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Fabrizio Simoncioni

An Italian engineer who likes to force a change is enjoying mixing Mexican pop hits from his brand new studio in Tuscany. **ZENON SCHOEPE**

Fabrizio Simoncioni is an Italian engineer, mixer, musician and producer who has managed to enjoy successful rock and pop production careers in Italy and then in Mexico amassing more than 50 platinum albums and a Latin Grammy nomination. He's now back in Tuscany working from a new studio — The Garage — where he mixes for his still mostly Mexican client base. His story started in the early 80s as a successful 'Italo-Disco' artist/composer. However, his career as a musician was curtailed by a very bad car accident in 1984, which resulted in the best part of year spent in hospital where he had a lot of time to think about what he might do next. He was encouraged to think about engineering and the more he looked into it the more he liked the sound of it. He studied and used his insurance money from the accident to broaden his education and build his own studio; he says he discovered that his talent was not in singing and composing after all but in engineering.

In 1990 he was lucky to engineer on a record by an indie band that had enormous success — 'not because of me! But it was a beginning for me.' The band was Litfiba and the producer was Alberto Pirelli and Fabrizio engineered a lot of records for him over the coming years.

He went freelance in 1997 and combined engineering with extended live playing and touring with Ligabue from 1998 until 2005. 'In 2007 I realised I was very bored. Italy is very small and I needed more. I received an email from an Italian producer in Mexico who said he liked my work and that he had his first important production in Mexico for Universal Music; he said he wanted to work with me although he knew that my price would be high, etc, etc... I told him to not worry about the budget, I'm in. I flew to El Paso and I fell in love with it.'

But it was like starting again from scratch because while he was known in Italy with credits that included Niccolò Fabi, Ligabue, Stellakowalsky, Silvrman, Negrta, Mietta, Gianluca Grignani, Gazosa, Ligajovapelu, Gianna Nannini and Settevite, nobody had heard of him in the Mexican pop music scene. 'The only Italian artists they knew were Ramazzotti and Pausini and I hadn't worked with either of them so I was no one!' But he stayed for seven years working in studios across the US and creating an impressive credit list

including Carlos H Gatica, Moderatto, Reik, Miró, Anahí, Gee, Yuridia, Erik Rubin, Aleks Syntek and Bárbara Muñoz among many others and some film scores. The heavy workload eventually made him return to his native Tuscany for the third stage in his production career — mixing in Italy for his Mexican clients.

He needed a room and teamed up with a long-time friend and built one alongside an existing smaller studio that now serves as two live areas. There's also a separate edit room. The control room was designed by acoustician Donato Masci from Studio Sound Service and the required ceiling height was achieved by cutting straight into the hillside of the plot. It's a beautifully airy environment with natural light from one side and an acoustic that combines perfectly with the

Genelec 1034As, according to Fabrizio. It is an impressive and comfortable space.

He runs an SSL 9000J and employs bus compression as part of his mix process in a hybrid system that is predominantly analogue. The studio opened six months ago and Fabrizio is still adding to his racks.

How different did you find the approach in Mexico to Italy?

In Italy when an artist starts a project in a studio they often start by listening to someone else's records — I want my kick like this record but my snare like that one, and my guitar like ... come on, you've got to do your own sound. Otherwise you're always going to be the second to do it, a good second perhaps but you've got to try your own thing. Mexico wasn't like that — they left me to work. It was a case of what do you think, what sort of sound can you do for us? That was exactly the spark I needed.

How did the change from engineer to mixer happen?

The fact that I've worked in the US and was successful and now have come back here to Italy, they think of me as a bit of a foreigner! They know that I've been recognised internationally so they think I must be good! What changed? When I was there I learnt a lot, of course, but it's still very much me.

In Mexico I was doing everything from recording to mixing but now they come to me mostly for the mixing. I'm not too expensive and my mixes sound good so the balance is good for the clients.

Since I've come back to Italy my work has been 95% Mexican and one Italian band in three months. They call me or contact me via email and we talk about the job and negotiate. Then they send me Pro Tools sessions and I always ask for prepped sessions — I think 56 tracks is enough. If they're talking about



things like layered keyboards it's much better if the client balances that because it's your idea and you know what you had in mind — I'm mixing, not remixing. I try to respect what the client is thinking and I always ask for a rough mix; I'll listen to it once.

I usually do my first mix quickly — in about two or three hours — and I send that back to the client. They make their suggestions and there's a second and third version and usually that's it. And it's fantastic working here, nobody bothers you, I mix for a couple of hours, smoke a cigar outside for a break and then back to work; it makes for a very smooth process.

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How does the preparation work?

If you get a clean session — normally they are 48kHz sessions, maybe that'll change in the future — it's a couple of hours to download. I can download here, at home or my assistant has another line so there are a number of ways and we're upgrading the internet side. I give the session to my assistant and he'll check it and organise it for me in the way I like to see things on the desk. I prefer not to use a lot of plug-ins but there are some that I like to have for certain instruments so he prepares that for me too.

record and I use the recording process to build the mix so when I've finished the recording the mix is almost done. I don't leave things to fix later — I want the right drum and bass sound right there or as close to it as I can get. It's easier. If you build right from the beginning you are creating the picture of the sound and you'll then know when a guitar sound is wrong, for example. You don't have to wait to discover that in the mix; you want to know what's wrong in a song as you go along and make it right. Then mixing is about having fun and not about fixing problems.

And when I start I work quickly. I don't like to spend an hour on a kick drum, I quickly do the instrument sections and then I put it all together and imagine the picture and see where the song pushes me. That's what I learnt outside of Italy; in Italy it can be quite technical but 24 great sounds do not make a great record on their own!

I am a phase freak and I spend a lot of time aligning things because it can change the sound a lot. I use my ears mostly but when I'm working on multimicrophoned guitars I work on the delay and phase alignment and I have a plug-in that helps. It's important particularly for guitars and bass — DI and amp — it can change the sound completely.

Have you recorded sessions here?

I've only done one here with a local band and those live rooms sound big for small rooms! We recorded the drums and bass together followed by the guitars and then the vocals. Then I mixed it. But I love to

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Tell me about your bus compression process.

I use the desk automation but I work on a hybrid system. I like to have order so my desk is always organised the same way for instruments and they're colour coded — guitars are green, keyboards are blue, and so on. For drums and bass I use bus A and that goes through a pair of linked Chandler Germanium Compressors and I use parallel compression on that. I do it differently to some others because I take the desk output into the compressor and then straight to a convertor and Pro Tools and I do that for all four buses — the second bus goes to an Avalon 747 for vocals.

Convertors is what I miss at the moment as I'm back to using the Avid convertors — in the US I was using Burl and Apogee. The third bus changes depending on the song but could be guitars and I use 1176s and the fourth bus can also change and I use DBX 165As. On the main bus I leave piano and keyboards usually and that uses the desk compressor. Then on the insert of the digital bus I have my main stereo processing, which is a Shadowhills Dual Vandergraph compressor and two Maag Audio EQ4s — I love them. I just give it some Air top-end and some low-end extreme and then it goes through the Shadowhills for the glue.

This way of working gives you very clean and dynamic stems and I've got everything available if I change my mind. It's flexible. When they say they need more guitars I don't have to recall everything, I just make the moves on the stems in the box. And if there is an issue with the balance of the drums, maybe the snare is too loud, then in that case I just reprint the drums stem. It works.

For my way of mixing it is so easy, I never miss a mix. You can try anything and always get back to it; you can play with it!

So what are you listening to?

I listen to the final stereo after all the processing. It means I can reprint single stems if I find anything strange going on. That's what I send to the mastering engineer. I don't send stems, I send one mix, I don't even do vocal up, vocal down. That's it. It's like I say: have you ever heard of a painter producing a painting and then doing it again with more yellow and then

with more blue? To me it's a piece of art, that's my approach. One mix with a lot of headroom for the mastering.

How do you monitor as you build your mix?

I start on the KRKs and loud because I want to listen physically at the beginning. That also lets me know whether I'm wrong at all with my low end or if there's harshness. At the point at which I'm moving levels I go to the NS10s at a very low level then I'll be back to the KRKs at a normal level — I'm building a 3D picture of depth and spread and I want to know if I'm right — back to the NS10s and then at the end the big Genelecs. I change the volume and speakers at the same time often because if you get too used to one speaker at one volume you can make its sound fantastic on just them. The mix will sound best on the Genelecs but it has to sound great on all the other speakers too.

What are your sound chains?

For my plug-ins I use Universal Audio UADs, then it's analogue outboard and there's a lot on the desk, of course. I have my BAE Neves, another SSL bus compressor, my Distressors for vocals always, a TLA 100 always on the DI bass, so I have my toys. Also, I don't like plug-in delays or reverbs apart from the UAD EMT. The Bricasti is just the best — I want ten of them! Some songs I turn it on and every preset works, it's almost too easy. It's at another level and I use mine on the vocals; the 480 I use on drums, the PCM42 on vocals and the two SDE3000 on guitars.

My vocal chain has a Dolby A which draws out the vocal noise and keeps the vocal at the front. I split the track and send the non Dolby part to the reverb — so the reverb is warm — and all the top-end is in the dry track and I then mix them together. I don't have one here but when I had an AMS DMX I would use 5ms and 7ms pitched plus 5 and minus 5 as a little subtle doubler that gives body to the vocal and that also works well with the Dolby.

You're happy to share your tricks then ...

There are no secrets. Again, if I was to learn painting from the best painter in the world he could teach me the technique but I could never paint like him. ■

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sales@kmraudio.com www.kmraudio.com
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