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**HARNESS
THE POWER OF
THE iPad**

Alesis

DM Dock

By Norman Weinberg

The concept behind the Alesis DM Dock is really smart. With the explosion of Apple iPad owners worldwide, why not use the iPad's computational power to serve as the front-end of a drum brain? It has a huge display, dead-simple user interface, and some pretty advanced music software already available in the app store.

I tested the DM Dock with the current (fourth generation) iPad as well as the iPad 2. Both versions fit just fine inside the DM Dock, and while these two iPads use different connecting cables (lightning and 30-pin), the DM Dock comes with simple adapters that fit perfectly with both models.

The marriage of DM Dock hardware with DM Touch software requires a two-part review, so let's begin in the physical world.

THE HARDWARE

In some ways, the DM Dock is a cousin to the Alesis IO Dock II. Both units serve as sophisticated hardware interfaces to the iPad's internal software, offering pro quality inputs and outputs that transform the iPad into a "brain." While the IO Dock II's strengths lie in microphone inputs and 24-bit digital converters, the DM Dock is designed for electronic drum inputs.

You'll find everything you need to connect your electronic kit to

the iPad and the outside world. The DM Dock has 12 quarter-inch TRS trigger inputs for kick, snare, four toms, hi-hats, two rides, two crashes, and an FX input. There's also an input for a hi-hat controller pedal and a footswitch that can be used for various functions. Other jacks include the main stereo outputs, MIDI-in, MIDI-out, and a USB jack to connect to an external computer. This is a very complete set of ins and outs that should adapt to most electronic kits or hybrid setups.

The TRS inputs accommodate single-surface pads as well as pads that trigger from both head and hoop. Cymbal inputs are also all dual zone, and the ride cymbal input is capable of reading a three-zone pad if needed.

While the DM Dock is made of plastic, it feels solid in your hand. Once you slide your iPad into place and close the access door, the iPad nestles securely into the chassis; have no fear that the iPad will slip out or be damaged.

I really like the design, and think it complements the iPad's aesthetics. The front face of the DM Dock is clean and simple. Under the iPad are a knob to adjust the headphone output and a knob to adjust the main outputs, as well as a small light that glows when the unit is powered on. The headphone jack (a real quarter-inch jack) and footswitch connect to



GOT A NANOSECOND?

That's how long it takes to slide your iPad into the Dock.

the left side of the box, while all other inputs and outputs are on the back of the unit.

THE SOFTWARE

While the DM Dock is the hardware interface to the iPad, the real functionality comes from the software. Alesis' DM Touch is a free app you'll have to grab from the Apple App Store. The download was quick and simple, and once I loaded it on my iPad, I was ready to go. You can play around with the DM Touch software, even if you don't have a DM Dock. In fact, I recommend that you download this free software app to get a feel for the interface, play around with the audio and programming options, and give a good hard listen to the sound quality of the app and the samples provided. Even without the DM Dock you can edit and save drum kits. (Of course, the controls that point toward tweaking the inputs won't do anything, but you should still be able to get a good idea of how the DM Dock

will enhance your drum rig.) If you want to dip your toes into the world of finger drumming, you can play all the sounds of the DM Touch simply by tapping the instrument's pictures on the main screen.

The kit screen of the DM Touch app is a clear and clean image of a 6-piece kit with five cymbals and a cowbell. While the images don't change to match the sound, you can drag and drop any of the program's sounds into any of the instrument locations. So, for example, you could make an entire kit of cymbal sounds, or assign additional percussion sounds in place of toms. You can find your sounds on the left side of the screen by either scrolling through the complete list of 145 instruments or browsing under 13 headings such as Acoustic Toms, Electronic Cymbals, Percussion, FX, and so on. Other screens include Tuning, Mixer, Settings, and Metronome.

Select a graphic of a drum key, and a selection of tuning



adjustments appears near each instrument. The tuning range is from -1200 to +1200, offering a total variation of two octaves. Hitting the tuning key graphic a second time causes the tuning knobs to disappear.

You'll find an individual fader for each instrument as well as a master fader to control the

overall volume of the kit in the DM Touch's mixer area. Each channel contains its own reverb send value and stereo pan position. This is also where you select the type of reverb you want to add to the kit from 12 choices, as well as adjust the parameters of damp, width, and room size. The reverb is global for all the kit's instruments,

but while you can't change the reverb preset for individual channels, you can adjust how much signal goes to the reverb from each instrument.

There are two pages in the DM Touch's settings section: One controls the individual trigger inputs and the other is a master edit page. The trigger input page

let you individually set velocity sensitivity, MIDI note number, crosstalk receive, crosstalk send, retrigger, velocity curve (five different types), and input type (piezo or switch). The Master area of this settings page has controls for selecting between a 2-zone and 3-zone ride cymbal, the MIDI transmit channel (global for the

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entire kit), a button to reset all triggers to the DM Dock's factory setting, and a button to switch the kit's graphic from right-handed to left-handed.

The metronome page controls time signature, metronome sound (clave, digital, hi-hat, shaker), metronome volume and pan, and tempo. There's even a tap tempo pad as well as a control to have the metronome send or receive MIDI-sync. The metronome lets you set anything from 1–15 beats with a note value between half-notes and sixteenth-notes.

All factory kits are minimal and include Jazz, Trash, Rock, Electronic, '80s, Electronic 2, Tight Funk, Rock 2, Percussion, and Beatbox. While this might seem like a huge limitation, you can easily drag and drop instruments and change tunings, effects, MIDI information, and other options, and save it as a new kit. Calling up a new kit is easy and all of the settings, including MIDI and mixer, are saved along with the instruments and tunings.

TOUCHING THE DM TOUCH

After plugging in my pads and cymbals, I started playing. I have to admit the default settings for the triggers didn't feel quite right at first. It took some experimentation to get the pads to respond how I wanted. Once adjusted, the system felt much better and tracked more accurately. There's plenty of power coming out of the headphone outputs, so take my advice and start playing with the headphone volume at a low level.

I never got the DM Dock system to feel and track as well as a dedicated mid- to high-end electronic kit. Perhaps that isn't an entirely fair comparison, as the intended market and price points are so different.

INTER-APP AUDIO

A great feature of the DM Touch app is its compatibility with inter-application audio. Using this feature, it's not difficult to get another inter-app audio program such as GarageBand to "see" and record the DM Touch software to a track. This makes it possible to play along with songs from inside GarageBand, and even record your drumming into GarageBand as an audio file you can edit just like any other audio track. That's pretty cool.

OTHER CONNECTIONS

By using the MIDI connections, I can send MIDI data from the DM Dock to my laptop and play any number of other freestanding software and plug-ins. While this is a great way to have your electronic kit interface with your computer, you'll bypass all the internal sounds, as well as the outputs on the DM Dock. If you don't have MIDI on your computer, you can do the exact same thing with the USB connection on the DM Dock.

IMPROVEMENTS

One of the great advantages a software-based brain offers over a hardware-based one is the ability to provide new options with a simple upgrade. I hope to see a few new features added to future versions of DM Touch software, starting with its documentation.

The DM Dock comes with a manual that covers only the hardware, with instructions about how to attach the iPad, and connect speakers and triggers — that sort of stuff. But the interface on the iPad is software and there's no manual for the app. I even had trouble finding help online.

Some examples: I couldn't find any indication of exactly how the five velocity curves relate to each other, or whether "log 1" or "log 2" are positive or negative values. When editing, the up/down value buttons don't scroll when held down, but if you place your finger on the value itself, moving up and down will scroll through values quite quickly. I'm embarrassed to admit that it took me several days to figure this out. A manual could have saved time and would be especially helpful for a novice.

Regarding functionality, it would be great to assign one voice/sample to the head and a totally different sound to the hoop. This way a player could have, for example, the head sound of one snare and the hoop sound of a clave. I also hope a future version would let you load your own sounds and samples into the Touch app. With such an upgrade, the power of this Dock/Touch marriage would increase dramatically.

OPINIONS

While DM Touch sounds were generally good, they seemed a little "thin" to my ears. Even most acoustic kits and individual instruments had a slight electronic feel rather than a purely natural sound. As much as I don't like "in app purchases," I think the DM Touch app is a perfect candidate for adding additional high-quality sounds via online purchase through the app store. You could add features such as sounds played by brushes, which are currently missing from the original sound bank.

VERDICT

I really like the DM Dock hardware. It looks great and does the job perfectly. The Dock has all the ins and outs you might need for just about any e-drum kit or hybrid setup. And its price point makes it a good value. The DM Touch software can use a few improvements and features, most importantly, a well-written manual. As you might expect, you'll have to hear the sounds yourself and feel the response under your own hands to be sure the software will suit your needs. That being said, if you own an iPad (and who doesn't?), you should check this out! 