ADA8-XR converters"

PM: What about post processing?

"A lot of the vocals after that were processed with a new bit of software from Synchro Arts that's not released yet, called ReVoice PRO that does vocal alignment and performance transfer, amongst other things. You get one vocal that's perfectly in pitch and the timing is perfect, and then all the other vocals just have to get near enough – it makes it perfectly in pitch and in time with what you've got on your first one."

"...It was alpha software at the time, so there were problems that you get with that but we persevered, and put it on the project because it sounded so amazing."

PM: You had to provide stems for post; does that take you out of a comfort zone? You're used to producing a final product. Did you have say over what they were doing?

"Well, Mark seems to have nominated me as his 'look after the project' person. He gets final say of course, he gets me to sort out something that's obviously wrong, or something that the edits have done or missed out. We do get a review – if there's something up I can always give them a call."

PM: And they can call you?

"Even 20 mins ago a guy from the TV company called me in and asked if the hurdle loop is right on YouTube."

PM: What about changes from your end?

"They needed to get the track as soon as they could, so we hadn't actually finished the track and they were already editing together for TV from our rough mixes... We need to be diligent with the housekeeping, because if we didn't look after all that stuff then something would fall through."