



THE
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Is It Live or Is It a Drum Machine?

Dave Black

The digital drum machine, a drum set in a box, is the latest of the computerized devices to have a profound effect on contemporary music and the recording industry. Played by controlling slides, pushing buttons, and turning knobs, these machines offer a variety of features that make their use practical by percussionists and non-percussionists alike.

Machines on the Market

Though the features of these machines vary according to price (the more expensive ones have more to offer), you'll find most of them reproduce the following:

- bass drum, snare drum, open hi-hat, closed hi-hat, cymbals, and hand clap sounds
- pre-set rhythmic patterns
- any newly programmed rhythmic pattern
- any rhythmic pattern in perfect time

For example, the new Dr. Rhythm from Boss is a portable workshop drum machine that has a graphic readout designed for easy programming. The sounds can be programmed into 32 different rhythmic patterns, which can be combined into two complete songs of 128 measures each. Its suggested retail price is \$240.

The TR-909 Rhythm Composer produced by RolandCorp is a more expensive drum machine. It offers two dynamic levels that can be programmed on the bass, snare, hi-hat, and all tom sounds; and accent, flam, and shuffle effects can be added. The

sounds can be arranged into 96 programmable patterns that can be grouped into songs on four memory tracks. The memory capacity of this machine is 1,792 notes, and the equipment will interface with other synthesizers. The suggested retail price is \$1,200.

The LinnDrum is getting the most attention of all the drum machines. The first of its kind, the LinnDrum is being used by such artists as Michael Jackson, Billy Joel, Lionel Richie, Jeff Porcaro, and Harvey Mason, to name a few. Because it uses actual digitally recorded drum sounds, percussionists say this machine has the most authentic sound on the market. Even with a price tag of several thousand dollars, many players are using the LinnDrum.

In addition to backing up other musicians, the drum machine has other uses. It's possible to program a pattern, one element

Percussionist/composer Dave Black attended California State University, Northridge, where he studied with Joel Leach and Louie Bellson. He has traveled to many parts of the world with a wide variety of shows and has added the drum machine to the list of skills necessary for his profession.

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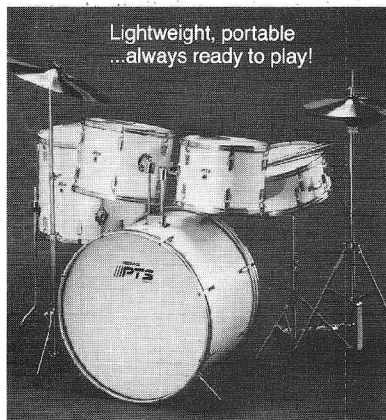
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at a time at a slow tempo, then play back the pattern at a tempo that would be difficult or impossible for a drummer to execute. Also, players can study and develop more difficult patterns on the drum machine using slow tempos, then reproduce them on a conventional drum set.

A Significant Question

Because many writers, artists, and producers are now using drum machines, players view this equipment as a tool and consider its use as a skill necessary for the job. However, many drummers are asking, "Will the drum machines put me out of work?" One answer is found in remembering that drum machines can't program themselves — a person needs to do that; and although anyone can program a drum machine, the professional drummer has the ability to make it sound the most authentic.

There is, however, a market where the drum machine may replace the percussionist — the jingle market. Because many jingles are only a few seconds long, often with only the lyrics or orchestration changed when used again, a studio could hire a drummer to record a number of patterns that could be used over several years.

Pros and Cons

The drum machine's ability to keep perfect time can be seen both as an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the musical requirements of the job. Because dance music requires a steady, unwavering beat, the drum machine is the perfect choice, whereas a drummer would play with some irregularity in the beat. (For example, the LinnDrum is used in Irene Cara's *Flash Dance*.) The disadvantage is that many drummers don't care for the metronome-like feel of such perfect time because it eliminates any chance for interplay between musicians. In fact, professional drummers are known to "move the notes around" in a bar so there is never a feeling of perfect time. The human touch just cannot be programmed into a machine. The lack of personality and energy is a big complaint about drum ma-

chines, and a further reason why they will never entirely replace the live performer.

It's unlikely that a single product like the drum machine will completely change the music industry, but if such a machine can be used to help the musician expand and enhance his ideas, then its use is essential. ■

Editor's Note: The following companies manufacture drum machines and offer information upon request:

Boss
7200 Dominion Circle
Los Angeles, California

Linn Electronics
18720 Oxnard Street
Tarzana, California

MXR
740 Driving Park Avenue
Rochester, New York

Oberheim
2250 South Barrington Avenue
Los Angeles, California

RolandCorp
7200 Dominion Circle
Los Angeles, California

Sequential Circuits
3051 North First Street
San Jose, California

Yamaha
P.O. Box 7271
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Best Dressed Band Contest

The 1984-85 "Best Dressed Band" awards program, sponsored by the National Association of Uniform Manufacturers and Distributors is now accepting entries. Each should include color photos showing the entire band, with close-ups of representative uniforms for each marching unit. At least two of the photos should be 8 x 10 in size. Trophies and plaques will be awarded to national and regional winners. Entry blanks and additional details may be obtained by writing to the Association at 1156 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York. The deadline for entries is December 1, 1984. Winners will be notified by January 15, 1985.