Drum Machine Programming

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More Timing Tricks

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Under the sticks of a master. Conversely, the best custom-built kit can sound like trash if the drummer doesn't have a clue. Drum machines are no different; they depend on the player.

Many programmers solve the mechanical drum dilemma by harnessing the drum machine's internal sequence altogether. By programming rhythm tracks directly into a computer-based sequencer, you can use your drum machine exclusively as a sound generator. Then again, rhythm machines can be extremely versatile at producing certain tasks such as copy-sequencers, deleting selected voices, and chaining patterns into songs, it is possible to get the best of both worlds. Maybe so.

I'm sure that you've heard recordings where the drum track alternates between one or two standard beats throughout the entire tune. The results are usually tedious and lifeless because that's not how real drummers play. Most drum machines initially suggest that you work in short patterns and two measures. Short patterns tend to be convenient and concise memory because the same patterns can be called up in various sections of the music. But don't really think in repetitive chunks. Every bar flows into the next and, like soundtracks, no two measures are exactly the same.

Tip #1: Set your drum machine's pattern length to eight or 16 measures before recording.

Real drummers don't play little plastic buttons with their fingers, they use sticks. Tip #2: The most realistic way to program a drum machine is from a drum pad, period! Even if you've never held a pair of sticks in your life.

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The physical sensation of hitting something is going to impart a certain amount of realism to your programming. (e.g., bouncing a steel ball around your drum machine and then using MIDI notes with a 16th-note value.) This is a powerful method of adding realism to your programming.

The next time you record a drum track, try recording the track and then removing it from the tape. Then, play the track back, and you will hear the difference. The human ear is a powerful tool in programming.

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Timings and music. It seems that the pendulum of change has been swinging the other direction lately. When drum machines were first introduced, the sounds were recorded as drum tracks with perfect timing resulting from the grid. Perfect was hot. Recently, though, manufacturers have been trying their best to bring humanization and feel back into the machine; Perfect is out.

Machine-generated rhythm tracks are often pedestrian, lifeless, tiring, and just plain dull. Almost any model drum machine can produce realistic and percussive rhythm tracks. But it's up to you to make it happen. Programming a convincing drum track is, in many ways, similar to commanding an acoustic set of drums. A cheap drum set can sound great under the sticks of a master. Conversely, the best custom-built kit can sound like trash if the drummer doesn't have a clue. Drum machines are no different; they depend on the player.