

Soundware Roundup

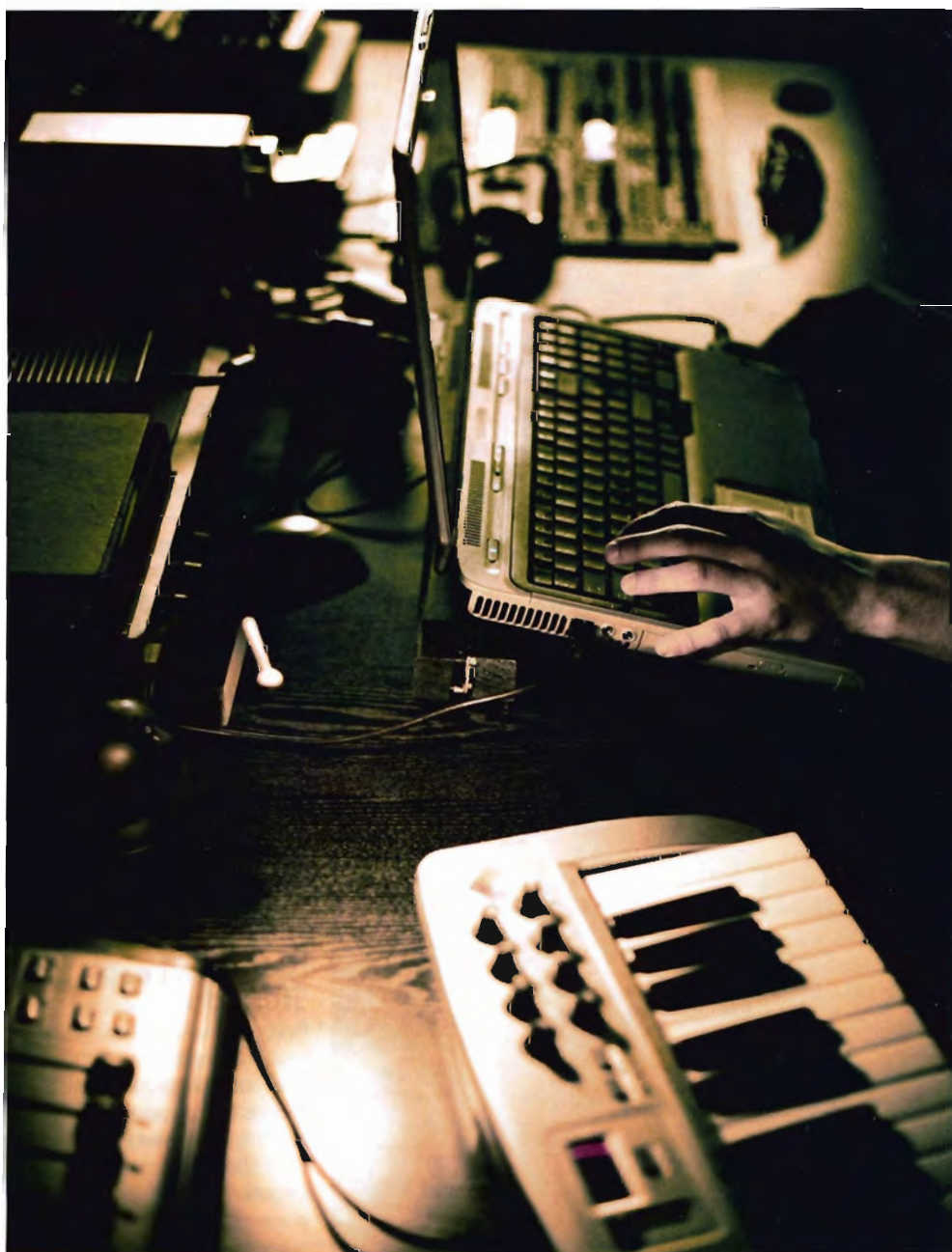
PLAYING WITH THE BIG BOYS

By Norman Weinberg

Over the last several years, sample libraries have grown to gargantuan proportions. Faster computers, cheaper RAM (comparatively speaking), and the availability of bigger hard drives have partially driven this trend. However, the main reason that percussion libraries have bloomed is the degree of realism even the casual user has grown to expect. It's no longer possible to offer a competitive library that stretches the same sample over a number of pitches, offers only two samples — one soft and one loud — for dynamic contrast, or settles for looped releases rather than natural decays.

Today's libraries must not only offer the very highest quality recording environment, with specially designed recorded studios and extreme high-end microphone setups, they also have to provide left- and right-hand strokes with eight or more velocity levels and full decay tails — even on the longest sustaining instruments. While 16-bit sounds were state-of-the-art just a few years ago, now it's 24- or 96-bit sounds that grab our attention. The bottom line is that libraries are bigger because they are better. It's that simple.

In this latest edition of the Soundware Roundup, we're going to take a look at three new libraries offering unique sound sets intended for three



PLUGGED IN

FOCUS ON TECH

By Mike Snyder



Record Your Own

SAMPLING IT. There's a lot involved in capturing your own sound samples, and making them of sufficient quality to be useable. The character you want for the final sound will determine what recording path you'll have to take. If you need high-quality sounds, there is no shortcut. You'll need a great-sounding instrument, a quiet room, the best mike/preamp combinations you can rustle up, and a high-end recording device. For a sound where the character has some dirt, you may need as little as a single mike and a device to record the sound.

I HEAR NOISE ...

EVERYWHERE. Whenever recording sound, ambient room noise is your enemy. Close your eyes and listen to the sounds in the room you're in right now. In addition to the motors whirring and the lights buzzing, there are sounds present that we've learned to tune out, like the birds chirping outside, the cars rumbling in the distance, and the air blowing out the vents of the HVAC system. Dedicated recording studios go to great, and very expensive lengths to get rid of these sounds.

Even without a pro-level recording room, you can minimize unwanted ambient sound. Your heating and cooling system is one of biggest offenders — turn it off. If you're sampling in your house, turn off the phone, unplug the refrigerator, and turn off or unplug anything that has a fan. When choosing a room in which to record, choose a room that has, if possible, no external walls. This will help keep sounds from the outside from being picked up by the microphone(s). Closets full of clothes have a nice dry sound.

Homespun Sampling. It is possible to get good samples at home; just keep in mind that a \$50 microphone plugged directly into your SPD-S or digital recorder is not going to achieve the same level of sample quality as in the "The High-Quality Road" described below. But not all sounds have to be noise free and studio quality. Dirty, raw samples can be very useful. A friend and I sampled his car door slamming in a parking structure last year with a handheld digital recorder — it sounded awesome!

THE HIGH-QUALITY

ROAD. Recently, I was called upon to record some high-quality kick drum samples. For the task, I booked time at one of the best studios in Portland, Oregon, and hired Bob Stark — an engineer with whom I've worked for almost 15 years. This gave me an ultra-quiet room, access to great gear, and a super-experienced engineer. To sample the kick, we used five mikes. For the room sound we used a matched pair of DPA 4011 reference microphones. The close-miked sound of the drum was captured with a vintage Neumann U47 fet, an Audix i5 on the beater side, and a speaker to capture the low end of the drum. These were routed to a Pro Tools HD system through GSM and Earthworks preamps. This setup captured the natural sound of the kick drum. We ended up mixing the five tracks together to make the sample without EQ. This is what happens when you use mikes and preamps worth the price of a new Prius! I said it earlier and I'll say it again: *The high-quality road has no short cuts.*

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StormDrum2's PLAY window showing the available controls for sensitivity, envelope, filter, stereo spread, delay, and reverb.

different purposes: drum set performance, orchestral percussion performance, and percussion for film and video. All three are going to give you some of the best drum and percussion sounds that you've ever heard coming out of a computer.

Two parts of each library work in symbiosis to make your experience as rewarding as possible: the sample library and the front-end GUI, which gives the player and programmer access to the samples in a playable and editable framework. We'll look at both sides of the coin and give you the skinny.



Quantum Leap's Stormdrum 2

First on the docket is Quantum Leap's Stormdrum 2. Subtitled *The Next Generation*, its title sounds like the sequel to a summer blockbuster. That just might be due to producer Nick Phoenix's background. He's the brains and the talent behind some of the most expansive

motion picture trailers ever made — *Harry Potter 2*, *Star Wars 2*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Lord Of The Rings: Return Of The King*, *Spiderman 3*, *I Am Legend*, 300 — the list goes on with at least 1,000 credits. The instruments in this collection were recorded in EastWest's own studios (formerly United Western Recorders), which boasts an impressive history of hits, awards, and Best Engineered Grammys. In short, the recording pedigree on this package is pretty darn high.

SD2 features more than 12GB of new sounds (although the Metallica black drum kit from their "Ministry Of Rock" library is held over for this collection). You may not want to use these sounds for your basic Thursday-night C&W gig, though that's not really the purpose of this library. SD2 provides a large sound set that invokes unique and complex textures designed to get your heart pumping and your brain engaged.

The package comes with seven main categories of sounds: Drumkit and Related, Ethnic Drums, Ethnic Metals, MIDI Performance Multis, Sound Design Percussion, Woods and Shakers, and Zendrum Programs. As you might expect, the Metallica kit sits inside of the Drumkit category along with black toms, Ludwig

toms, Octapulus toms, and a few other sounds.

The Ethnic Drum section contains some pretty exotic sounds, such as the African bowl drums, Chinese kettle drums, the Earthquake Ensemble (11 players hitting large and small drums in unison) and the Roman War Drum. It also contains more common percussion, such as bongos, congas, timbales, darabuka, and udo, as well as several others. This folder holds 22 instrument sets in total.

There are 31 different instruments included in the Ethnic

combinations I've heard in a long time. Some of these combinations are so provocative they immediately inspired me.

The samples from the Orchestral Marching Kit are perfectly designed to create that huge, old-school military sound rather than the more contemporary drum line samples. The Sound Design Percussion grouping includes little sound bites that have been created with digital effects to create new and provocative sounds.

With so many sounds and styles at your disposal, you'll

WITH SO MANY SOUNDS AND STYLES AT YOUR DISPOSAL, YOU'LL FIND MANY THAT WILL BLOW YOUR MIND

Metals group. I absolutely loved these sounds. Okay, so I'm a fan of metal percussion in general, and sounds that have a lot of character and change timbre are my very favorite. Here, you'll find your fill of bowed cymbals, gongs ranging from 7" to 35" (both struck, scraped, and played with superballs, providing a roller coaster of harmonics), waterphones, and something called the "whale drum."

The hang drum truly shows off the power and the sound quality of SD2. Individual left- and right-hand strokes are spread underneath the white notes from C1 to C3. The variety of colors produced from the subtle changes in dynamics are extremely playable. With the softest strokes, you can hear the audible sound of skin striking metal blended with the beautiful soft tone of the instrument. At the strongest dynamic, you hear the complex overtones and "overdrive" of the metal. Considering a real hang drum goes for over a grand on eBay, well, you know the rest.

I had the best time playing with the MIDI Performance Multis. By sending MIDI messages on multiple channels, I was able to produce some of the most interesting sonic com-

binations I've heard in a long time. Some of these combinations are so provocative they immediately inspired me. find many that will blow your mind and some that might leave you a little cold. It all depends on how you plan to use SD2 and how creative you can be. For me, the sounds in this library are a welcome addition to my sonic palette.

The GUI to SD2 is one of the most elegant I've seen. The entire program is controlled by two simple windows. The first is the browser with a series of vertical slots that allow you to find files by searching for files in your system and in your Favorites area. Getting to your sounds and loading them into your computer couldn't be easier. The second main window is called PLAY and is where all of the sonic editing occurs. PLAY is EastWest's newest front end, and is similar in design and use throughout all of the company's new sound libraries. PLAY can run in a stand-alone mode or as a plug-in for just about any host program.

In SD2 controls for the sensitivity along with the MIDI interface and round robin reset button are in the upper left corner (by the way, adjusting the sensitivity on this software makes a huge difference on how the sounds respond to your play-

ing). The bottom left window contains the five-stage envelope controls of attack, hold, decay, sustain, and release.

The right side of the PLAY window includes controls for the filter, stereo spread, delay, and reverb. In all, there are 35 different reverb "rooms," and I found that they provided just about every type of ambience that I might be looking for.

The controls in this window are not nearly as sophisticated as some other soundware libraries, but in truth, how often do you really need to tweak and twiddle with every single parameter of every single sample? For the vast majority of players, this attention to ease-of-use and editing parameters is going to be a welcome change. Select your sounds, make a few edits if you feel they're necessary, and start playing.

One note about the installation and authorization of SD2: The software requires an iLok security key in order to run. If you're not familiar with the iLok system, it's a physical USB dongle that holds the license information for SD2 as well as other programs. The good: Once your iLok has the SD2 authorization on it, you can run the program on any computer system simply by moving the key from one machine to the other. The bad: You've got to

have the iLok connected to your machine to run the software. Without it, you're SOL.



Elite Orchestral Percussion

If you're in the market for an orchestral sound set, you owe it to yourself to listen to the Vir2 Elite Orchestral Percussion library. This little baby comes on 3 DVDs and weighs in with a hefty 19GB of 24-bit samples.

EOP contains 20 instrument categories with more than 250 instrument patches. While the list is too extensive to include here, rest assured that all your favorites are present and ready for action: bass drum, snare drum, field drum, xylophone, chimes, cymbals, gongs, timpani, tambourines, and so on. Along with the standard orchestral fare, there are many specialized instruments that help make the library much more flexible (wine glasses, slapstick, handbells, castanets, maracas, and many, many more).

As far as specialized and high-end instrument selection



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goes, the EOP is quite impressive. Where else are you going to find samples of a \$650 12" Gold Buddy & Thein triangle? I was impressed with the variety of strokes, dynamic variation, and the full length of decay on these samples. Easily, you could use this patch for the most exposed solo parts without ever giving away the fact that the passage was sampled

rather than recorded live. In all, there are six instruments that comprise the selection of triangles, including an Abel, a Black Swamp, and three additional B&T instruments.

The folks in charge of selecting the instruments know their stuff. The choice of tambourines includes Grover, Hinger, Lafima, Stoessel, and Vaughcraft instruments. The snare shelf contains

Black Swamp, Cleveland, Gladstone, GMS, and three different Pearl drums. Hand cymbals include a selection of nine pairs of Zildjian plates that would make anyone envious, including two sets of 18" Constantinoples and a pair of 22" Germanics dark enough to summon the Gods of Valhalla.

The designer's and programmer's knowledge of sticks

and mallets is just as impressive as the instrument collection: Becker Blues, Freer K11s, and Pau Rosa mallets on the Xylophone, OR45s and Innovative 901s on the Glock, and they're all typical and "correct" to achieve the proper orchestral tone color.

Along with the beautiful samples, there are plenty of

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unique performance techniques that are also typical for orchestral percussion parts. The crash cymbal instruments offer crashes, frottee (plate rolls), and zischen (scrapes) for the complete crash cymbal experience.

Rather than have a dozen different marimbas in the collection, EOP provides a number of different mallets that help to define the sound of the instrument. Included are Innovative Percussion 100s, Leigh Howard Stevens 20s, and a Nancy Zeltsman Graduated set, among others.

While all the sounds in EOP are great, I especially liked the xylophone, hand bells, and gongs. Getting a good concert bass drum sample is close to impossible, but the EOP samples are about as good as they come. I also found the timpani samples to be as natural as those of any other package I've heard.

EOP runs inside of Native Instruments' Kontakt Player 2, which is included in the package. Several publishers have gone to running their library



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inside of this popular and stable environment. Kontakt Player is a flexible, and somewhat logical front end, especially for a library of this magnitude. If you don't like twiddling with options, you can just call up the sound and go at it. But if you like to open the hood and get your hands dirty, Kontakt Player is much deeper and more flexible than the PLAY front end of SD2. If you happen to own the full version of Kontakt, you can access EOP through that program.

The Kontakt 2 engine allows for seven different velocity curves and more than 50 different sonic spaces with its EZRoom feature. Along with selecting the space, the software offers adjustments for both the dry and wet levels.

Of special note is the humanize feature. With humanize turned on, the software adds minor variations to the pitch, timing, and volume. Each of these three parameters can also be edited to adjust the probability of change along with the total range of change. With some experimentation, you can create anything from subtle changes to totally extreme, wacked-out craziness.

If you're trying to create some orchestral percussion sounds with a little more edge, it's not too difficult. Simply use the Kontakt 2 engine to add as many as four inserts to each sound. The options are pretty staggering: compressor, limiter, inverter, saturation, lo-fi, stereo modeler, distortion, phaser, flanger, chorus, reverb, delay, convolution, and 19 different types of filters. Keep in mind that each of these inserts can be fine tuned in a number of different ways. If you come up with something that you love, you can plug that special distortion patch into presets to apply to other sounds.

Kontakt 2 also includes trigger and pattern generators. If you hold down a note and then activate one of the trigger keys, you can call up

chokes, rolls, and flams. You can also customize each of these to fit your needs. The pattern generator controls velocity, basic rhythm value, loop commands, smoothing operations, and pitch variation. At first, you might think that these features wouldn't be of much use in a live performance situation. You would be wrong.



Ocean Way Drums

As you might have guessed, this package was recorded at

the famous Ocean Way Studios. Producers/engineers Allen Sides and Steven Miller have one of the very best studies in the world at their disposal. To say that the groups and individuals who have created hit records in this room reads like a who's who is a huge understatement. From Frank Sinatra to Radiohead, Aerosmith to Zappa — this space, the

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STUDIO SECRETS

By Jake Wood

Recording Tips For Auxiliary Percussion

"I've got a fever, and the only prescription is..." a strategically mixed cowbell. Blue Oyster Cult aside, a little bit of auxiliary percussion (bells, tambourines, shakers, cabaças, triangles, and so on) can be the toe-tapping savior of otherwise lifeless rhythm tracks. They can also, as Will Ferrell's aggressively thrusted and exposed paunch so inelegantly demonstrated, dominate a mix in the incessant competition for the ear's attention. Avoiding a potentially disastrous percussive mutiny is a difficult and underrated task, but with some helpful tips, blending everything from engine blocks to pots and pans becomes a walk in the zoo... er, park.

When tracking any percussion, mike placement is critical. The goal is to find the best blend of attack and reverb and to avoid the low-end occurrence from the proximity effect. Getting friendly with the strike zone and wedging a mike 2" from impact isn't necessarily the most appropriate place for capturing tones from high transient instruments. Nobody wants face time with a tambourine or any other percussion, but when tracking at such close quarters, the banging and clanging can quickly devolve into a crude and brash annoyance during mix-down. Resolution lies in pulling the mike (or adding a second mike) 2'-3' away, as it will reduce both the more piercing elements and the unnecessary bass while capturing some nice natural room sound.

Speaking of piercing, the area of bandwidth

around 5kHz typically draws a lot of attention from our ears. For a subtle percussion track, a slight EQ trimming around that region can sculpt an otherwise aural attention-whore instrument into an inconspicuous attendee, waiting to be discovered by the astute music appreciator.

Another familiar problem is the competition for overlapping bandwidth between various percussion instruments and the drum set. The previously mentioned tip of shaving off some of the 5kHz area certainly aids in this dilemma, but a well-organized panning job (i.e., hi-hat to the left; shaker to the right) goes a step further while simultaneously adding some spatial depth to a recording.

All precautions aside, natural-sounding pop mixes can be boring. Spotlighting (really spotsounding, eh?) different noisemakers can bring a fresh and original character to a mix. For example, older Motown recordings have some extreme tambourines that aided in defining that classic Motown sound. Check out some old Martha Reeves And The Vandellas. Not only are the tambourines swallowing the drum tracks, but there are also tire irons (as heard on "Dancing In The Street") and snow chains ("Nowhere To Run") displayed rather prominently in the mix. Love it or hate it — tweak accordingly.



Ocean Way Drums with Kit 18 called up for action. Notice the individual controls for each of the close, overhead, and room microphones.

customized console and gear, the incredible microphone selections, and the knowledge and experience of Sides and Miller — all come together to create something magical.

Once you've installed the entire package — the library is a whopping 40GB in size — it's time to call up a kit and give this baby a listen. Be prepared. These kits are going to knock you on your butt! I found that each and every kit was something special with a character and color all its own. No gimmicks, no special effects, no indigenous instruments, just kicks, snares, toms, rides, crashes, and hi-hats.

Once a kit is loaded up, you can make just about any microphone adjustment to any instrument. For example, for the six individual mikes on the snare (not including the room mikes), you could mix the under-snare mikes, the close mikes, or the slightly more distant mikes (about 18" away)

in any combination of mono or stereo. Add to that the control you've got on the sets of room mikes and you can easily see that creating a great-sounding snare that's totally your own work of art is not only possible, it's pretty easy to do.

If you make a change to one or more of the mikes on a specific instrument, let's say the ride cymbal, that alteration in tonal color will affect only that instrument. You won't have to worry that adding a bit more stick attack will alter the sounds that you've created for the other instruments in the kit. Once you've designed and edited the sounds of each of the instruments, you can then move to the output screen to make final adjustments to the balance between the close mike instruments, the overheads, and the ambient room mikes.

Each kit comes with six different preset mixes that range from dry to ambient that

can be applied to the kit as a whole or one instrument at a time. To save time I usually just picked a preset and made minor tweaks from there.

Since Ocean Way Drums also uses the Kontakt Player 2 front end to control all of the samples, many of the features found in the Elite Orchestral Percussion Library are common to this library. Of special interest are the four inserts that can be used to add a variety of effects to each audio channel. That being said, you may not want to do anything that could detract from the amazing quality and presence of these sounds. It doesn't make sense in this review to single out instruments that sound particularly good or kits that I feel are the best of the bunch. Everything is killer. Everything! You may not believe me, but I'm telling you, these sounds are *that* good.

The entire package includes 19 drum sets, each with snare-

on and snares-off versions. And the kits are available in two different formats: one setup in a keyboard-style fashion (called IMAP), and the other arranged for the Roland V-Drums system. If you own a V-Drum kit, you'll want to write these folks a thank you letter.

As I mentioned, all of the Ocean Way kits are amazing, but if you want to mix and match, or build a kit from scratch, it's simple to do. The Kontakt 2 interface does a great job of putting all the controls within easy reach.

As an added bonus, the Ocean Way Drums package comes with an extra DVD that explains the history of the facility, the creation of the library, and the theory behind putting the package together. It goes a long way toward helping you understand the philosophy of Ocean Way Drums. Philosophical issues aside, Ocean Way Drums is the best drum set library I've heard with

a GUI that makes sense and is easy to learn and operate.

Working with these packages has been a real pleasure. Sample libraries have gotten so good that it's truly hard to determine if a particular recorded passage is live or sampled. Some of these sounds could easily stand up to the closest scrutiny in the most exposed passages to the best of educated ears. In addition to simply offering great sounds, the GUI systems are simple to use, quick to learn, and stable.

As electronic percussion controllers — from small multi-pads to full-blown electronic kits — continue to gain in popularity, libraries like these are perfect partners. The quality of your sound has never been more important, and the quality of high-end drum and percussion libraries has never been better.

Last Words Of Advice

These libraries take a lot of

storage space and a lot of computer processing power to make them truly great. If your computer is more than a couple of years old, these packages may run, but they're not going to be happy about it. I would suggest that you consider upgrading to a more contemporary machine if you plan on using any of these libraries on a regular basis. As a general rule, you always want to purchase the fastest machine you can afford and pack it with as much RAM as seems logical. In most cases, 2GB of RAM is a good idea. ■

CONTACTS

Ocean Way Drums
oceanwaydrums.net
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Storm Drum 2:
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Vir2 Elite Orchestral Percussion
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The advertisement features a black and white photograph of Nick Mason, a member of The Who, playing a drum kit. He is wearing a dark t-shirt and a wristband, and is captured in a dynamic pose with his arms raised. The drum kit is a yellow Paragon Series kit by Peace Drums and Percussion. The background is dark with some red lighting effects. The text 'PARAGON SERIES' is prominently displayed in a large, serif font. Below it, 'Nick Mason (VOODOO DOLLIES, alternative)' is written. The Peace Drums and Percussion logo is visible on the bass drum. To the right, a list of features is provided, including 100% hand finished 9-ply Canadian Rock Maple shells, fully customizable options, L.I.F.T.S. tom mounting technology, and Deus low mass micro-tube lugs.

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