Plugged In
Soundware Roundup

by Norman Weinberg

A Big Batch Of Cool Sounds & Grooves

During the last 20 years, we've witnessed an intense growth and maturity in electronic percussion. It wasn't so long ago that our available sound-set consisted of nothing more than a sterile world of synthetic blips and beeps. While these sounds were certainly unique for their time, and can still prove useful and valuable in many types of music, there has been a steady progression towards increasing realism and purity of color.

Over the last few years, electronic drum kits have offered a large number of high quality drum-set sounds, common percussion instruments, and the opportunity to trigger a good selection of general MIDI sounds such as bass, piano, guitar, synth leads, and special effects. The ability to play and control loops, so important in today's musical styles, has also worked its way into a few of the more advanced brains.

By routing the MIDI output from an electronic kit's brain or drum controller into a sampler (hardware or software), an entire new and superbly rich sonic world becomes available. Imagine being able to play complex berimbau grooves, a set of marching tenors, orchestral crash cymbals, an Arabic violin, or a one-of-a-kind glass harmonica, right from your kit adding nothing more to your rig than a small sampler or laptop computer! Let's take a look at some of the newest sound libraries.

Steve Smith's Rhythmic Journey
PUBLISHER: EASTWEST
FORMAT: AUDIO/WAV, AKAI, UNITY
PRICE: AUDIO/WAV $49.95, OTHERS $99.95

Like signature sticks, sampled loop libraries of well known and respected drummers carry a lot of box-office weight. Several high-profile drummers have created soundware libraries, and this recent offering from Steve Smith has it all. What really makes this package extraordinary is Smith's command of the kit and his superb sense of style and groove. It's all here: the busy yet tasteful left hand with hundreds of inflections that seem to make the snare drum talk, an outstanding bass drum sound with his characteristic mix of strokes into and off the head, and the colors that come out of his cymbals – rides, hats, and crashes – are just too much! Under his sticks, each instrument of the kit lives in its own little world of subtle phrasing and nuance. And,

when all the instruments are blended together, it's magic!

This disk does a great job at offering variations and subtle changes to grooves. A typical groove contains 10 to 30 variations of two- to four-bar grooves, along with a number of short phrases that can serve as introductions, fills, and endings. The accompanying booklet does an adequate job of describing the beats by offering a generic title (such as "Pop

Groove" or "Send Her My Love"), a beats-per-minute indication, and a "loops" or "fills/endings" classification. I loved the "What's Going On" and the "Rhythm Nation" grooves.

The one-shot samples are well recorded and offer the raw materials to blend additional strokes into the loops. I particularly like the hi-hat and ride samples. But the shining stars in this collection are the loops. Plenty of style to work with and some heavy, heavy grooves!
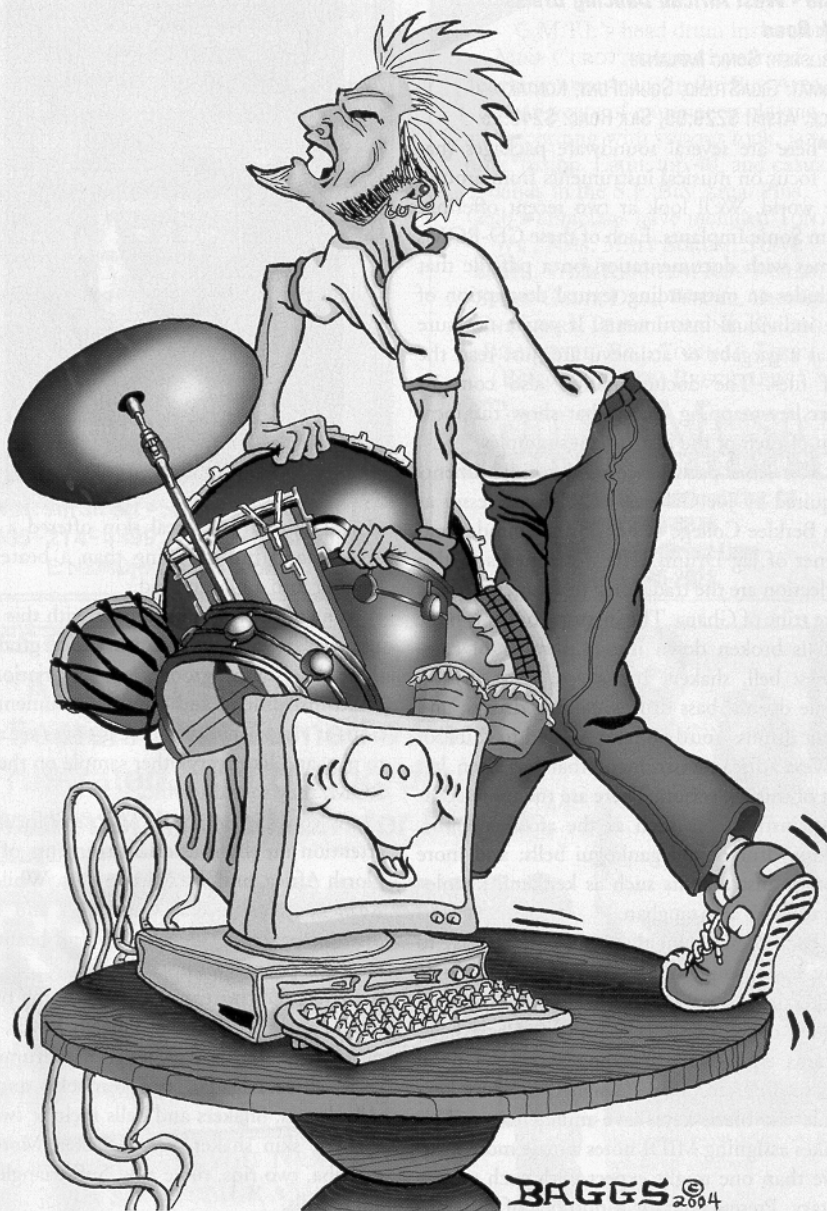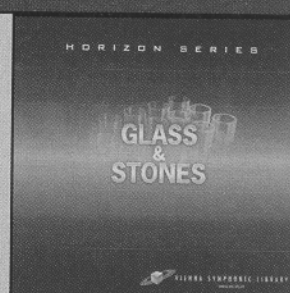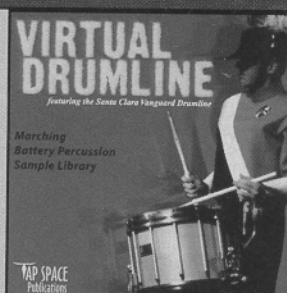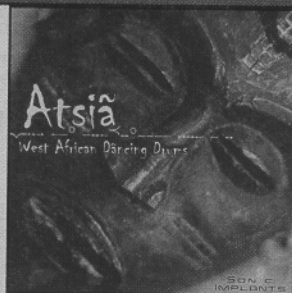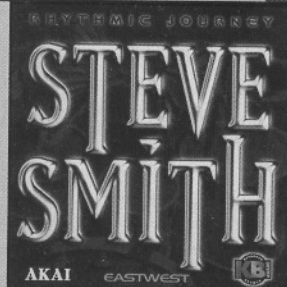
Atsiã - West African Dancing Drums
Silk Road

PUBLISHER: SONIC IMPLANTS
FORMAT: GIGASTUDIO, SOUNDFONT, KONTAKT
PRICE: ATSIÃ: $229.95, SILK ROAD: $249.95

There are several soundware packages that focus on musical instruments from around the world. We'll look at two recent offerings from Sonic Implants. Each of these CD-ROMs comes with documentation on a pdf file that includes an outstanding textual description of the individual instruments. If you're not sure what a gargaba or atsimevu are, just read the pdf files. The documentation also contains clear key-mapping charts that show the location of each of the instrument's samples.

The *Atsiã* package consists of instruments acquired by Joe Galeota, associate professor at the Berklee College of Music and founder and owner of Jag Drums. The instruments in this collection are the traditional instruments of the Ewe tribe of Ghana. The instrument list is huge and is broken down into a number of categories: bell, shakers and snaps; floor drums; frame drums; bass drums; talking drums; and other drums. You'd be hard pressed to think of a West African instrument that has been left out of this collection. There are the more common instruments such as the afoxe, djembe, talking drums, and gankogui bells; and more esoteric instruments such as kenkeni, kpanlogo, totodzi, and sangban.

Each preset is highly organized and easy to play. For example, the shekere preset has single shakes in the lower octave, double shakes in higher octave, and taps on the black keys. Drums typically have strong and weak hand hits in different octaves assigned to white keys while the black keys have muted tones. This makes assigning MIDI notes a little more intuitive than one might expect with such a large library. Presets contain a number of different samples for each of the playing styles, sounds, or effects an instrument offers.

You shouldn't feel that this package is solely for African grooves. Drums is drums, and once you get some creative juices flowing, you'll easily be able to hear how these sounds could be used in a variety of musical applications. For example, the gome samples make excellent bass drums. I used the f4 and g4 pitches together to make a super set of double bass drums for a very tight and punchy sound. The combination
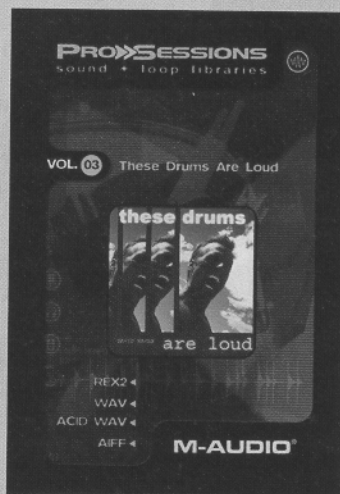
of real skin striking real skin offered a more organic and funky feeling than a beater ball coming into a plastic head.

One of the fun things to do with this package is play with the African dance grooves – three big dance grooves with variations of multi-instrument and single instrument versions at various tempi. These grooves are a blast to play and like every other sample on the CD-ROM, they sound terrific.

As you might expect, *Silk Road* focuses its attention on the musical instruments of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. While *Silk Road* contains several woodwind and string instruments, there are a number of beautifully recorded percussion instruments.

Percussion instruments include the bandir, three copper bowls, two Tibetan bowls, three dumbeks, darbuka, daff, two frame drums, garbada, three nagadas, two tombeks, and two udu drums. Shakers and bells include two bell shakers, skin shaker, vessel shaker, Moroccan garbaba, two riqs, three zills, Sufi triangle, and ankle bells.

Each instrument's programs and presets are complete with all the sounds you need to make beautiful music. The Bandir patch has a variety of single strokes; dum, slap dum, two teks, two slap teks, and two snaps under the keys from C3 to A3. But the usefulness of the patch comes from the variety of multiple strokes that can be used in conjunction with the single strokes. There are multiple finger rolls; muffled finger rolls; flams; three-, four-, and five-stroke groupings; glissandi; and long rolls. Other per-

cussion instruments are offered with a similar eye towards thoroughness.

The recordings of these instruments are so clear and clean, and recorded with such warmth and splendor, that playing one or two notes will light the creative flames inside you. The frame drums are some of the best-recorded samples I have ever heard. The finger cymbals and riqs are outstanding examples of how good a sampled instrument can sound. *Silk Road* also serves up a large number of loops for many of the instruments. Again, the loops are recorded with meticulous detail and sound great.

Virtual Drumline

PUBLISHER: TAP SPACE PUBLICATIONS
FORMAT: GIGASTUDIO, SOUNDFONT
PRICE: $99

Here's an idea. Take one of the best drumlines on the planet and build a sample library around them. This package is the creation of Jim Casella, one of the most respected leaders in the drumline community, so you know that the product is going to be first-rate. *Virtual Drumline* contains four main files for GigaStudio; the snare line, the tenor line, the bass line, and the cymbal line. If you're using a software or hardware sampler that can handle SoundFont banks, *Virtual Drumline* offers three different files; full (containing all samples), medium (doesn't contain all samples), and small (minimum configuration). One of these three versions should work for those with more limited RAM.

This package is complete with all the bells and whistles that make the special sounds and playing techniques of the drumline such an exciting sonic exploration. Did they leave anything out? I don't think so. The snare line included samples for individual right- and left-hand strokes, short/medium/long buzz rolls (cresc. and decresc.), sustained buzz roll, dry crush, wet crush, right and left hand rimshots, ping shot, right- and left-hand rim clicks, over-the-head shots, rim knocks, stick shots, right-and left-hands with dreadlocks, right- and left-hands with felt sticks, ride cymbals, bell of rides, crash on cymbals, dreadocks on cymbals, stick clicks, and the shell of the drum. The files for tenors, bass drums, and cymbals are equally comprehensive.

Each of the instruments is multi-sampled

with up to eight different velocity levels. While these changes in velocity can be heard on all of the sounds, they are most apparent when listening to the snare line. The changes in velocity, when coupled with the large number of samples, work together to create a very natural performance.

One of the best things about this package is the care that has been taken to link the library with the high-end notation program called Sibelius. While the Virtual Drumline can certainly be used as a stand-alone library, there are several folks who are using this package to hear their drumline arrangements from their computer. There is a very active newsgroup on the Tap Space website where users can mine the vast resources of other folks who use the Virtual Drumline library. This is an outstanding tool for anyone who writes or arranges music for drumline at any level – high school, college, or championship competitions.

Glass And Stones
PUBLISHER: VIENNA SYMPHONIC LIBRARY
FORMAT: GIGASTUDIO, EXS 24 MK II
PRICE: $275

Glass and Stones is provided on a single DVD with 4,300 samples totaling 4.4 GB. It is totally dedicated to four extremely unique instruments: glass harmonica, verrophone, musical glasses, and lithophone. Explaining the mindset behind the creation of the Vienna Symphonic Library is beyond the scope of this article. If you're not familiar with the VSL project, the attention to detail can be illustrated by the fact that the VSL team built a new concert hall – the Silent Stage – for the project. Recordings in this space deliver an average 95 dB signal-to-noise ratio.

Here's a short description of the instruments included in Glass And Stones. The glass harmonica is an instrument first invented in 1761 that has a series of nested hemispherical glass bowls mounted on a spindle. The spindle rotates along its horizontal axis turning the bowls while the performer touches the rotating bowls with moistened fingers. You may be more familiar with musical glasses. These are wine glasses that are rubbed around the rim with fingers to produce a sustained high-frequency pitch. You can control the pitch at home by filling the glass with varying amounts of water (or your favorite adult beverage). This particular set of musical glasses had their pitches pre-determined in the glass blowing workshop and did not need any tuning adjustment with liquid. The verrophone is a relatively new instrument that consists of a series of chromatically tuned glass tubes. The instrument is played by rubbing with fingers like the musical glasses, but can also be played with mallets. Lithophones, an instrument classification that includes those made of

stone, have been known for centuries. This particular lithophone closely resembles a marimba and was developed at the Technical University of Zurich. It has a five-octave range, a series of resonators, and a totally distinctive sound.

If you use this package with GigaStudio software, there are additional patches that make use of Giga's "release trigger" and "release control" features. In short, Giga is able to fire a unique set of samples on "key up." Patches that feature the release trigger programming call up the release portion of the sample when the controller issues the note-off command. Patches that use release control allow control of this feature by using the modwheel. These features provide a much more realistic release than most samplers that simply close down the envelope. The performance sound doesn't just get softer; you actually hear the sound of the note's release.

The glass harmonica samples are presented as portato and sustained notes as well as half-tone trills. The mallet strokes (actually a special effect with the glass harmonica) include normal and short single notes as well as glissandos. The lithophone offers a larger variety of strokes. There are "normal" strokes with hard and soft mallets, glissandi, sul ponticello, and several special effects such as playing with the fingers, fingernails, stones, knitting nee-

dles, bowed, and with "shattering" tremolo-like sounds.

The wonderful thing about this soundware package is that each instrument is totally unique and offers a sound pallette that is fresh and distinctive. Of course, you won't be able to use these sounds for each and every piece you play, but for those special occasions where you're interested in setting a specific mood, these sounds just might do the trick.
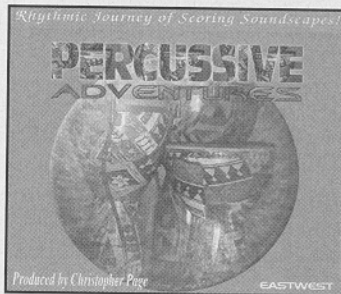
Percussive Adventures

PUBLISHER: EASTWEST
FORMAT: AUDIO, AKAI, GIGASTUDIO, KURZWEIL, UNITY
PRICE: AUDIO $69.95, OTHER FORMATS $199.95

The guiding hand behind *Percussive Adventures* is the concept of providing complete percussion landscapes. Delivered on audio CD and three volumes of Akai CD-ROMs, are 95 full-length percussion compositions ranging from 20-50 seconds in length.

In general, these pieces were designed to stand on their own. Most of the textures are rich and thick with good use of the stereo field and great attention to the details of sonic balance. Several of the pieces creatively mix high and low percussion instruments to weave a complete texture. Very low instruments, such as big drums with lots of effects, thunder sheets, bowed gongs, tam-tams, and explosions are contrasted with close-miked higher-frequency percussion such as shakers, tabla, ankle bells, or tambourines.

These short compositions have hundreds of potential uses. They could be popped right out of the box into movie or TV cues, or married with your own melodic and harmonic creations. Some compositions are highly rhythmic while others paint a vibe that is more non-metered. All are very cool. I honestly didn't hear any tracks that I thought were lame.

Armed with a program like Re-Cycle on the Mac or Sound Forge for the PC, you could easily slice and dice these tracks into smaller pieces: from a beat or two, to two-, four-, or eight-bar loops. It doesn't hurt that the recordings are very well done and the instruments themselves sound great. Mixing and matching smaller segments from within a single 40-second composition results in plenty of unique yet highly cohesive patterns that

can provide hours of creative spark plugs.

But wait, that's not all! The real fun begins when you start experimenting with disks 3 and 4 from the set. These two disks offer presets that have each composition broken up into various layers and parts. Some MIDI notes fire individual samples, some play the whole composition reduced to various submixes of the instrumental ensemble, and others have short rhythmic phrases of a submixed group. Using these presets, you can combine instruments, layers, and single hits into totally new compositions. How cool is that?

M-Audio Pro Sessions Sound and Loop Libraries
Volume 1 – Discrete Drums: World Rock and Percussion
Volume 2 – Discrete Drums: R&B Drums & Percussion
Volume 3 – These Drums Are Loud
Volume 4 – World Beat Café
FORMAT: MULTI (WAV, AIFF, ACIDIZED WAV, REX 2)
PRICE: $49.95 EACH

M-Audio is known for producing high-quality hardware and cutting edge software, so it's no surprise that the 24-volume set of *Pro Sessions* has all the bases covered, offering everything from drums and percussion to synths and guitars. We looked at the first four volumes to see what's under the hood.

Each volume is delivered on a CD-ROM that is jam-packed full of loops and single-shot samples. These libraries have a huge bang-for-the-buck ratio as all the loops and samples are supplied in four different formats: WAV files, AIFF files, REX 2 files, and Acidized WAV files. This makes each package as versatile as your tools. You can open the AIFF files in your Macintosh, read the WAV files on your PC, or dump the REX files into Reason, Live, or the latest versions of Digital Performer, Cubase, or Logic.

Volumes 1 and *2* consist of different grooves that include both drums and percussion: Bubble, Funk Juice, and Slam It in *Volume 1* and Shake, Skippin, and Swing Theory in *Volume 2*. For each groove, the files include drums and percussion together, drum loops alone, and percussion loops alone. Loops are named by their potential function such as intro, verse 2, break 1, chorus 2, alt beat, etc.; or by short descriptions such as no kick, tom beat, and end crash. Even with these abbreviated names, it's pretty easy to anticipate the sort of function a particular loop will fill.

Single shot samples are offered for all instruments in the grooves. For example, the tom samples are offered in soft, medium, hard, hard 2, and flam varieties for all three toms. The snare samples are just as complete, offering a variety of dynamics as well as flams and rolls. This makes it very easy to create drum patterns in Reason's ReDrum (for example) and experiment with different drums and percussion instruments for more versatility and creative applications.

By using longer loops of four bars, there are little inconsistencies that make for a "real" live feeling performance. Each and every sixteenth-note in the loop is not exactly the same and it's true that variety is the spice of life. Using a software package than can take advantage of this type of file will result in a ton of available single samples and millions of possibilities. For example, a four-bar shaker pattern in a sixteenth-note base is going to result in 64 different samples. You can then take these samples and mix and match to your heart's content.

Volume 3 presents a dozen loops in a variety of musical styles. The loop called "Acoustic Rock" has a nice subtle shuffle feel with gated kick and snare, and plenty of snare buzz in the kick and toms. "East L.A." has a slightly Latin feel with several patterns that incorporate a cross-stick rimshot peppered with a few toms. "Sambaesque" has a great sounding bass drum and a snare with a lot of punch and style. There are some funky patterns that rely heavily on the ride cymbal's bell to propel the energy forward. All the loops are cool and the playing is of the highest quality.

The folder of single hits is a gold mine of colors. "Dave's Snares" contains WAV files of seven cross-sticks and 64 strokes offering an assortment of tones and colors. One thing that's totally cool, there are a large number of strokes played with rods rather than sticks. This alone is worth the price of the package. Hats, snares, toms, and cymbals are all well represented with a large selection of strokes. Most samples are very natural sounding and include full decays that are smooth and clean. Some of the cymbal samples are nearly 12 seconds long! If you're looking for some realistic rides, you've got to listen to these nice crisp samples.

Volume 4 contains full mix grooves, partial mix grooves, single hits, and single percussion grooves. There are 11 styles that represent many common Latin American dance styles, such as bolero, montuno, partido, and rumba. Single instrument percussion files come in both mono and stereo versions. These are not single shots, but loops of varying length; typically one to four measures. These loops have a lot of style and humanistic elements. They obviously have not been highly quantized and cleaned up of all the little elements that give a groove life and character. ✍