

Steven Raybine: Multi-Dimensional Expression Through Electronics

BY NORMAN WEINBERG

Steven Raybine has been making music with electronics for over 20 years. His first influences in this arena weren't other percussionists, but keyboard players.

"My interest in electronics began in the 1970s with the pioneering work Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and Joe Zawinul did with synthesizers within their groups," Raybine says. "I wanted to do similar things with the acoustic vibraphone by transforming it into more of an electro-acoustic instrumental hybrid. In the late 1970s, while recording with the jazz/fusion group Auracle, I manipulated a wah-wah pedal we hooked up to the mixing board for one of my vibe solos, with the intention of simulating the sound Miles Davis and other jazz fusion trumpeters were getting when they used that device in combination with their instrument.

"More recently, the advent of the K&K Sound Systems MIDI Master amplification and MIDI interface unit has enabled me to create more of a MIDI vibraphone workstation where I can explore new methods and modes of musical expression. Over time, I have found that the expanded MIDI vibe focus seems to work best within the context of my solo performances by making them more multi-dimensional in scope."



A "multi-dimensional" solo performance isn't so easy to create. Some of Raybine's compositions were created through improvisation, and others came about in a more orchestrated environment. For instance, for a piece called "Digital Dream Dance," Steve created complex, multi-shifting melodic and rhythmic contours by manipulating a 500-millisecond digital-delay effect patch within his Alesis Quadraverb Digital Effects Processor.

"Initially, I improvised on this by playing rapidly executed, intricate four-mallet stickings as applied to melodic patterns, and after time a composition began to unfold," Raybine explains. "With my composition 'Prayer' I used an evocative sound patch I liked and wanted to feature within the Roland U-220 sound module. Again, I improvised until I completed the composition, which ultimately enhanced the sound I had chosen to feature."

Some of Steve's arrangements feature sequenced backing tracks. "My associates at DAN-CER MIDIfacturing and Digital Sound Design Studios of Omaha complete the orchestration, which is stored on disc. Then I try various methods of performing the piece live with the sequence."

This type of performance is not without its trials and problems. "One of the first technological challenges I've encountered during live performances with electronics is the variety of cords—MIDI, quarter-inch, XLR—that may not function properly," Raybine says. "This means that some important components may not be operational at a critical moment. Therefore, carry extra cords of all types in a variety of lengths in case you need to replace them, and remember to check all connections before you perform."

Raybine says that it's also important to get a good soundcheck before a performance, "in order to eradicate sound imbalances with triggered sounds and effects patches between the acoustic/amplified vibraphone and sequenced backing tracks and audio-tape accompaniment backgrounds."

Steve's solo performance rig is pretty extensive. His main controller instrument is a customized Musser M-55 Pro Vibraphone with the K&K Sound Systems MIDI Master amplification and MIDI interface unit. His sound modules include a Yamaha TG500 and a Roland U-220. His sound system includes a mixer, amp, playback machines, outboard effects modules, main speakers, and monitor speakers.

Maintaining musical focus and concentration while simultaneously accounting for all the electronic/technological parameters of all this gear can be extremely daunting. Some of the extra-musical considerations that Raybine has to deal with during a performance include:

- Triggering one or more sound or effect patch changes.
- Adjusting and readjusting volume levels of various components between channel settings on the mixing board.
- Shifting between octaves with the synth octave transposi-

tion button on the K&K system.

- Making certain the fragile breath-control interface is engaged and working properly.
- Making sure the correct sequenced backing track is accessed at the desired time.
- Remembering to activate or deactivate the foot switch for the vibraphone motor.
- Maintaining a good balance between the monitor speakers and the main speakers.

Even though he's constantly dealing with the technology, Steve's philosophy of blending acoustic and electronic music performance practices is clear. "First and foremost," he says, "it is essential to have command of your instrument acoustically. Electronic music/MIDI technology offers new modes of musical expression to contemporary players, but should be used with sound musical judgment, taste, and discretion in order to best enhance the music and to make for an effective and musically compelling electro-acoustic synthesis."

Raybine recently completed a CD titled *Balance Act*, which he describes as "my original smooth jazz music with a decidedly melodic orientation and funk/R&B rhythmic grooves."

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