



BANG THE DRUM

Creating Hooks on Rhythm Machines

If you ask a few of your friends to name their ten all-time-favorite musical hooks, you're certain to get a slew of different answers. Keyboard players may tend to identify with hooks that involve a keyboard part (perhaps the octave portamenti played by Keith Emerson in "Lucky Man"). Drummers might include Steve Gadd's military-based groove in "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover." And guitar players might point to that screaming solo in "Thriller." The point is that everyone has a different idea of what makes a great hook. ● Perhaps the easiest way to describe a good hook is to think of that special something that makes a song memorable even after the very first hearing. Many

By Norm Weinberg

Illustration: Eric Thomason

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songwriters have a special gift for creating million-selling hooks. It's easy to create a list of possible musical ingredients that can be made into a hook (as you read this list, use your mind's ear to listen to a favorite tune that uses each hook idea):

Lyrics: A super catchy or clever lyric (during the verse or especially during the chorus) has often been enough to create the hook for a tune.

Melody: Occasionally, a good writer will compose a melody that is so strong, the listener is singing it for the rest of the day.

Harmony: Perhaps the harmony to the chorus is unique, imaginative, or daring enough to raise the hair on the back of

the listener's neck.

The Hot Solo: It could be played by a keyboard, guitar, sax, or even harmonica, but the solo is just so burnin' that you've just got to hear the tune again!

While it is certainly possible for a song to sell itself on the basis of a single hook or great idea, you'll have a better chance to reach the "hit" factor if your creation has two or more strong hooks. The very best composers and songwriters often have several hooks in the same song. Perhaps they've joined a strong melody with a great lyric and placed it within a heart-stopping chord progression.

The drums are all too often overlooked when it comes to creating the hook. The self-imposed requirement of punching two and four on the snare can often stifle creative hooks in the percussion parts. With a little thought and extra effort, though, the drums can become a major contribution to the hook factor of a song. Below are just some of the musical building blocks that can create a hook in the drum and/or percussion tracks of your song. Since many of these ideas are interrelated, consider combining one or more of them in your next track.

Sound. A unique sound can easily act as a hook. Just as you sweat and toil over pro-

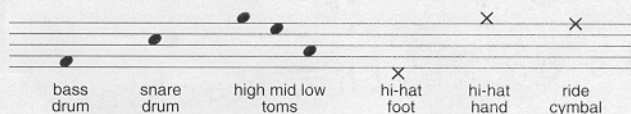
gramming special patches on your favorite synth, creating your own drum sounds will give your composition that special flavor. With all the sample-editing software on the market, not to mention the thousands of drum sounds and loops available on CD, you can custom-design a unique color for the bass drum, snare drum, toms, or any of the cymbals. One of my favorite bass drum sounds was created by mixing, cutting, pasting, and reversing the sounds of two different bass drums, a floor tom, and a gunshot.

An easier method of custom designing drum sounds is to layer different percussion

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key



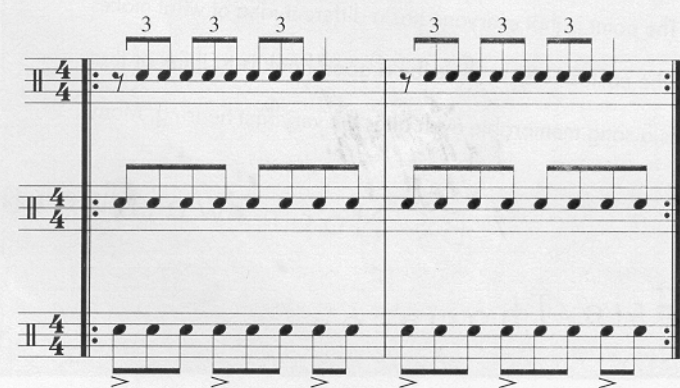
Ex. 1a. Typical Ghanaian rhythm, played by two different instruments.



Ex. 1b. Ghanaian rhythm of Example 1a revoiced for drum set.



Ex. 2a. Ikoro slit-drum rhythm from Nigeria.



Ex. 2b. Ikoro rhythm from Example 2a revoiced for drum set.



together. Now that so many percussion sound generators are capable of layering multiple sounds, you can create that "fat-back" snare drum sound by layering five or six different snare colors. You might wish to create your hook sound by layering different instruments that are complementary or even contrasting in nature.

If you prefer, you can decide to break the bonds of tradition and replace the established drum set sounds with other percussion instruments that can easily take their place. Here are just a few examples: Instead of the normal drum set bass drum, try a concert bass drum, a surdo, timpani, gunfire samples, or a sample of your fist hitting a large suspended sheet of drywall. A snare drum can be replaced with a taiko drum, iron pipe, bongo,

or tambourine (now extremely common). Try a triangle or anklings in place of a hi-hat, or use timpani for tom-toms. Try a substitution so weird no one has ever thought of it before, and see what happens.

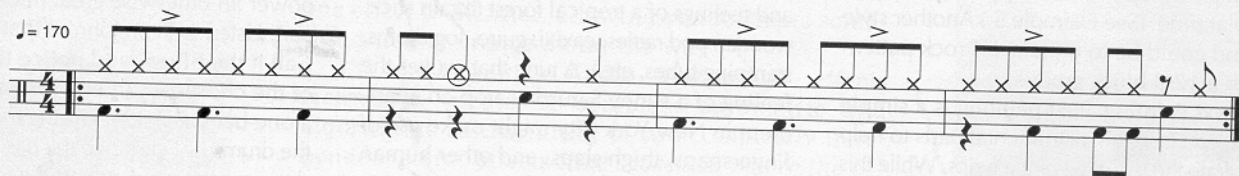
Don't forget that using audio effects can help create a distinctive sound. Sure, everyone knows about passing the drums through some EQ or adding a little echo and reverb, but some very cool drum sounds can be created by sending them through one or more of the myriad "stomp boxes" that guitar players use every day. Try phase-shifting the cymbals, adding some wah-wah to the toms and bass drum, or passing the snare drum through a ring modulator.

Style & Groove. While we're on the subject of substituting or designing new sounds,

you can create a unique groove by using both the indigenous percussion instruments and the idiomatic musical styles of various countries and peoples. Paul Simon created the hooks for several tunes by using the musical styles and instruments of South Africa and Brazil. But some other musical heritages have yet to be blended with our Western pop music styles. There are some fantastic percussion instruments and musical styles in Korea, Syria, Ghana, and India. (See Examples 1 and 2.)

There are even some styles right here in the good ol' U.S. of A. that are not explored as much as they might be. The "second-line" drumming style of New Orleans is common in music by such artists as Dr. John or the Meters, but few composers have created a fusion combining second-line drumming with styles

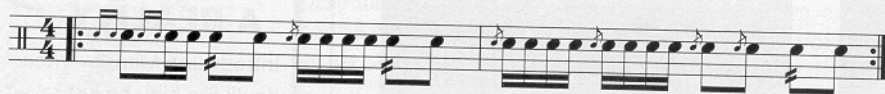
Ex. 3. Second-line drumming style; program this with a shuffle feel similar to that in the tune "Iko-Iko" (by James Crawford).



Ex. 4. Second-line drumming style; the use of flams gives a strong marching feeling.



Ex. 5a. Rudiment-style drumming.



Ex. 5b. Rudimental pattern from Example 5a revoiced for drum set. There are hundreds of ways to revoice this pattern.



Ex. 6. Examples of text painting with drum set.



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outside of this geographic area. (See Examples 3 and 4.)

If you take the traditional snare drum rudiments and apply the rhythms and stickings to the drum kit, you can arrive at something new and useful — the sticking may help determine which instruments play at any particular time. (See Example 5.) Another style blend could be to unite a 4/4 rock pattern with a 12/8 blues groove.

Text Painting. Text painting is a simple concept: Use the instrumental parts to help illustrate the meaning of the lyrics. While this tried-and-true technique has been around for centuries, most composers think of text painting as purely a melodic or harmonic

device. Why not apply the same technique to the drum and percussion parts as well?

For example, if the lyrics mention running, you might briefly switch to a sixteenth-note passage on the hi-hat, so that the drums imitate the busy physical activity of running. You could program the drums to observe a rest for a short time near the lyric "stop." If the lyrics indicate a movement upward (high, loud, bright, etc.) a fill can ascend through the various pitches of the drum set. If you use your imagination, many descriptive lyrics can be creatively imitated on various percussion instruments. (See Example 6.)

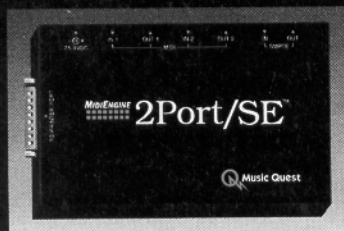
In addition to painting specific words of the text, you can paint a picture of the mood of the music with percussion. If your musical creation concerns saving the planet by efficient use of our natural resources, you could texture the background with wooden instruments that evoke the sounds, textures, and feelings of a tropical forest (a rain stick, wooden pod rattles, caxixi, guiro, log drums, stamping tubes, etc.). A tune that evokes the feeling of a sunny Saturday atop an apartment in New York City might make use of fingersnaps, thigh slaps, and other human percussion sounds.

Nothing at All. One of the most effective methods of using drums to stir up the hook

of a tune is to leave out one or more of the traditional instruments that make up the drum set. For example, try programming song without using any cymbals. As mentioned earlier, you might use another percussion instrument to replace the parts that the cymbals might play, or you can even leave the instrument's function completely out of the picture. I remember listening to a recording that had Bill Bruford playing drums, thinking, "There are no cymbals on this track, how cool!" I wasn't aware of the fact until the third time I heard the song. I knew unconsciously that there were many interesting things about the composition, but I wasn't immediately aware that the cymbals were missing. It certainly gave the song a special flavor and character.

You might try leaving the drums totally out for a bar, a section, or even the entire tune, especially when drums might overpower an otherwise great hook in another part. Listen to Elton John's "That's Why They Call It the Blues" and notice the structure of the chorus — an eight-bar phrase with a one-bar extension. During the extension the drums just continue the basic beat. Most drummers would use this opportunity to play a powerful fill back into the verse. Less is sometimes more.

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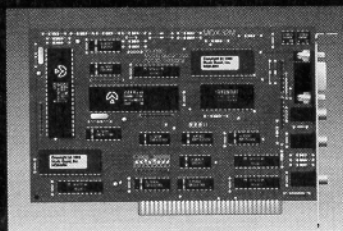


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