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Erykah Badu: Freestyle Mac

By Dustin Driver

Erykah Badu is awash in creative energy. She conjures the stuff from thin air, whipping up hooks and melodies with little more than a basic backing track. Think soulful freestyle riffs and lyrics punctuated by the boom and clack of a jazzy drum kit. Yet even a steady stream of creativity like Badu’s can be diverted—for days, weeks, months, or years. In fact, five years passed without a new Badu album. Some said she had writer’s block. Some said she had lost her groove. Turns out the vibe was alive the whole time—it simply needed a new channel to flow into.

“I didn’t really have writer’s block,” she says. “I just needed another medium, another way to be creative. I needed a new boyfriend to bring the old butterflies back.”

That new medium was a MacBook running GarageBand. Badu fired up the application one quiet day around the house, and the music surged. She laid down vocals and sent them via iChat to producers 9th Wonder and James Poyser. The three traded tracks for months, collaborating with producers Karriem Riggins and Rashad “Ringo” Smith. Engineer Mike Chav helped stitch it all together—and that’s how Badu’s new record, *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)*, was created.

“Making this album at home felt good,” Badu says. “I felt relaxed. I didn’t feel any pressure at all. I took my time. And in taking my time, things happened so quickly. I know that’s strange, but that’s how it happened. I didn’t have to go through the hustle and bustle and fuss of finding another engineer. I have a home studio, but I didn’t use it that much, because I was able to maneuver things by myself on the Mac. In four months, I had three albums—seventy-something songs and 20 to 50 more ideas.”

Finding the Groove

For Badu, discovering the new musical tools in her MacBook was an organic process that blossomed out

Suddenly Badu was free to create on her own time, wherever she wanted, without the hassle of extraneous recording gear. “I started writing so much, so quickly, and so independently of people disturbing me,” she says. “It was just me, my headphones, and my laptop. I could be anywhere, as long as I had some juice, and write music.”



Improv Ink

For Badu, songwriting is improvisational, a jam session on paper. “I never write lyrics,” she says. “The music inspires me. I listen to the music, I’m in it, I hear it, and I begin to hum a melody. As I’m

Logical Transition

Rashad “Ringo” Smith has cut tons of tracks on the Akai MPC3000, and has encountered dozens of music apps during his days as a producer. But today he uses Logic Studio.

“It’s pretty much my main sequencing tool now,” he says. “It’s great for getting things done very quickly, sequencing-wise. I also find that Logic is great for accessing all your plug-in synths, which sound as good or better than all the old hardware I’m used to.”

Smith almost always carries a MacBook loaded with Logic Studio to capture any musical ideas that may arise. “Sometimes when I have some downtime I’ll open Logic and start fooling around to see what I can come up with,” he says. “It has definitely changed the way I make music, because it’s so convenient and easy to use.”

Logic Studio on Tour

Engineer Mike Chav is currently managing the technical aspects of Badu’s tour-bus studio. “We’re using Logic Studio, GarageBand, and Pro Tools on this tour,” he says. “Logic will be a main compositional tool—it’s great for recording and editing multiple vocal takes quickly, which is very important for Erykah. It’s also a great tool for sequencing. We’ll be using Logic Studio a lot from now on, on this tour and when we get back.”

Playlist

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of a few simple iChat windows. "I got on iChat, and all my friends started sending me MP3 tracks and asking me to come up with vocals and lyrics," she says. Soon she launched GarageBand and started dragging tracks into the timeline. "They told me that I could basically layer my vocals in GarageBand like I used to do with my old four-track," she says. "I'm an analog girl, so it was easy to relate." Within a few minutes she'd recorded a new track, with several more ready to go.

"I learned how to use GarageBand by trial and error," Badu says. "I hate reading instructions, so I just figured it out. It took the amount of time that I dragged the MP3 into a track. It's like somebody stuck a plug in the back of my neck and uploaded a program to learn how to use GarageBand. It was automatic. Everything on that Mac was automatic."

humming a melody, I begin to find a rhythm for the melody. There has to be space between the kick and the snare for what I'm saying. It's all about finding a space where I belong. Soon that humming and rhythm breaks into syllables and I just find words that match the syllables of the melody. It somehow all makes sense."

For *New Amerykah*, Badu laid freestyle vocals over tracks from producer 9th Wonder, who collaborated with producer James Poyser. "9th Wonder would send me a track and I would put some vocals on it, put a tambourine on it or something. Then 9th Wonder would IM it to James Poyser, who would put some keys on it. Poyser would IM it back to me, and I'd write a hook. I'd send it all to Mike Chavarria, and he would dump everything to two-inch tape to get a nice warm analog sound."

Resources

- Soundtrack Pro
- MacBook Pro
- Mac OS X Music and Audio Documentation
- Logic Pro
- Mac Pro
- Third-Party Music Products

Seminars

- Guitarists and Mac: Pat Metheny
- Your Guitar. Your Mac. Your Music.
- Making Music on a Mac with GarageBand
- Creating Rich Media Podcast with Final Cut Pro

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Erykah Badu: Freestyle Mac

Badu used a combination of effects and filters in GarageBand to give her voice a gritty, soulful quality. "I got a little creative and went to the guitar plug-ins and the drum plug-ins," she says. "Those effects give my voice a flange-y sound that gives me a feeling of 1969 to 1973. Sonically I was trying to create something that didn't sound too new, but everyone knew was new. By putting the vocals through effects that are not for vocals, of course you're going to get something kinda freaky."

Visual Vibes

When it was time to craft the first video for *New Amerykah*, Badu broke out her MacBook once again. "I did my first demo videos on the Mac," she says. "I used Photo Booth camera and did stop animation. I did about 500 still photos of me just moving slightly left and right, put them all together, and added effects in iMovie. It took about three hours, and I never left my bedroom. I took it to the label to give them an idea of what I wanted to do with some of the videos for this album."



Badu has directed all her own videos the release of *Baduism* in 1997, and *New Amerykah* is no exception to the rule. The artist directed the first video release from the album, "Honey." "I wanted to do something where I'm using old record covers, because I know so many people collect records," she says. "So I just

The process was new for Badu, who's used to the tactile, chemical world of film processing. "I've always used film, even with still cameras," she says. "I've always cross-processed my slide film to bring effects to my unique shots. I was never a digital camera girl, but everybody has to change sometime. I'm still in love with analog things, but this is just another part of me."

The Mobile Mac Studio

Badu is currently touring in support of *New Amerykah*, and plans to release *New Amerykah Part Two (Return of the Ankh)* later this year. She'll have a GarageBand and Logic Studio-equipped mobile recording studio on the tour, and plans to write more music on the road. "I love freestyle," she says. "I enjoy experiencing the natural music that comes out of me on stage. It's like getting your feet rubbed. Or smelling rain. It's why I do what I do."

She'll also tweak tracks for the new album during the tour. "I'll continue to put my touches on *New Amerykah Part Two* by singing and stacking vocals and creating effects in GarageBand and Logic," she says. "And if anybody sends me more tracks, I'll put vocals on those too."

Badu's stream of creativity will keep flowing. "GarageBand really gave me the freedom and the time to live while I worked," she says. "To me, living is the little things you do in between working, like stopping and smelling the flowers, or risking being late because you're finishing up listening to an album. With the Mac, I have time and the freedom to do all those things and write my music without going into a studio."

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