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VOL. THIRTY-FOUR
NUMBER TWELVE
SEPTEMBER 2021
USA \$5.99
CANADA \$5.99

BABY Audio: Smooth Operator Intelligent Signal Balancer

Intelligent, BABY Audio-smooth tone shaping

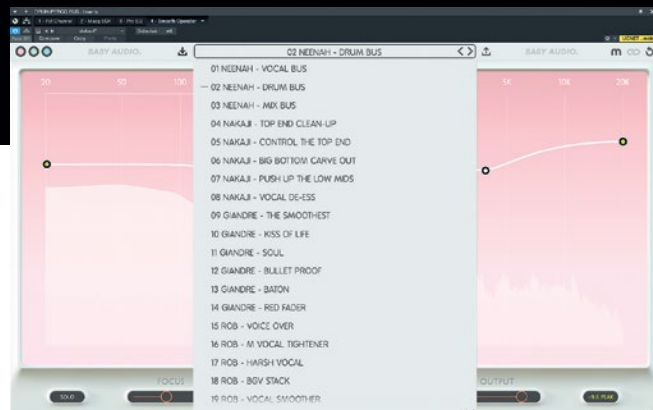
BABY Audio enters the spectral realm with the release of Smooth Operator, an intelligent, multi-function tone shaping plugin. It was designed as a tool to “transform your tracks into the smoothest versions of themselves that they can be.” To achieve this, Smooth Operator employs a sophisticated spectral processing AI algorithm to analyze and surgically process your audio.

The specter in the machine

Rather than treating the signal as a whole, spectral processing uses FFT (Fast Fourier Transform) algorithms to break down the audio stream into extremely fine frequency bands—the building blocks of the signal. The Smooth Operator intelligent algorithm analyzes and processes each sample individually, dynamically applying its processes to reduce stale or musically unpleasant resonances. The goal of this blended surgical EQ, compression, and resonance suppression is meant to smooth tonal imbalances by eliminating harshness in the frequencies.

The eyes have it

While the minimalist, eye-soothing BABY Audio aesthetic is on full display, Smooth Operator breaks its design mold slightly here. Smooth Operator actually looks more like a traditional plugin than previous BABY Audio releases; specifically, it looks like a dynamic EQ. With audio running, the background field displays an animated frequency response graph. A separate animation at the top of the screen shows the frequency ranges where the compression/suppression is and the amount being applied. The GUI is sizable, and users can switch the pastel background color between pink, blue, or green. My aging eyes appreciate both features.



Nodes

Five nodes are laid out horizontally across the display; they control the amount of processing happening at the selected frequency ranges. The two outer nodes are fixed high and low shelf bands; you can change the center frequency of the inner nodes. The Q of these EQ nodes can be adjusted by using the scroll function on your mouse or touchpad. You can solo them to aid in accurately identifying the desired frequency ranges. The fifth (center) node acts as a universal threshold control.

Focus

A focus control below the display sets the intensity or granularity of the processing. Higher values cause the signal to be broken down into ever-finer slices. Processing can be further tweaked by engaging the 'M' toggle in the upper pane. You can choose between 'Hi-RES', which results in more transparent, higher definition processing, and 'CLASSIC', which is more CPU-friendly but

can introduce some processing-related artifacts. Chaining engages external side chain processing. A universal output control, switchable peak and RMS metering, and a preset menu round out the control set of this tidy GUI.

It's wise to pay attention to the focus control. Most noticeable in CLASSIC mode, high focus settings can generate a saturation type of effect; it's actually not 'saturation' but rather the artifacts of a multitude of tiny crossfades interacting with each other. The possible distortion isn't wholly unpleasant, but if you have the horsepower, use HIRES mode.

Smooth workflow

I've had Smooth Operator on my DAW for a couple of months now. All it took was a scroll through the presets and some critical listening to get me quickly up and running. It's now firmly embedded in my workflow. The presets are nicely curated, the bulk of them created by a host of engineers, artists and producers. They cover a wide range of applications for individual tracks and busses. My experience is that Smooth Operator works great on both.

I have a collection of acoustic guitars, and they all have quirky resonances; Smooth Operator makes light work of identifying and smoothing out those resonances. Using the default setting typically achieves workable results. The results get even better with minimal tweaking—consistently equal to or surpassing my standard EQ and compression strategies for de-harshing these instruments. It does a similarly great job of subtly attenuating typical 4k or 5k-centered harshness on electric guitar tracks.

Sculpting the bass

Selective frequency sculpting on a bass instrument is often necessary to un-clutter a mix. Setting a carefully chosen node centered in the low mids and adjusting the threshold nicely filters out the mud. Processed bass guitar tracks become much more defined. Using the internal sidechain between the bass and the kick drum produces excellent results as well. Actually, the surgical nature of the processing makes sidechaining any two tracks with overlapping EQ profiles amazingly effective and well worth experimenting with.

A smooth bus ride

On buses, the results are equally effective though a little trickier to achieve. Sometimes Smooth Operator tries to tame frequencies that you're trying to feature—it may be smart, but it can't read your mind! A little extra sub in the low end, for instance—that's when you need to get in there and tweak the EQ-centered thresholds. Raising the threshold of any frequency ranges that you're trying to preserve effectively protects them from unwanted processing.

I found the mix bus presets to be particularly interesting. They achieved results that I hadn't even considered trying to achieve using standard EQ and compression techniques, opening my ears to some new possibilities. They also provide great jumping-off points to fine-tune the processing to your taste.

Wrap-up

As with any process, you need to use Smooth Operator judiciously. It lives up to its name and its promise. In the spectral audio ring, it's definitely a contender. ➤

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