

PLUGGED

7 ELECTRONIC DRUM KITS FOR UNDER \$500

**THE WORLD OF
E-PERCUSSION HAS
NEVER BEEN MORE
ACCESSIBLE**

By Norman Weinberg

Why, when I was young, we had to hand-crank our old generator to get electricity! Back then, there were only a few electronic drum kits available, and only a couple with MIDI. You had your Simmons SDS-9 and your Roland DDR-30. If you wanted to use an electronic kit to interface with a computer or play sounds from a sampler, you had those two choices. Each had only a few onboard sounds, they played like crap, and cost over \$2,000. Today, you young whippersnappers have electricity running into your house 24/7. On top of that, you've got half a dozen kits with hundreds of sounds, plenty of kit memory, MIDI, and even USB connectivity. Plus, they've got a street price below \$500! What a time to be alive.



We're going to be looking at kits from Alesis, Ddrum, KAT, Simmons, and Yamaha. All of these kits have certain attributes in common. All of them come right out of the box with everything you'd need to start playing except a bass drum

pedal and a throne (although some come with a bass drum pedal). You'll get pads for drums and cymbals, a rack-mounting system, hi-hat pedal, all necessary cables, and sometimes even a pair of sticks.

Each kit has five pads des-

ignated as snare, three toms, and sometimes, a dedicated kick drum pad. Three cymbal pads are provided with each kit: ride, crash, and hi-hat. Each of the hi-hat systems offers one sound when the pad is struck with the pedal down (normally

a closed hi-hat) and a different sound when the pedal is up (open hi-hat).

To get an idea of how the kit feels under your hands and the responsiveness of the pads, you're going to have to play the kit in person. But all these kits come with rubber surfaces that are designed to minimize impact sound while giving a somewhat natural drum-like response.

These kits have sound modules that have the ability to select between a number of different kits and assign different sounds to each of the pads. Each brain also has a number of built-in songs that serve as playalongs for your practice. In addition, all modules have an auxiliary input for connecting an iPod or other music player. They also include a metronome and tap-tempo capability.

For some, the money-saving features applied to these kits may be a minor problem. After all, lower costs means fewer bells and whistles, and some corners just have to be cut to bring this much technology in at this price point. But let's face it, those who are buying a kit in this price range

want a good value for the money, but likely aren't expecting true professional features or performance. Does that mean anyone interested in a kit like this is only an amateur weekend warrior? Absolutely not.

There are many reasons why a professional might want one of these kits. For one, they are inexpensive. They can serve as practice kits while your main kit is at the club, in the truck, or otherwise not available. They are perfect for those who want to practice in an apartment or home where an acoustic kit just isn't possible due to the volume. For those who are into sequencing and home studios, having an electronic kit to input rhythms and grooves, as well as creating loops, is as essential as a piano player owning a digital keyboard.

ALESIS DM6

The newest version of the DM6 has recently changed its name to DM6 USB. As you might guess, the new name indicates that the DM6 brain now has a USB output in place of a MIDI output. In addition



Alesis DM7X | alesis.com | List: \$899.99 Street: \$499

to the USB port, the back of the module sports 1/8" mini-jacks for headphones, main output, and auxiliary input. There's also a power switch and a small switch that selects the type of bass drum trigger you're using, allowing the module to substitute a simple footswitch. The pads hook into the brain with an included cable snake that makes hooking up the pads easy and quick.

The front of the DM6 has several dedicated controls: master volume, tempo, click on/off, pattern select, start/stop for patterns, drum off (for muting the drums in the included patterns), kit select, voice select, volume (for individual control of kits, voices, patterns, and metronome), and save/rec. Yes, this last control is used to enter record mode. Of the kits included in this guide, the DM6 is the only one that lets you record your own pattern. Okay, so there's only one user pattern location for your recording, but there's plenty of memory — about 5,000 notes — allocated for your recording. And, it's one more recording location than the other kits have.

Another important item that separates this kit from the others is a stereo snare pad. With a stereo pad, you can assign one sound

to the head's surface, and another sound to the rim (rimshot, rim-click, cowbell, etc.).

ALESIS DM7X

The Alesis DM7X Session kit is a step up from the DM6. Actually, you may consider this kit to have several additional steps. Along with the increase in available drum sets (40 rather than 15) and raw sounds (385 rather than 108), the DM7X Session also includes MIDI ports in addition to the USB port. If your rig requires MIDI rather than USB, this is certainly the way to go. The 7X Session can also be expanded if you wish. The brain on this unit is more sophisticated than the DM6, with additional tonal controls, reverb, and trigger settings that let you customize the response of the pads. The brain also includes additional inputs for another tom and another crash cymbal.

With these additional features, is there any downside? Well, maybe yes and maybe no. The DM6 offers up 12" cymbal pads while the DM7X Session is supplied with 10" cymbal pads. However, the DM7X Session crash cymbal can be choked. The DM6 includes a kick drum tower while the DM7X Session relies on an electronic pedal without the tower.



Alesis DM6 | alesis.com | List: \$699.99 Street: \$399



ddrumDD1 | ddrum.com | List: \$872.50 Street: \$499

DDRUM DD1

The front of the module supports a number of individual function buttons. There are dedicated controls for volume, save, start/stop, kit selection, song selection, drum mute (for the percussion parts of a song), metronome, increment and decrement, pad selection, and tempo. The back panel of the DD1 module offers up the power-input jack and on/off switch, along with nine trigger inputs, a MIDI output, a stereo output, and an auxiliary input. The headphone jack and the control for the volume of the aux

input are located on the left side of the unit.

One of the features that separates the DD1 from some of the other units in this group is the ability to adjust the sensitivity and crosstalk rejection of each pad. There are 15 available settings for sensitivity and higher values make the pads more sensitive to softer strikes. There are also 15 levels of rejection for each pad and 15 different pitch values for each sound.

The DD1 does not come with a bass drum pedal. You'll need to get one of those if you want to play the kit as soon as you get it home.

KAT KT1

The KAT brand is a relative newcomer to the electronic drum kit market. The top panel of the brain is clear and clean. There are power, mode, and page buttons on the left side; with the master volume and click on/off on the right side. Two larger buttons labeled + and - sit in the middle and control the value of different parameters. The back has ports for 9V power, USB, MIDI-Out, stereo outputs, auxiliary input, and headphones.

Getting down and dirty with the KT1 is straightforward. There

are four main modes: pattern, drum kit, voice, and click. You press the mode button to access one of these four choices, then the page button to scroll to the command you want to adjust. From there, the plus and minus value buttons do the rest. While the module lacks dedicated buttons for individual actions, some people may prefer the simplicity of this interface.

One unique feature of the KT1: while all the pads are single triggers, the crash cymbal is chokeable. Like the DD1, the KT1 does not come with a bass drum pedal.



Kat KT1 | alternatemode.com | List: \$849 Street: \$499

	MIDI	USB	Snare	Toms	Ride	Crash	Hi-Hat	Foot	Kick	Kick Splash	Voices Pad	Voice Pedal	Kits*	Play Pitch Songs	Aux	Effects Along	Sensitivity Input	Rejection	Velocity Curve
Alesis DM6	NO	YES	Dual Zone	Single	Single	Single	Single	NO	YES	YES	108	NO	10/5	40	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Alesis DM7X Session	YES	YES	Dual Zone	Single	Single	Chokeable	Single	YES	NO	YES	385	YES	0/40	60	YES	Reverb	YES	YES	YES
ddrum DD1	YES	YES	Single Zone	Single	Single	Single	Single	NO	YES	NO	215	YES	20/10	50	YES	Reverb	YES	YES	NO
KAT KT1	YES	YES	Single Zone	Single	Single	Chokeable	Single	NO	YES	NO	158	NO	0/10	40	YES	Reverb	NO	NO	NO
Simmons 5X	YES	YES	Single Zone	Single	Single	Single	Single	NO	YES	NO	130	NO	0/14	40	YES	Reverb	NO	NO	NO
Simmons SD7PK	YES	YES	Dual Zone	Single	Single	Single	Single	YES	YES	NO	300	YES	20/30	50	YES	Reverb	YES	YES	YES (6)
Yamaha DTX400K	YES	YES	Single Zone	Single	Single	Single	Single	YES	NO	YES	169	YES	0/10	10	YES	9 Types	YES	YES	YES (10)

*Factory/User

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SIMMONS SD5X

Simmons has been making electronic kits from the very beginning, and the SD5X often has the least expensive street price in this group. The drum brain of this unit is very similar to the one on the KAT KT1. There is a mode button that selects between the pattern, kits, voice, and click controls. There's also a page button to access the commands under each mode area. You'll also find the familiar volume, start/stop, and plus/minus buttons. The back of the unit is also familiar if you've seen the KT1. Here you'll find the power jack, the on/off switch, USB and MIDI jacks, stereo outputs, aux input, and headphone jack. In fact, the various pages inside the modes are exactly the same as the KT1 brain.



Simmons SD5X | simmonsdrums.net | List: \$999.99 Street: \$400

SIMMONS SD7PK

This Simmons kit is an upgrade from the SD5X. This kit sports a more sturdy rack-mount system and a dual-zone snare pad so you can trigger a separate sound from the head and the rim. In addition, the brain is significantly more sophisticated, offering up the ability to set each pad's level, pan position, and tuning. In terms of setting the responsiveness of the pads, you can adjust the sensitivity, velocity curve, crosstalk, and even the splash sensitivity on the hi-hat.

The hi-hat controls on the 7PK offer five different sounds: open, half-open, closed, foot closed, and splash. This gives the hi-hat more flexibility and a more natural feel. The 7PK has more available onboard kits, sounds, and playalong songs than any other brain in this price group.



Simmons SD7PK | simmonsdrums.net | List: \$1,165.99 Street: \$499

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YAMAHA DTX400K

Yamaha has been creating electronic drum kits for a good long time, and the 400K offers a few unique features. Rather than having controls on the front and back of the brain, this unit incorporates the top and the sides, making everything easy to access.

The 400K doesn't come with a bass drum pad, but it does come with the freestanding KU100 electronic bass drum pedal. Yamaha states that this pedal system is quieter than a pad-based kick. A freestanding hi-hat pedal offers open, closed, foot closed, and foot splash sounds.

The 400K sound module is laid out in a way that is both easy to understand and ergonomic. There are controls for the ten pads, kit and song select, metronome, start and stop, tempo, volume, and drum mute. From the very beginning, Yamaha has stressed education in its electronic kits, and the 400K keeps this tradition alive. There is a specific command

for "training" that takes you into commands for working on your rhythmic accuracy (groove check, rhythm gate, measure gate, tempo, and change up), playing drum patterns (easy session and groove tracker), learning new drum patterns (pad gate, part mute), and something called "fast blast" (a game where you can score more points by playing faster).

FINAL ANALYSIS

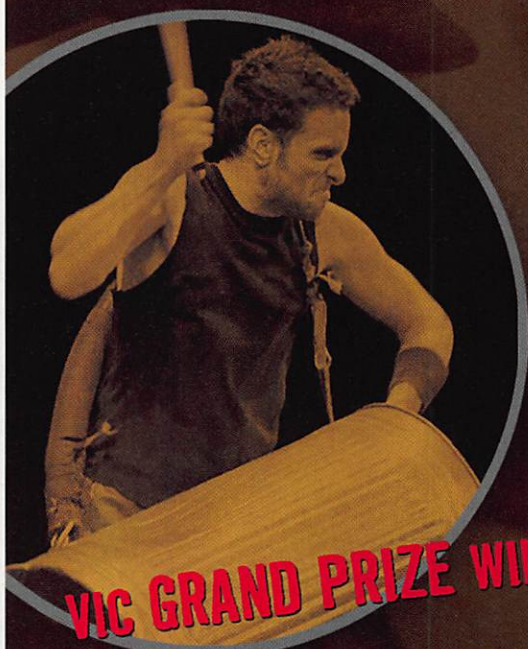
As I stated earlier, your final decision should be based on how the kit feels beneath your hands and feet, and how the on-board sounds fit with your needs. Hopefully, this guide can help you limit your choices to just a couple of kits with the features that you want or need. From there, it's up to you. But you really can't lose with a functional electronic kit at this price.

All the kits included in this article have a street price under \$500 even though the list prices are significantly higher. ▣



YamahaDTX400K | yamaha.com/drums | List: \$799.99 Street: \$499

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Joseph's photo courtesy of Guido Mandozzi