A year ago, if you wanted to get a new electronic drum kit on the cheap, you had to drop nearly a grand. For some folks -- and I count myself in this group -- a thousand bucks is serious green. Then, all of a sudden, Alesis entered the market with a low-cost electronic set (around $500 on the street), and lots of jaws hit the floor. So before you read on, put a hand under your face. You've been warned.

OUT OF THE BOX
As you no doubt expected, the centerpiece of the DM5 kit is Alesis' DM5 brain. This machine has been around for a while and is generally considered to be a good, solid module with fast trigger inputs. The set itself contains five drum pads -- a kick, snare, hi-hat, and two toms. For cymbals, the kit comes with two pads that function as a ride and a crash. It also includes a kick drum pedal, a hi-hat pedal, a rack stand,
all the necessary cables to hook everything together, and even a pair of sticks! In fact, the DM5 kit is so complete that the only thing you'll need to start playing straight away is something to sit on.

**FEATURE FOCUS**
The DM5 uses 18-bit samples recorded at 48kHz. That's a little better than what you hear on a typical compact disc (16-bit files at 44.1kHz), and is pretty high-end stuff for a low-cost kit. The audio polyphony for the unit, however, is only 16 notes, which means that playing more than 16 notes at a time will cause some notes to be cut off before they are finished sounding. While it might seem that playing 16 notes at the same time is a pretty rare occurrence, when you're firing long sounds like toms and cymbals, it's not all that hard to hit your head against that ceiling. Happily, the DM5 holds a total of 21 different kits in memory at one time, which is not a huge number of independent kits, but is certainly enough for most gigs and nearly any practice situation.

The DM5 also boasts a pretty complete set of sounds. There are 94 kicks, 116 snares, 70 toms, 33 hi-hats, 35 cymbals, 113 percussion sounds, 64 effects, and 15 "random" sounds. The random sounds need a little bit of explanation. When one of the them is selected, a different sample of the same voice type (snare, hi-hat, percussion, etc.) will trigger each time the pad is played.

The front of the one-rack-space unit includes a headphone jack, master volume knob, and a LCD display. A large knob is used to change the value of the various parameters, and nearly every function has its own dedicated button to enter into editing mode. The back of the brain contains an input for the power brick, a footswitch jack, MIDI-In, MIDI Out/Thru, 12 mono trigger inputs, and four audio outputs. Having four outputs increases the potential for live performance and studio use.

Getting around the interface is really quite simple and one of the best features of the unit. There's a separate button for each of the following functions:

**VOICE.** This button is used to select the external trigger parameters are adjusted inside this function. They are covered in detail in the next section.

**GROUP.** This button determines how a voice will sound when a number of strokes are played in quick succession.

**MIDI.** Here you can edit the DM5's MIDI parameters: the root note, the MIDI channel, the MIDI Out/Thru selection, the local control on/off, the program change enable, the controller enable, and the program change table.

**TRIGGER TALK.** All the trigger inputs on the DM5 are mono. This works just fine for the kit, as all the drum and cymbal pads are single-trigger pads. You can't program a separate sound for a rim stroke or striking the bell of a cymbal pad. You could, however, add a dual-trigger pad to the kit (perhaps for the snare) and use two inputs on the DM5. Since the kit has seven pads and the brain has 12 inputs, there's room for future expansion.

As for programming the pads, the DM5 lets you set the gain, the velocity curve (eight different curves are available), crosstalk between the pads, decay, and noise. In Alesis-speak, decay is not the length of the sound but the amount of time before another stroke can be recognized from the same pad. When adjusted correctly, this parameter helps to avoid double triggers. The "noise" value serves as a noise floor that must be met or exceeded before the drum will fire. This helps prevent false triggering from external vibrations.

If you want to use your DM5 as an external sound module for a software sequencer, you can access 61 notes at a time (from MIDI note numbers 36 to 96). You can also shift the root-note range to any MIDI note number. Using this system, you could have your sequencer trigger percussion sounds while you play drums along with it for practice. Keep in mind, however, that you'll be limited to 16-note polyphony for the entire machine.

**PERFORMANCE REVIEW.** Putting the kit together was actually quicker than I thought it would be. From opening the box to playing the first note took me about 56 minutes. The rack comes in a number of pieces, but the instructions were clear and relatively easy to follow. As might be expected for a kit at this price point, everything is pretty lightweight. The clamps and collars are all plastic, but the bars are made of metal. Since the rack has three crossbars, it's surprisingly sturdy. Instead of using a drum key to make adjustments, all parts on the rack and pads are adjusted with the included hex-wrench.

Once all the pads and clamps were tightened down, everything pretty much stayed put. You'd have to be a really heavy player to get the pads to slide or move from position. I was also impressed at how easy it was to get the pads into a playable position around the rack. It might not fit everyone's physical layout, but it should work for the vast majority of players.

The drum pads are a shaped a little like a shield and are about 7.5" wide and about 7.75" front to back. For drum pads, they're on the small side. I don't mind having a...
VERDICT

Even when you're offering an electronic kit at this price point, you've still got to bring enough to the table: For the cash involved, Alesis spreads out a banquet. The OM5 provides seven pads with a high-quality brain and everything you need to start playing as soon as you get it home. If you're looking for a kit to put in a state-of-the-art studio or to take on the road with a busy band, you won't be happy with the OM5. If you're a beginner or intermediate player looking for an inexpensive way to practice at home without driving your family or housemates crazy, this kit could be for you. And if you're comfortable with acoustic drums and want to get your feet wet in the world of electronic drums, the OM5 will definitely do it. Right now, you won't find a better electronic kit for the money.

tiny target (I've got a pretty focused stroke), but they're so small that it feels like I'm playing on a kit made out of bongos. When played, the pads make a distinctive click sound, not unlike hitting a plastic tabletop covered by a thick sheet of rubber. They're certainly not as loud as playing real drums, but they're louder than mesh-head pads and even most rubber pads. The cymbal pads are 11" in diameter and are also made of plastic with a rubber playing surface. There's a little bit of play that gives the cymbal some movement on the stand, and you can adjust the spring tension to make the cymbal move more or less, depending on your liking. While the pad itself does not have a tilting mechanism, there's one built into the rack arms that hold the cymbal.

Both the drum pads and the cymbal pads tracked just fine, and there was a good deal of dynamic contrast between soft and loud strokes. While not as sensitive as some of the better pads on the market, for most playing, they worked fine.

LET'S FACE IT

If you're going to bring an electronic kit in at this price point, you've got to make some sacrifices. Here are a few things that matter, as well as a few minor issues. The hi-hat pedal, for example, is very light-weight and flimsy. Because of some strategically placed rubber buttons, it didn't slide around on me too much, but you'll be happier buying a better electronic hi-hat controller to go with this kit. The bass drum pedal is functional but certainly not professional grade. I was able to get it adjusted to my playing style, but it didn't inspire confidence. The included drum sticks were terrible — unbalanced, unmatched, and way too short. Don't even try to use them.

The DM5 brain will let you set an open and closed hi-hat and even a foot stroke. But you won't be able to program a foot splash. MIDI and on-board sound layering or alternation is not possible. One pad equals one sound. While the brain does have a large number of sounds, I've been spoiled lately by the amazing quality of recent drum software packages such as BFD, Drums From Hell, and others. The sounds on the DM5 are good, but they're not killer. And too bad that the unit doesn't have an audio input so that you can play along with your favorite tunes on your iPod.