

Robin Horn: Developing Electronic Drumset

BY NORMAN WEINBERG

As a performer, educator, clinician, and composer, Robin Horn is making his mark on several fronts. If you've been to a recent NAMM show, you've seen Robin demonstrating the newest electronic drumsets at the Yamaha booth, but you may not know what's behind the demos.

Horn started playing drums when he was eight years old. "I studied music for two years at De Anza College in San Jose, California, and two years at the University of Toronto. In addition, I've taken lessons with musicians such as Peter Erskine, Graham Lear, Milt Holland, Emil Richards, Chuck Flores, Jake Hanna, Jim Blackley, and Russell Hartenberger, and studied Brazilian percussion with Memo Acevedo, tablas with Taranath Rao, and jazz composition with Ted Moses."

Robin's studies paid huge dividends as his performing career expanded into the

Los Angeles scene. Living in L.A. for seven years, Robin performed live and recorded for studio and television. He released his debut CD, *Fast Lane*, in 1990. Robin also wrote the title track for Wayne Linsey's Virgin Records release *Perfect Love*. He worked with such artists as Airtio, Brian Bromberg, Tom Ervin, David Friesen, Frank Gambale, Paul Horn, James Ingram, The Jets, Steve Kindler, Barry Mann, Marilyn McCoo, Aaron Neville, Tommy Newsom, Linda Ronstadt, Diane Schurr, Ben Vereen, and Eugene Wright.

Currently an Artist-In-Residence at the University of Arizona, Horn specializes in drumset instruction and electronic percussion. He has been a pioneer in the application of electronic percussion to the teaching studio. "At UA, Gary Cook and I put together a MIDI studio, complete with a rack filled with gear, along with an acoustic kit with triggers, and a Mac

G3 computer," Horn says. "The studio also has Yamaha electronic drumkits. I teach the students how to program drumkits, layer sounds, work with multiple notes, etc. The electronic kits have about 100 songs built in to play/record along with, so we pick styles that the student needs to develop, and we get to work. Because there's a mixer in the studio, the students and I both wear headphones and that enables us to play together. In this manner, we can isolate certain sections of songs, and I can suggest grooves, licks, interpretations, etc. I also teach how to program drum parts for songs into computers, and we get into sampling."

As co-director of CrossTalk, the University of Arizona's Electronic Percussion Ensemble, Horn composes and arranges music for the group. "This ensemble makes use of just about every type of percussion controller, synthesizer, and sampler," he says. "Again, we make certain that the students have a firm command over knowing not only how to play their particular controller—such as the Zendrum—but how to program the sound module or sampler that they are using. The result of this is pretty obvious: We're preparing students to have skills in electronic percussion as well as the traditional percussion studies. We're dedicated to giving the students some 'real world' skills necessary to succeed in the business."

The techniques and performance technologies that Robin teaches in lessons and uses with CrossTalk are similar to the ones he employs in his solo performances and clinics. "If you've seen Tony Verderosa, Akira Jimbo, or me at the Yamaha booth at trade shows playing what seems to be an entire band or orchestra, it's due to a technology called 'multiple notes,'" he explains. "In short, you can play several notes from each pad and create multiple musical effects. For example, with the DTX, you can play up to five notes with a single stroke, and these notes can occur simultaneously,



like a chord; alternately, like an arpeggio that cycles through those five notes; or velocity cross-fade. In this last type, you can trigger different notes depending on what volume you play the pad or drum.

"To take this a step further, you can combine these triggering techniques within a preset kit that you've developed. For example, you can have the kick pad play both a bass drum sample and cycle through a four-note bass line using an internal bass sound from the DTX, have another pad or two reserved for playing chords, and have other pads designated for playing melody lines. Even with all of this, there are still pads left over for playing regular drumkit sounds.

"The real challenge comes in playing a regular drum part on certain pads and remembering what pads to play to trigger melodies, chords, and bass lines. The positive effect of this is that it forces you to develop your concentration chops *big time*, and come up with new stickings and independence.

"When you apply this multiple-note capability to the technology that exists

within a high-end sampler, the results are incredible—and endless. With samplers, you can get into triggering loops and bass lines from the pads. You can also manipulate sounds in infinite ways in a sampler to come up with your own unique sounds. If you use a computer or sequencer, then you can design, or sequence, a phrase of music, record it into the sampler, then trigger that phrase from the pad of your choice. I like to play different original compositions in various styles based on this technology and break it down step by step. This unravels the mystery of the one-man band."

Horn is a member of the development team for Yamaha's electronic percussion system. He was invited to submit a number of compositions to be included in the new DTXTREME system. "My goal was to include a broad cross-section of musical styles that are fun, yet interesting and rhythmically challenging to play along with. The songs are from my first CD, *Fast Lane*, and some new compositions that will be included on my next project. These pieces were all sequenced

as MIDI files and use all the sounds that are included in the DTXTREME's sound library. Because all of the melodic instruments are different than my CD, I spent a lot of time balancing and mixing the new voices. I also gave a lot of thought as to what percussion parts would be helpful to include for play-along.

"One of the songs, 'Crimson,' has a burnin' synth guitar solo by Frank Gambale, who co-wrote the tune with me. Another song is 'Robin's 7,' which alternates between 4/4 and 7/8. There's a section in the middle where you get the chance to trade eights, fours, and twos in 7/8 time with some great keyboard solos. It's a blast!"

PN

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