

The Bee Gee's — Remixing a Legend

An inside look at remixing classic Saturday Night Fever tracks for the 50th anniversary deluxe edition, working from the original analog multitracks for Barry Gibb himself.

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SUBJECT · **REMIXING · CLASSIC TRACKS**

A couple of years ago, I had the great pleasure of receiving four amazing multitrack files for some classic Bee Gee's songs. This was for the 50th anniversary, *Saturday Night Fever (The Original Movie Sound Track) [Deluxe Edition]* that includes the Serban Mixes of "Stayin' Alive", "Night Fever", "How Deep Is Your Love", and "You Should Be Dancing".

What we received were Hi-Resolution digital transfers of the original analog tapes; our task was to remix updates for these songs, our customer was no less than Barry Gibb himself.

Some like the remixes, and others prefer the originals, but an analysis of the tracks

that we worked from and the steps taken to recreate the mixes should be a good lesson for newer engineers who have never worked with tape machines and for older engineers to reminisce on simpler times.

In pulling up material like this to remix, we have to compare to the original released mix of the song and figure out what they did in their own mix. We didn't have mix notes, nor track sheets, nothing but the multitrack and the original mix.

The most interesting of the four songs for me was "You Should Be Dancing", so I'm spending most of this blog on it.

"You Should Be Dancing" came in with 24 tracks from the tape transfer, so I guess they did not use a timecode or automation data track, or it was just left out of the files sent. Analog tapes were pretty much standardized at 24 tracks onto 2" magnetic tape by the time these recordings were done.

I've read that for the mixing at Criteria, Karl Richardson did use automation in the mixing of "Stayin' Alive", so I'm guessing he had a way to do it for this one as well.

"Stayin' Alive", "How Deep Is Your Love", and "Night Fever" did come with automation data tracks transferred from tape.

Track Listing: "You Should Be Dancing"

24 MULTITRACK SOURCES

Kick
.....
Snare
.....
Drums_L
.....
Drums_R
.....
Perc_L Conga 2 & Triangle
.....
Perc_R Timbales, Maraca, and Conga 1
.....
Bass
.....
Moog Bass
.....
Guitar Lead Solo & High Harmony Vocal
.....
Guitar Rhythm Alan
.....
Guitar Rhythm Barry 1
.....
Guitar Rhythm Barry 2
.....
Horns_R Tenor & High Bone
.....
Horn_L Bass Bone
.....
Ensemble Strings (mono)
.....
Synth High Strings (mono)
.....
Electric Piano Rhodes (mono)
.....
Choir Vocals Barry & Robin_L
.....
Choir Vocals Barry & Robin_R
.....
Pilot Vocal Barry
.....
Vocal Choir Middle Harmony
.....
Vocal Choir Lo Harmony
.....
Lead Vocal Barry Double
.....
Lead Vocal Barry
.....

(Tenor and high bone referring to mic placement, not instrumentation. There was a full horn section.)

The "Guitar Lead Solo & High Harmony Vocal" track had vocals that I created a new track for in our mix. The Choir Vocals Barry & Robin tracks were not double tracked — two mics, one performance. The Pilot Vocal Barry track had all three singing, gang vocals, one mic. The Vocal Choir Middle Harmony had all three singing, gang vocals, one mic. The Vocal Choir Lo Harmony had two voices singing the low note. The Lead Vocal Barry Double also had the mono horn swells that come in the last hook.

Tempo Matching & Edits

The original recording came to us at a tempo that I calculated as 123.4208 bpm. The original mix, however, was at a calculated 123.5654 bpm.

I'm calculating these by counting along with and making marks in the session every eight bars or so for both the original mix and the session. For my purposes I really only need the overall tempos.

The difference is probably due to differences in tape machine speeds. So my first task was to speed up — we call it VariSpeed Offset or VSO — the digital files to match the original mix tempo. This mainly helps us to play them in sync so that we can listen to each section, each part, and A/B the tracks to hear exactly what parts match up.

One very critical reason to do this tempo match is because there are two edits in the

song that we had to figure out how and where to make them.

I figured out that they cut out 8 bars in the first hook (they recorded a longer chorus with two "what you doing on your bed" sections). They also recorded a longer chorus again after the third verse and again cut the first "what you doing on your bed" section for the mix.

Because they didn't record locked to a click, we had to find the right place for our edits, sliding the files a bit, just as they would have done with a razor blade and tape edit on their 2-track tape mix master.

I also needed the tempos to match in sync to mute parts that were recorded but not used. The Moog bass was recorded playing throughout the song up until the drum break, but in the mix it is muted in the hooks.

Both string tracks swell up and down throughout the song, and the synth high string has a lot of panning automation as well that we needed to listen for and recreate.

Vocal Delay Effects

With the edits and automation done, I had to figure out that vocal delay — "my baby moves at midnight (midnight)", "what you doing on your bed (on your bed)".

There are vocal delay throws all over the place on a bunch of tracks, these were "mix" effects, not recorded, so we had to recreate them.

I set up a send from all of the tracks that shared the effect: Choir Vocals Barry & Robin, Pilot Vocal, Barry Lead and double; this send feeds to an aux channel where I did the actual automation of the send to the delay. This way I only needed to write automation on one fader instead of multiple send faders. We are doing a 12 dB boost on the send for the specific words we want the delay on: "midnight", "dawn", "higher", "warm", "on your bed", and the falsetto "aah", in the first verse and on like that through the song. There is a bit of the delay across all of the vocals, but the boost really creates the effect.

The delay, as we recreated it, is a dotted 1/8th note sync, just 12% of feedback, and then feeding a medium hall reverb with a high end rolloff and a 60% wet/dry mix.

*"D'you think we should do it again,
I didn't get all . . ."*

HEARD AFTER THE FADE-OUT ON THE
GUITAR LEADS TRACK

The Pilot Vocals track is interesting because it has all three brothers singing, with Barry

doing adlibs later in the song while Robin and Maurice harmonize the chorus "you should be dancing". What clued me in that the Pilot Vocals were used in the mix is during the drum break, Barry is singing the low "yeah, ahh, uhh" while the falsetto "aaah aah, aah" is on the Pilot Track.

One really fun thing to find was Barry singing the horn parts in the horn break "ba da, ba ba, ba da, ba da, bah dah duh, da bah dah ba dah". These aren't used in the mix, but he was probably guiding the horns for overdubbing later.

Other fun finds: at the end of the song, after the fade-out, on that Guitar Leads track with the overdubbed vocals someone says "D'you think we should do it again, I didn't get all . . ." And the count off on the Pilot Vocal track is so cool. As they are playing a bit of the song, getting the groove and tempo set, Barry counts in "one, two, one two three fooaaah". The band, total professionals, all drop out on the second one, and then there they go! I love to hear these really human moments before and after takes.

How Deep Is Your Love

A more straightforward mix. We did have to do a small VSO again to line up the mixes. Of special note here, they cut out all of the wah guitar swells on the Electric Guitar track, only leaving the guitar hits.

Drums were recorded as Kick, Snare, and Drums L & R tracks. A total of 4 tracks for drums.

This song did have Automation Data printed to a track; doesn't sound like SMPTE timecode though.

"How Deep Is Your Love" has 8 tracks of vocals, four stereo pairs which I believe are all gang vocals; all three brothers singing together on a set of stereo microphones.

Stayin' Alive

This one had a significant change in tempo. We needed to vari-speed the song up by a

bit more than 2% to match the time and pitch of the original mix.

There is the legendary drum loop, two tracks here looped by engineers from the drums in "Night Fever". There is a mono percussion track with triangle, timbales, cymbals, high hat.

Two tracks for horns, but the horns are only doubled in the first break when the Saxophones play, they needed that track later in the song for more vocals.

"Stayin' Alive" has seven tracks of vocals, but only three tracks of gang vocals. The other tracks are all Barry, I believe, ad-libbing, doubling, and harmonizing with himself. He used the Sax track and the End Strings tracks for more vocal overdubs.

We included the count-off recorded on the Bass Guitar track in the new mix, that must be Maurice.

Night Fever

I tried to find the section where they looped the drums for "Stayin' Alive". They had their work cut out as they needed to find a section without instrument bleed. I believe it comes from a 1 bar part of the B Section "sweet city woman" as this is the only spot I can find where there is not the hat perididdle, no crash cymbal decay, and no bleed. It does also have the small flam on the snare hit.

The stories that I've read say they used a 2-bar drum loop, but I didn't find 2 bars that matched.

Imagine how difficult it must have been to create a perfectly timed 5 minute drum loop from one bar (or two) of drums with two tape machines, razor blade, grease pencil, and your ears.

"Night Fever" has 8 tracks of vocals, four stereo pairs which I believe are all gang vocals; all three brothers singing together on a set of stereo microphones.

"I look at it as an art restorer would look at an Old Master as they uncover the original brilliance of color and brushstrokes beneath the dirt."

ON APPROACHING THESE CLASSIC RECORDINGS

My greatest takeaway from this project was an appreciation of the quality of musicianship and technical ability of the band, artists, and engineers. I look at it as an art restorer would look at an Old Master as they uncover the original brilliance of color and brushstrokes beneath the dirt.

I can hear that the band was well rehearsed before the Record button was pushed; they are noodling around before and after the takes, but always locked in. It sounds like they are having a lot of fun, but are also quality conscious and professional. I can tell that they were adding to the production as it progressed; I imagine it was something like "I need another track for a vocal part." "Ok, I can punch you on the string track at the end."

One of the things that I think existed in earlier recordings and that is missing in modern productions is the decision making during recording due to track limitations. They locked in the sound much earlier in the process. Four tracks for a drum kit, gang vocal three part harmony on one microphone, mono tracked horn sections, strings, etc.

The amazing musicianship of the band and artistry of the Brothers Gibb and other performers of earlier eras has not been lost in more modern artists, but maybe part of the process that created such enduring music has been to some extent.