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A Sampling of Samples: Percussive Sounds for Your Library

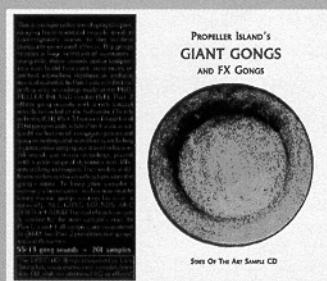
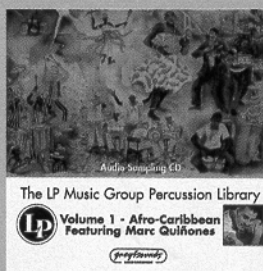
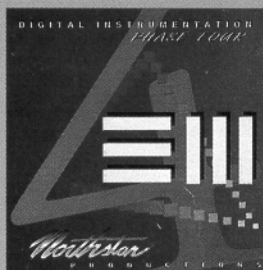
by Norman Weinberg

Samplers are an essential element for many electronic drummers. The ability to gain new sounds by simply creating new samples is a wonderful example of expandability, but often when you create your own new sounds, the recording, editing, placing, and tweaking off samples is an extremely difficult, time-consuming and sometimes expensive art to master.

Enter the sampling CD or sampling CD-ROM to make your life easier. A sampling CD is an audio CD that is designed to be sampled into your machine. The advantages of using an audio CD are obvious. First, you don't need to find someone to create the original sounds. For example, if you're looking for some new djembe samples, you won't have to talk your local music store into loaning you an instrument. You won't have to find someone to play it, you won't have to rent a professional studio with an outstanding desk and a multitude of expensive microphones, and you won't have to pay for an engineer.

If you own a CD-ROM drive for your sampler, you may wish to go this route. CD-ROMs are usually more expensive, but with a CD-ROM, all of the sample editing work has also been done for you. Typically, CD-ROMs contain banks of sounds that have the presets already programmed and ready to play. Just load the bank, select the preset and start rockin'.

One additional note before the reviews begin — the prices for RAM have been shrinking fast during the last year. If your sampler uses normal RAM chips instead of proprietary chips, buy more memory now. For the CD-ROMs in this review, a 16



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megabyte memory is the price of admission. For a few of the more fancy banks, you'll need 32 MB of RAM. As the price for RAM continues to drop you might think about bumping your machine up to its maximum RAM potential.

Burning Grooves (Spectrasonics. CD-ROM with Audio CD \$199. Audio CD Only \$9.00). The complete *Burning Grooves* set contains two CD-ROMs with an Audio CD. The first CD-ROM is identical to the Audio CD and includes loops and variations. The advantage of having both formats is quite clear: you can scan the audio CD and listen to the loops much faster than loading the samples into your machine. Once you've selected the groove you want, then you can load the bank and not have to worry about creating the samples yourself.

The disk contains 98 grooves, and is

organized by tempo with the slowest metronome markings at the beginning of the disk. Tempos range from 56 bpm to 178 bpm, with the vast majority of patterns in common time (there are a few 3/4 and 6/8 grooves).

These grooves are really individual — not your ordinary loops and tired old backbeats. In just about every instance, there is something about each loop that makes it very special. The booklet states that the producers wanted to create a loop disk that would be "unique and inspiring." I think that they've done it!

All performances are by Abe Laboriel Jr., and on this disk he proves that he's got chops, time, groove, style and a creative mind that can come up with some very clever motions. Some people believe that sample CDs should not be recorded with any audio processing. They prefer to record

the samples dry and add any desired processing after the fact. Well, this disk isn't one of those!

The audio processing on the disk is very hip. There are snares that seem to be compressed and reverbed beyond any normal circumstances, big splashy hi-hats (are they really a pair of 22" rock-crashes?) that are so in-your-face that you can't see anything else, bass drum and tom sounds that have longer decays than most pianos — and fantastic stereo separation.

Each groove includes the basic pattern with a few variations and the groove without snare or kick. This way, you can combine some of the grooves with the other drum sounds contained on the CD-ROM of Kits. Now, isn't this a cool idea? Oh yeah, don't forget that since a pattern may not have a bass drum, you can really start it on just about any beat of the measure (or even a half-beat) to create a totally different pattern.

The Kits CD-ROM contains 25 complete drum kits, six banks of snares, and one bank each of kick, tom, hi-hat, and cymbals. The kits are large (anywhere from 10 to 16 MB) and sound just great!

The accompanying booklets are really outstanding. In addition to the play-by-play, which is absolutely necessary, the booklets provide information about the recording process, the keyboard layout for all of the drum kits contained in the CD-ROM, helpful hints for using loops with a sampler, and sampler-specific instructions for machines of different formats (E-mu, Kurzweil, Roland, etc.).

Classic Beatboxes and Drum Machines (Greysounds. CD-ROM PRICE?). Years ago, I had an E-mu Systems SP-12 sampling drum machine. When the Alesis HR-16 came out, I heard the sounds and wanted to buy one. Then it dawned on me — I had a sampler built into the SP-12! I could just borrow a friend's HR-16 and sample all the sounds. Well, you know that I did it, and it worked just fine (except that the 16-bit sounds from the Alesis machine were sampled with the 12-bit technology of the E-mu, but that's another story). If you've got a sampler now, have I got a disk for you!

Classic Beatboxes and Drum Machines was created by David Kerzner, a keyboardist and programmer from Los Angeles and well-known collector of vintage electronic instruments. For this CD-ROM, samples

were recorded and placed into banks containing just one or two presets. Don't expect anything fancy here, just raw samples of the sounds placed under some logical keys and ready to play. This is a great collection for those of you who have samplers with limited memory. Depending on the number of sounds contained inside the original machine, banks typically require less than a megabyte of memory.

All the major sounds seem to be here: the 808 bass drum, the E-mu snares, the Alesis percussion sounds, and Simmons' great filters on the toms. So what other samples are included on this CD-ROM? Take a big breath now: Roland's TR-505, 606, 626, 707, 727, 808, 909, CR-78, Rhythm 77 and the DR-55 Dr. Rhythm; Korg's SR-120 and 55B; Sequential's Drumtrax and Tom; Oberheim's DMX; E-mu's Drumulator; the Linn Drum and the Linn LM-1; the Yamaha RX-5, and more esoteric machines such as the Univox, Rhythm Master, Maestro Rhythm Jester, Electro-Harmonix Beat 16 and some Simmons Drums.

In addition to the basic drum samples, there are 17 banks of drum loops. Since the loops are "static" (no way to change them), I feel that they are just the "gravy" that comes with the samples. One note though — the cheesy bass and rhythm lines that accompany the Chamberlin rhythm loops are just too retro. You've got to hear them!

Double Platinum Drums (Ilio Entertainment. CD-ROM \$299). *Double Platinum Drums* is a four-disk set, but only two of the disks are totally unique. Disks 1 and 2 are recorded with "room ambience," and disks 3 and 4 are identical, but recorded "dry." Disks 1 and 3 contain loops and loop kits/cymbal kits. Disks 2 and 4 contain modular hits and kit combinations. The concept behind the loop disks is that you can load the loops and their associated kits into your sampler and add your own drum and cymbal hits and fills as necessary.

With the modular hits and kit disks, you can easily build your own kits. Since the same note map is strictly followed for all the kits, it's a simple matter to combine different kicks with different snares, cymbals and toms to suite your individual needs.

The loop banks contain several variations and small fills and fill measures. The loops are, of course, looped, and the fills are shorter segments that aren't looped. With this format, it's easy to put these

together and "play the loops" in real time. Each bank also includes a beginning fill pattern and one or two endings.

The loops in this collection range from tempos of 66 bpm to 164 bpm, with a few faster patterns for special effects. Styles include all of the general stuff, including pop, rock, country, samba, shuffles, funk, and even some surf grooves. Michael Botts is the artist here, and his playing is hard and solid with a good deal of groove and a lot of spirit. The subtle variations in the loops are genuine and offer a reality that few loop disks can match.

The second and fourth disks in this collection contain single hits and kit combinations that are outstanding. There is a DW maple kit, a Tama birch kit and a Remo composite kit. The toms sound full and rich, the snares crack with a bunch of punch, and there are enough brush samples to cover that casual gig at your grandmother's wedding. Listen to some of the extended brush swishes on the snare and you'll see how useful this collection of drum samples can be. By the way, it's great to hear the brushes on cymbals in addition to the drums. There are several sets of cymbals contained on this disk, including a set of A. Zildjian, K. Zildjian, Zildjian Platinums and a wide range of effect cymbals. One special item: this disk contains a cymbal roll with a soft mallet that lasts 13 seconds. It's a very smooth crescendo, and seemingly unique to sample libraries.

Giant Gongs and FX Gongs (Propeller Island. Audio CD \$99). This CD is too cool! Propeller Island's sampling CD (not a CD-ROM) is one of the hippest I've ever heard. The philosophy here seems to be "Do one thing, but do it very well." This CD contains nothing but gong samples. To be more precise, 201 individual samples spanning just over 53 minutes.

The disk is divided into four parts: Part I contains ten different instruments recorded in the studio without ambience. Part II contains a dozen gongs recorded at the Salvatore Church in Berlin. Part III features gong sounds with heavy use of filters and odd EQ settings. Part IV is an avant-garde selection of computer-processed gongs and gong waveforms.

Since gong samples can be very long (a loud stroke can easily decay over several minutes) all the samples on this disk are subtly faded. Congrats to Lars Stroschenm, the CD's creator, performer, editor and

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producer, for adjusting the fades in such a way as to not interfere with the natural decay of these samples.

Most of the gong samples are outstanding! The large "Antique Gong" samples have just the right amount of beater noise during the initial attack and rich oscillation or "beating" between the mix of overtones and harmonics. The "Big Gong Studio" is an outrageous set of samples with a very natural fade and an attack that spreads and builds in a very characteristic manner. Some of the more esoteric gongs — such as the "Big Java Gong," with a very focused pitch center, and the "Earth Gong," that sounds almost like an electronic construction — have unique timbres that are quite interesting and very useful. There are a number of samples that could best be described as metallic clinks that sound a little like someone banging on the side of steel drum. While not especially great gong samples by themselves, they work very well as special effects and would be a welcome

addition for those of you who work with industrial soundscapes.

The church recordings have, as you might expect, an entirely different flavor. They are warmer, darker and richer than their studio counterparts. The characteristic metallic overtones tend to blend together well with less individual identity. The 12 samples of the "Symphonic Gong" are incredible.

The FX-filtered gongs in Part III are interesting and very fresh. One of the most distinctive set of samples on the disk are the "Moving Gongs." For these samples, the instrument is moved after the attack, altering its position in relationship to the microphones. The result is the creation of vibrato-like effects with slow and irregular changes of the balance and intensity of the various overtones.

Part IV contains many special effect samples with long-sustaining ambient tonescapes that at first seem static and then grow and change in a very subtle manner. These sounds are not exactly noise, but certainly aren't produced by a normal acoustic instrument, though they do have some sort of organic identity. If you're

looking for some specialized, unique, non-pitched pads, you might find them here.

The LP Music Group Percussion Library (Greytsounds. Audio CD \$99). This audio CD set contains three disks. Volume I contains Afro-Caribbean instruments performed by Marc Quiñones. Volume II contains Afro-Brazilian instruments played by Ron Powell on two CDs: Disk 1 is comprised of single hits and Disk 2 contains rhythms.

This set comes with 48-page and 44-page booklets that should become the standard for all other sampling CDs. Information included in the booklet covers the track, the index number, the rhythm and tempo, and the instruments used, for example: "Conga & Tumbadora - Classic Model w/plastic heads (LP559X/LP552X)."

The format for the idiomatic rhythms include the composite pattern followed by each individual instrument isolated out from the full pattern. These included the cha-cha, two son montuno patterns, bomba, plena, merengue, gua guanco, orisha, songo, three different 6/8 grooves, two pop grooves, and one Bata rhythm. Not only can these grooves be sampled and looped,

but they also provide an outstanding lesson in how the instruments are played and how to perform typical rhythmic patterns on these instruments. For example, if you want to learn to play the guiro, just listen to Quiñones playing on "Cha-Cha 2" and you've got a wonderful example to follow.

Individual instrument samples are also outstanding. Just for an example, the set of samples for the "Generation III Bongos" with rawhide heads includes 52 individual samples: four attacks each of 13 different strokes. The selection of instruments is the most complete that I'm aware of: three Bata drums, four different sets of bongos, three different sets of congas, six sets of timbales, five guiros, five claves, five maracas, 18 cowbells, two castanets, bell tree, cajon, djembe, tambora, vibraslap, granite blocks, groove blocks, jam blocks and five different wood blocks.

Disk 1 of Powell's Afro-Brazilian volume contains the rhythms of afoxé, baião, three bossa novas, frevo, makulélé, maracatu, marcha, maxixi, ola dunn, pagode, two partio alto rhythms, nine samba rhythms and four African rhythms. These rhythms are a little looser than the rhythms offered

on Quiñones's contribution. If you're familiar with these Brazilian grooves, you'll know that they aren't typically performed with click-track precision. These patterns stay true to the authentic, idiomatic feel of the style. Worthy of special note is the outstanding pandeiro playing, the great-sounding grooves and the talking drums.

The individual instrument hits are contained on the second CD and are every bit as complete as those mentioned earlier. Five different agogo instruments are sampled with both stick and metal beaters and with open, closed, flams and with the bells striking each other.

The berimbau samples are some of the best that I've ever heard, and the inclusion of a variety of birdcalls and whistles are a welcome addition. Also included are afuches, cabasas, caixa, ganzas, caxixi, bar chimes, congas, crickets, cuicas, finger cymbals, frigidiera, Ice Bells, Jingle Sticks, kokorikos, pandeiros, rainsticks, repique, shekeres, surdo, talking drums, tamborins and tambourines.

This disk is highly recommended for the variety of berimbau samples, both with and without caxixi. There are enough shakers of

various construction and sound quality, that you're sure to find what you're looking for: tight/thick, light/coarse, high/low, etc. The Bar Chime samples include glissandi with a great deal of activity, up and down motion and shimmering, high frequencies.

Both CDs are recorded dry, without any natural or artificial ambiance, and include all of the natural decay of the instruments. This means that sounds with extended durations, such as wind chimes or open drum samples, are complete. If you're looking for sounds of instruments made by the Latin Percussion company, this is definitely the package for you.

Phase Four (Northstar Productions. CD-ROM \$495). Northstar claims that this disk is the largest ethnic and world instrument CD-ROM available for the E-III class of samplers. They may be right. Included on this disk are 85 banks of sounds divided into 33 8-MB banks and 52 4-MB banks. That's over 460 MB of sounds! Each bank typically contains a large number of individual samples and plenty of presets. In fact, the accompanying booklet states that there are over 3,500 presets.

The CD is organized into banks of

strings, percussion cymbals, percussion drums, percussion combination, percussion shakers, percussion pitched and ethnic winds of various types. Included in the string collection are some of the more common instruments such as guitars, banjos, lutes, dulcimers and bouzoukis, along with some less common little fellows such as saz, hasapi and zheng.

Cymbal banks include Korean gongs, Java gamelan gongs, Jordanian gongs and a great 8 MB bank of Iran brass zills. In the percussion drum category are African sugu, chueshee, breketa, gome and odunu, as well as two banks each of udu drums, beledi, darabuka and tabla. Percussion combination banks include ethnic instruments of various countries combined into presets such as African Combo, Japanese Percussion, Korean Percussion, Hawaiian Percussion, Cameroon Percussion, etc. Other categories and banks are equally diverse and full of interesting and useful sounds.

These banks are optimized for the E-III class of instruments with changes between samples and styles based on velocity switching, velocity to pitch, velocity to filter cutoff and additional tricks that the E-mu samplers do so well. All you need to do is load in a bank and start exploring the presets. For example, the African Combo contains 24 different samples combined into 55 presets. No doubt that Northstar has done its homework here. The udu drum bank (with hits and performances played by David Beal) has normal presets, isolated presets (such as finger hits, slaps and pops, and "scooped" hits) and effect presets using chorus, flanging and stereo delay. Very cool!

Worthy of special mention is the Tibet Mediation Bowl. This 8 MB bank contains only two samples and they are astounding in their realism. The movement, texture and color of this bank is so mind-grabbing, that holding down a single note for about ten minutes is a new-age composition by itself!

One bummer. The steel drums used for sampling were in desperate need of tuning. The fundamentals all sound okay, but the overtones are out of tune, making the drum sound sour. The real strength of this CD-ROM comes from the depth and variety of the hundreds of percussion samples, not the pitched materials. Some of the string and

other pitched instruments seem to suffer from spreading the multi-samples just a little too far. When working with instruments of such exotic flavor, the tonal characteristics often change dramatically from note to note. When just a few samples are stretched across an entire keyboard, the lowest notes of one sample and the highest notes of an adjacent sample are just too different from one another. When this is the case, making a smooth melodic line is nearly impossible.

Synclavier Sampler Library: Disk I - Essential Percussion, Disk II - World and Orchestral Percussion (Ilio Entertainment. CD-ROM \$187 each.) Anyone involved with electronic music should be familiar with the Synclavier. This was an amazing instrument that was used and owned by a large number of the highest-profile artists. Frank Zappa and Stevie Wonder are just two of the creative folks who built entire recordings on the Synclavier technology.

The idea behind this set of disks is simple: offer the original Synclavier sounds on CD-ROM for today's samplers. This is a great idea and I've got to tell you that these sounds are something special.

Essential Percussion, contains over 100 banks (ranging from 0.1 to 8.5 MB) with one to ten samples in each. These are not fancy-schmancy banks with tons of creative presets, it's just the samples, the whole samples and nothing but the samples. The "Ambient Really Huge Kick" is exactly what the name implies. The "Bizarro" percussion sounds are lots of fun and very useful for many types of music. The shakers are thick and rich, and the snare drum roll samples in the orchestral snare bank are the real deal. The electronic toms bring back sweet, old memories of days gone by, and the kick drums are solid and punchy. In addition to the sounds of drums, cymbals, Latin percussion, electronic percussion and effects, this disk also contains several banks of electric bass samples.

World and Orchestral Percussion has a little more variety, in that some of the banks offer additional presets. Of special note are the bell trees. They sound more like sarna bells than what our Western ears associate with the term "bell tree," but they are really nice. The chime samples take up 12 MB of memory, but they are the closest imitation of church bells that I've ever heard from a sampler. And check out the waterphone samples next time you score a TV thriller.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Propeller Island c/o Ilio Entertainment, P.O. Box 6211, Malibu, CA 90264. 800-747-4546. Fax: 818-707-8552.
Spectrasonics c/o Ilio Entertainment (see above).
Northstar Productions, 13716 SE Ramona St., Portland, OR 97236. 503-760-7777. Fax: 503-760-4342. E-mail: nssamples@aol.com.

The timpani samples are abundant (18 banks!), but aren't as useful as I would have hoped. Single strokes are placed in odd positions on the keyboard and span less than an octave before the timbre changes. There are rolls (nice to include them in a bank of timpani samples) but they need some additional tweaking to be totally convincing. The set includes strokes of hard, medium and soft mallets at a variety of dynamics from piano to fortissimo, but the pitch is not very focused. These would probably work fine for timpani passages inside an orchestral mix, but the most effective timpani samples are banks of patterns. One great set of samples is called Timpani "Chase" Patterns. Here, the drums sound great, the patterns are hip, and the dynamic contrasts are convincing.

Legal Stuff. Okay, this is really important information. When you purchase sampling audio CDs or CD-ROMs, you'll need to be very aware of the legal ramifications of using these materials in your music. For most manufacturers and distributors, what you really pay for is not so much the actual physical disk, case and liner notes. You pay a licensing fee for the rights to use these sounds in your own music without paying any extra royalties.

In most cases, the publisher asks that you credit the use with a written statement like the one suggested by Spectrasonics: "Drum loops by Abe Laboriel Jr. courtesy of Spectrasonics' *Burning Grooves*." In short, if you use these sounds to create music, you'll be okay. If you want to figure out a way to repackage and resell the sounds, you may be in trouble. To play it safe, be sure to read the small print on these disks to be sure that you don't break any laws. ■