IT'S ABOUT TIME

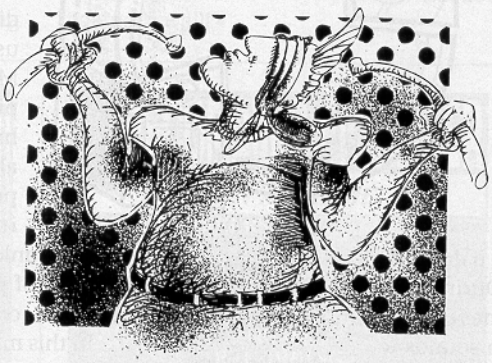
Creative Programming Ideas

BY NORM WEINBERG

ON SOME PROJECTS, THE DRUM AND percussion lines can help turn an average composition into a creative masterpiece. Coming up with an interesting groove can influence a tune's compositional direction, and a unique rhythm often serves as the hook that captures the listener's attention.

But it's not always easy to be original. As producers, engineers, and musicians, we have stockpiled preconceived notions about what music is and how it should sound. One way to induce originality is to turn off the musical experiences and influences of your past. This way you leave yourself open to new ideas.

Blind Programming. Here's a simple yet effective technique for building drum machine patterns that are unique. First, turn off all the audio outputs coming from your drum machine. Next, put the machine into RECORD mode and start hitting buttons. Naturally, quantizing is fairly essential to the success of this technique.



Since you won't be able to hear the machine's metronome, you won't be influenced to support the meter in the traditional manner (like putting a snare on counts two and four). In addition, you won't be able to hear any sounds as the pattern loops, so you won't be listening to how one instrument interacts with another (such as bass drum relating to snare or hi-hats).

Be Original. Break Some Of Your Own Rules.

Once you've banged on the buttons for a while, turn up the audio outputs and see what you've got. If it sounds too busy, press fewer buttons next time. If it sounds too spare, press more buttons. Try playing at different dynamics, assigning different sounds to the buttons, or try recording with different levels of quantization.

The nicest aspect of this technique is that you can create 40 to 50 patterns in a short amount of time. From that large number, you should find at least three or four that sound hip. Another five or six might work out fine with a few minor changes; perhaps adding or deleting a single bass drum or a snare drum in the proper place would do the trick.

Alternate Sound Generators. A drum machine is nothing more than a box of sounds with an internal sequencer. Have you ever thought of sending the sequenced MIDI information from your drum machine to a different sound generator?

One technique that works extremely well is to MIDI your drum machine directly into a multi-timbral sound generator that contains percussion sounds (such as the Roland D-110, E-mu Proteus, or Korg M1). Sometimes the timbres will correspond (the drum machine's bass drum also will fire the sound generator's bass drum), but the most original patterns occur when something completely unexpected happens. Maybe the drum machine's bass drum will fire a cowbell or a timbale on the sound generator.

Even if the drum machine's rhythm track is fairly standard, the relationship of the different percussion colors coming from the sound generator will make the pattern distinctive. If you have a computer-based sequencer, consider recording the drum machine pattern into the software, then transposing the track. Since these instruments typically contain 60 or more drum sounds, you're likely to find a transposition that contains many colorful relationships.

Oops, Wrong MIDI Channel. If you work with a fairly complex MIDI system, you've probably run across this next technique by accident. Simply send the melody of a song from your sequencer to your drum machine (bass lines and *ostinatos* also work well). Since melodic passages usually are longer than rhythmic grooves, the trick is to listen to the passage and try to find an interesting phrase.

Once you run across something you like, loop the passage and see how it feels as a drum pattern. If single melodic lines are used, then the rhythm track will sound "linear" in nature. A polyphonic section like a fugal passage, background chords, or a melody/counter-melody structure will produce a "vertical" drum track.

This technique can take you in one of several directions. You can use the melodic material from one piece as the rhythm track of another composition. Or you can achieve a degree of unity by using materials that originate from the same composition.

When you strive to be creative, keep an open mind and two open ears. The real beauty of MIDI and electronic instruments is that hundreds of ideas can be tried quickly and inexpensively. If you come up with something that doesn't work, throw it away and try again. Your next effort may be the one that wins critical acclaim for its originality. •

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