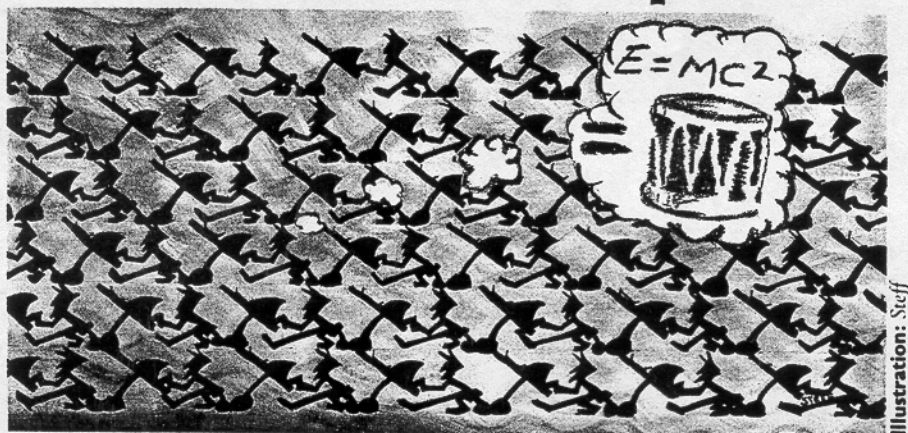


If only I had a little spare time...



Norman Weinberg throws out a few creative ideas on how to get rich, Rich, RICH...

A FEW WEEKS ago, I was talking to some students about wrapping their own marimba and timpani mallets. A few dollars spent on yarn or piano felt, along with a little spare time, can produce several hundred dollars worth of high quality sticks. The discussion eventually worked itself around to small business opportunities for drummers. You know, ways that a drummer might be able to make some extra cash by inventing, building, or designing something that would be beneficial to other drummers.

Admittedly, drummers are a strange breed of animal. Even though there are numerous companies that mass produce percussion instruments of all qualities and price levels, we, more than any other instrumentalists, like to customize or create our own gear.

The percussion world is full of small, home-run businesses that provide high quality products at a fair price. Some of these small businesses have grown into good size companies. Abel, American Drum Mfg., Balter, J.L. Cooper, DeMorrow, Digidesign, Andrew Feldman, Vic Firth, Goodman, Great Plains Percussion, Grover, Hinger, Keplinger, Kraft, Lone Star Percussion, Joe Montineri, Vaughncraft, and Steve Weiss (to name just a few) have found a niche in the percussion market and filled it quite well. They all had good ideas, carried them out, and the drumming community is grateful. And don't forget that some of the big mega-companies such as Ludwig and Apple Computer once began as garage projects.

Like yourself, I've had several ideas of what I would like to see created, produced, and made available. Keep in mind that I'm not talking about things that are impossible, like inflatable drums or a megabyte of additional memory for a nickel. But sometimes I get frustrated that I don't have the time to invent and produce some products that seem to be in obvious need. Right now, I don't – but maybe you do.

The Entrepreneurial Drummer

LET'S BEGIN BY looking at percussion accessories. If I had the time, I'd make a snare drum stand with a cage that could accommodate larger size drums. Our school owns two beautiful old Ludwig tenor drums that measure 17 inches in diameter. Unfortunately, the only stand that will hold them is an old Marvel contraption that's been around longer than most of my students. It's rusting and looks like it's been through a war – and it lost. It's been repaired so many times it has its own charge card at the music store. I really don't want to mount floor tom hardware on the shell of the drum. So what are my options once this stand is beyond repair? A company could manufacture such a cage and offer it as an option to their product line. For some styles of stand, it would only require a longer adjusting arm. Perhaps someone will produce that single arm, put a couple of advertisements in RHYTHM, and see what happens...

Every so often, a student wants to play the 'Concerto for Percussion and Small

Orchestra' by Darius Milhaud. I can't blame them; it's one of the standard works in the percussion literature. This composition requires the use of a special attachment for the bass drum pedal and a special holder for a suspended cymbal. You see, there's a suspended cymbal mounted onto the hoop of the bass drum and when the soloist pushes the pedal, the additional arm on the pedal rocks forward and hits the cymbal as the beater ball hits the bass drum. They used to be very popular in the '20s and '30s, but I haven't seen them around lately. They just sort of fell out of favor when the hi-hat pedal became more popular. I guess I was born too late to be able to buy the required attachments. Meanwhile I'll bet that this composition is played several hundred times a year around the globe. If I had a little free time, I'd build these attachments. Every college and university would have to own one. Who knows? Perhaps the idea of mounting a suspended cymbal on the bass drum would catch back on. Two sounds for the price of one. Call it "layering," get an endorsement by some heavy metal drummer, and watch the postman drop the checks in the mailbox.

What about a bass drum pedal that could move the beater ball against the head with a stroke from your heel as well as your toe? If I had a little extra time on my hands, I'd try to design one. It couldn't be that hard to construct. After all, we're getting ready to build a Star Wars defence system! I'm sure that this pedal could be designed so that it would be comfortable for the player, because I can use a heel-toe technique with my shoe on the floor and it feels just fine. Tap dancers use heel-toe movements all the time. Imagine what kind of things would be possible if you had a pedal like this under each foot. Tommy

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Aldridge, look out! (Editor's note: An attachment to this effect has already been invented by a fellow in Europe named Vruk)

Electronics Innovations?

THE EMERGING WORLD of electronic percussion is ripe for great ideas. Keyboard players have been screaming for more real-time control over their sounds and they've gotten it. Perhaps this is just another case of the squeaky wheel getting the grease, but currently only a few drum machines and percussion brains read or transmit control change messages. OK, so our hands are busy with sticks and our feet are already playing some pedals, but that doesn't mean that all options are used up. As instruments like the Roland R8 drum machine become more commonplace, drummers are going to need a variety of ways to send control messages.

Keyboard players have breath controllers, but these aren't much help to drummers. If I had some time, I'd make a few as yet unheard of controllers for my friends. How about a controller that could read pressure exerted by a drummer's teeth? Clench your teeth together, and you send controller values. The harder you squeeze, the higher the value. It could be about the size of a postage stamp, and be made out of the same material as a football player's mouth guard.

The counterhoop of a drum might be a great place to attach a ribbon controller. No, I've got it. Put the controller right on the drumstick! To change the sound of the drums while you're playing, just reach a finger up and touch a certain part of the stick. When the stick breaks, just peel the controllers off the old pair and attach them to a new pair. How about a stick that could recognize changes in fulcrum pressure or pressure caused by squeezing the back fingers?

How about a controller that could read the physical placement of your head? If you flicked your head up or down past a certain predetermined point, a control change or patch change message would be sent to some external sound generator. By using your head (no pun intended), you could send messages based on several distinct planes of movement: up, down, left, right, pitch, roll, yaw, and any other motion that NASA has come up with lately.

While I'm on the subject of electronics, let me throw out a few more ideas. Let some big manufacturer like Roland or Yamaha release a new keyboard or tone generator, and about twenty computer programmers get to work on building librarians, editors, custom sounds, and the like. But where are the editors and librarians for some of the more popular drum machines or electronic drumkit brains?

OK, I understand part of the problem. RHYTHM SEPTEMBER 1989

Some drum machines and electronic sets don't include a very complete set of System Exclusive codes. If the machine can't recognize SysEx messages, a computer librarian can't be written. Maybe it's time that manufacturers got the message that full System Exclusive codes need to be implemented in all electronic percussion instruments! Write your congressman, contact the local musician's union, do everything you can to raise a stink, and maybe the message will get through.

There are a few drum machines and drum brains that do have good System Exclusive implementation. But the only computer librarian for drums that I know of is "Drumfile" by Blank Software for the E-Mu Systems SP-12 sampling drum machine. I've got an SP-12, and I use this librarian all the time! This program alone has saved me hundreds of hours. But what about the poor guys who have Roland, Yamaha, Korg, or Casio machines? Where are their editors and librarians? If I only had a little spare time, I'd make some serious cash. There must be 20,000 Yamaha RX-5 drum machines out there in use. If a programmer sold an editor to only 10% of the owners, that would generate 2,000 sales. Even if the editors sold for only \$50 (very cheap by software standards), that would create a gross sales revenue of \$100,000.00! That's real money in anyone's book. How hard could it be to port that program over for the Yamaha D8 drum brain and generate even more sales?

Perhaps that kind of bread isn't enough for the larger software firms to bother with, but what about us drummers? What about "Uncle Louie's Software Shop"? Even if you've never programmed a line of code in your life, it can be learned. Computer programmers aren't any smarter than drummers. Programmers know how to program and drummers know how to play drums. Everything you've ever wanted to know about programming librarians and editors can be picked up from reading books and writing code. In many ways, it's just like playing drums: Anyone who wants to learn simply has to take the time and trouble to do it.

While we're on the subject of electronics, here's one more idea. If I had some free time, I'd build a little box with can be mounted on a cymbal stand for data messages. Hitting one side of the box would act as an increment button and striking the other side would serve as the decrement button. Using this little multi-pad, you could call up different programs, step through a chain, or even change the value of some parameter during a live performance. A few electronic kits will let you use a pad or a footswitch for changing the current program, but two little pads like these would be much more versatile.

Any takers?