

DRUM MACHINE PROGRAMMING

NORMAN WEINBERG

A TRIP INTO THE REGGAE ZONE

REGGAE HAS BEEN AROUND FOR quite some time. Its feel, groove, and style continue to influence music in many genres. So, let's get right to it and look at some of the patterns and fills that make reggae cook.

In the most basic sense, reggae is a slow groove (quarter-notes moving from about 58 to 86 beats per minute) with the strong beats

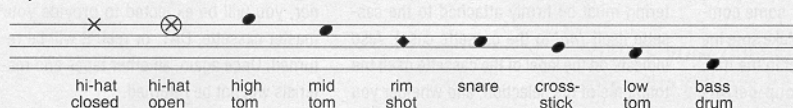
on two and four. The "classic" reggae feel uses triple subdivisions, but reggae songs can also have a straight eighth- or sixteenth-note feel (more about this later).

Intros. Many reggae tunes begin with a short unaccompanied drum flourish that serves as a "call" to the rest of the musicians. Most often, these pick-up patterns are one or two counts in length and have strong lead-in characteristics. Example 1 shows three of these introductory

fills. The first two make use of 32nd-note subdivisions, a common rhythm in reggae fills. The third pick-up is a 12/8 figure that emphasizes

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key



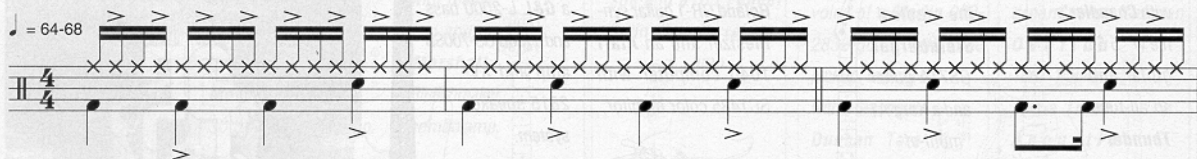
Ex. 1. Three common pick-up fills.



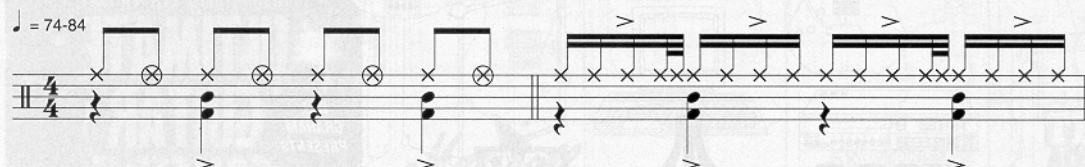
Ex. 2. A typical reggae groove in 12/8 followed by two fill patterns.



Ex. 3. Two reggae patterns that use duple divisions of the beat.



Ex. 4. Two up-tempo reggae patterns.



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the triple subdivisions of each beat.

Patterns. Example 2 is a typical reggae groove in 12/8. As often happens, the cross-stick rimshot replaces the normal snare drum stroke. In terms of balance, the hi-hat strokes are fairly light while the bass drum and cross-stick notes are mixed hot. The following two bars illustrate some of the rhythms that drummers use in playing reggae fills. Notice that the notes outline the triple subdivisions of the beat, but are highly syncopated with plenty of off-beats. As for ending fills, don't be afraid to use the bass drum on beats other than two and four. Punctuate the end of a fill with a cymbal crash and a bass drum note on the downbeat of the following measure.

Example 3 shows two different patterns that use duple divisions of the beat. The first is a two-bar phrase with the accents played off-the-beat, which gives the pattern a slight lilt. The second pattern in this example has a slow rock feel.

More up-tempo reggae patterns can be seen in Example 4. Both patterns use the stylistic feature of stressing each "and" of the beat. In the first pattern, the stress is with the open hi-hat, while the second pattern uses accents and 32nd-notes to give the second half of each beat more energy.

Programming Hints. Getting the correct feel is an important aspect of programming reggae

grooves. Patterns in common time have even eighth-notes, but the inner sixteenth-notes have a slight lilt or swing to them.

On some drum machines, the swing feature only affects the second half of each beat. If your drum machine behaves in this socially unacceptable manner, adding the swing command to a steady stream of sixteenths will make the rhythm sound lumpy. Instead, program the patterns using eighth-notes in place of the sixteenths and then double the tempo. Be careful, as this may cause synchronization problems with other units. If you're programming on a software sequencer that offers a variety of swing levels, try using swing values between 52% (very subtle but noticeable) and 58% (more "in-your-face").

Sounds. As a general rule, bass drum and snare drum timbres in reggae are quite different from one another. The bass drum should be tight and thumpy. Its pitch is low and deep, but not especially resonant or full sounding. The snare drum should be high-pitched and bright. It's not surprising that many reggae patterns use a cross-stick rimshot instead of a normal stroke to exaggerate this tonal difference. Reggae drummers often augment their drumkit with other Latin-American instruments. It's not uncommon to find a reggae drummer using timbales and/or bongos instead of the tomtoms found on a more traditional kit. Feel free to use these instruments as a substitute for toms during fills.

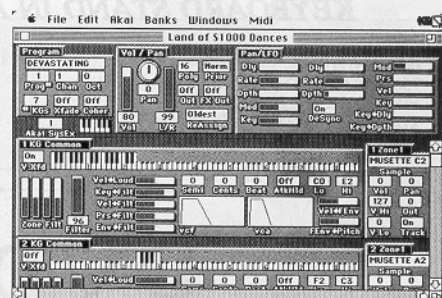
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