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10 THINGS TO DO FIRST WITH YOUR NEW E-KIT

By Norman Weinberg

Okay, so you've just bought your new e-kit from your local music store and it's time to pull it out of the car, open the box, set it up, and start playing. But wait! Here are ten very important things that you should do to help make your first experience (and future experiences) with your new kit awesome. And in the process, you'll become the "Capo de tutti capi."

1. DON'T BE IN A HURRY

If you're trying to get up and running in a matter of minutes, you'll be shortchanging yourself over the long haul. Give yourself a nice, long span of time when you won't be rushed. Be patient, and really give yourself the luxury of doing everything right. An electronic kit is a somewhat different animal than an acoustic, and there are a number of aspects that you'll need to address.

Make yourself a pot of coffee or tea (maybe even a nice glass of merlot) and relax into the experience. You should plan for at least two hours to get everything "play ready," and another two to three hours to tweak the kit to your touch and temperament. To really get to know your new machine inside-out and upside-down, you might plan for as much as a few weeks before you totally become the e-kit-boss you're destined to be.

2. GIVE YOURSELF SOME SPACE

Be careful not to pile things on top of one another while unpacking your new kit, or put them in a position on the floor where you're going to step on them or trip over them. This might sound like a no-brainer, but believe me, when you're excited and trying to work fast,



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you'll be tempted to cut corners. The "I'll just pile all these pads on top of each other" method is not the best approach. Again, this speaks toward allowing some time to ease into the process.

3. IT'S HIP TO BE SQUARE

Most acoustic kits have individual stands for the snare, hi-hat, cymbals, and maybe even toms. However, most e-kits have one rack that supports all (or most) of the instruments. It's vitally important that the rack be assembled properly so that it is solid and stable, as well as ergonomically advantageous.

It won't make you a bad person to use a tape measure or a level. Using a level is a little easier, but either tool can be used to ensure that all the crossbars and posts are truly horizontal and vertical. If you're not accurate with this, the rack could end up being "tippy" and might put undue stress on the fittings that connect one piece to another. If you want your e-kit to be solid and last a long time, keep it square!

4. A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

Individual instruments in an e-kit are often smaller in scale than acoustic drums. It's

common to find 8" to 10" tom pads and 12" to 14" rides and crashes. But you don't have to mount them close to each other just because the instruments are smaller.

Where you put your instruments is a very important decision, both in terms of ergonomics and in terms of translating your muscle memory back to your acoustic kit. When a keyboard player moves from acoustic piano to electronic piano or even to a Hammond organ, the feel, touch, and response of the keyboards may be vastly different, but the size and shape of the keys themselves always remain the same.

If you plan to use your e-kit as a practice instrument, then you should try to duplicate the physical position of your acoustic drums as closely as possible. If the rack and mounts don't allow you to get the exact same placement and angles, try thinking outside of the box. You might be able to turn the tom mounts upside-down and hang the instrument from the descending posts. Or try reversing their orientation so that they hold the instrument outside of the rack rather than inside. Maybe the solution to accurate cymbal positioning is to change out the upper pipe from another crash cymbal stand. Perhaps

just adding an external clamp with a boom arm or additional tilter will give you the perfect placement.

On the other hand, if you're thinking of going totally electronic, you might be able to play beats and fills that would be more difficult on acoustic drums by putting the instruments in a tighter configuration. With the instruments closer together, less physical energy is required to move from one surface to another.

5. TWEAK YOUR TOUCH

This is perhaps the most important aspect of setting up your new e-kit, so you'll never have to say, "I don't like the way the damn thing feels!" Just as you would take care in cleaning and tuning the heads on your acoustic instruments, if you want to play your very best, you'll need to adjust how your instrument responds to your touch and playing style. It's possible that all of the settings will fit you perfectly right out of the box, as even an off-the-rack suit will fit some folks without any tailoring. Chances are good, however, that the suit and your kit will fit you better when fashioned to order.

A number of various factors come into play when adjusting your kit. Even if your new e-kit

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comes as a matched set of pads and brain, you may want to experiment with the settings for pad type and trigger gain. Crosstalk controls help prevent the triggering of one instrument when you play another instrument. If you need to fine-tune how the instruments respond to your lightest strokes, the sensitivity or threshold adjustments will take care of this.

Setting your velocity curves will determine how your drums and cymbals will respond to your playing dynamics. Unlike with acoustic instruments, you're not locked into a 1:1 relationship between stroke strength and dynamic. If you're generally a light player or a heavy player, you can change the velocity curves to give you more or less control over the volume of the sounds in relation to your playing strength. Depending on your e-kit, you can set velocity curves to respond in a linear, exponential, logarithmic, S-curve, or even inverted manner. For even more control of volume, you could experiment with minimum and maximum velocity levels.

Not all e-kits contain a large number of trigger adjustments, though. Generally speaking, more triggering parameters go hand-in-hand with more sophisticated kits (sophisticated means "expensive").

6. MEET YOUR SOUNDS

Every e-kit contains a collection of onboard sounds. Some kits have just a few basic drum and cymbal sounds, while others have hundreds of different percussive and instrumental colors to feed your creative desires. Now is the perfect time to start listening, evaluating, classifying, and qualifying your options. Depending on the number of available sounds, you could possibly keep mental notes, but I find it much easier to write down some information about the sound set. You could make notes in the manual or create a computer database for future reference.

The kit's manufacturer might group sounds into a number of categories based on sonic qualities or musical styles. As you go through each sound, listen to how it responds to various playing dynamics. Do you hear a one-dimensional quality as you change dynamics (only softer or louder) or does the tonal quality change depending on your dynamic (brighter, warmer, thicker, and so on)? Can you hear when multisamples switch from one to the other, or is the transition smooth? As you listen, try to determine whether a sound might be good for a musical style or character other than what the manufacturer suggests. Just because a sound is in the "effect" category doesn't mean

it can't make a killer cymbal. After all, one of the biggest creative advantages of an electronic kit is the ability to incorporate wildly different sonic colors whenever the spirit moves you.

Some sounds might strike you as dull, silly, or even cheesy. I suggest that you not be too quick to judge. In the right context, something that didn't offer a great first impression might just grow on you if you give it a chance. Perhaps a less-than-hip snare might be perfect for a project when its pitch is dropped by a fifth, given some slapback echo, and blended with a cymbal. Sometimes hearing a sound in context goes above and beyond hearing it in isolation.

Don't worry about making any hard decisions concerning the usefulness of any particular sounds just yet. Simply give them a listen and start to become familiar with what they are. There have been plenty of times when I've heard a sound and thought it was a piece of dreck, and then found the perfect use for it much later. I strongly suggest that you visit your soundset on a somewhat regular basis just to refamiliarize yourself with your options.

7. MASTER YOUR SOUNDS

"Man, I didn't know you could do that!" You're never going to use a feature or make an

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adjustment if you don't know it's available or what it does. Getting your hands dirty deep inside a machine is a two-part process.

First, go through the manual and experiment with adjusting each and every parameter. No matter what you might try, you can't break anything from the front panel. If you find yourself totally lost, you can always go back to the factory settings. Becoming the boss means that you can't be afraid of making mistakes!

The second part is to understand what each parameter does to the sound or the playability. You can try two different options: One is to jump on the Internet, do a quick Google search for the name of the parameter, and see if you can understand what it is and what it does. But no written explanation will give you the same mastery as the second option — using your ears. For each parameter, set the value to its minimum level and give it a serious listen. Then raise the value to the maximum and hear how it affects the sound or playability of the instrument. Once you can identify the minimum and maximum effect, try making more subtle adjustments and educate your ears to the differences.

Experiment with tuning (coarse tuning and fine tuning if your e-kit supports both types), panning, tone controls, filters, envelopes, and anything else your kit's brain presents. If your e-kit's brain offers audio effects, learn to hear the differences between reverb, echo, chorus, and all the rest. Try adjusting each of the various internal controls within an effect, such as pre-delay, damping, or diffusion.

8. YES, YOU'RE SPECIAL

Depending on the e-kit you choose, you may have some special features designed to make your playing experience more fun and creative. Perhaps you've got the ability to blend two or more sounds together, and to adjust the relative balance and response of

each sound. Using this special feature, you should, depending on your playing volume, be able to turn your ride cymbal into a crash cymbal. Another creative application would be to have two totally independent snare drums, depending on your stroke velocity. Playing softer gives you a nice tight jazz-style snare, complete with dynamic control. Playing near the top of the dynamic range switches the instrument to a popcorn snare that sits perfectly naturally in urban styles.

Many kits have an "alternate sounds" feature. When it's on, each subsequent strike will change the sound from one to another in a round-robin style. Getting to know this feature well could pay big dividends when it's time to add that special touch to a tune. For example, alternating between differently tuned tom sounds could result in a 5-piece kit playing like a 10-piece.

At first thought, you might believe you're never going to use these special features and you don't need them. But if you don't know they are there and you don't know how to use them, you'll create a self-fulfilling prophecy that limits your flexibility. If you want to be the boss, you have to know every aspect of the business!

9. MAKE THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

Today's better e-kits communicate with other devices via MIDI or through USB. By using these connections, you might be able to load new sounds into the kit's brain and/or have your kit play sounds from your tablet or computer. Take a few minutes to understand how to set up these communication protocols so that you're ready to go whenever you need them.

Sending control signals out from your e-kit is only half of the communication your machine offers. If your e-kit's brain has an audio input (for playing along with MP3 tracks, for example) you can use this connection to feed the audio

from your tablet or computer back into your brain to blend internal sounds with external sounds. Using this technique, you won't need to bother with an additional mixer. With the super flexibility and high-quality sounds available in today's software, you'll never go out of style. Again, the key here is to experiment with how best to make these connections and how to adjust all the parameters so that your playing will be absolutely comfortable.

10. IT'S SO OBVIOUS

No matter how fast and deep you get inside your new kit, don't throw away your manual. You'll likely need to refer back to it many times. In fact, it's not a bad idea to review it from time to time. You might just find a feature or two you've forgotten about. If you can track down a PDF version online, download it and keep it on your computer's desktop. The PDF lets you perform a word search to quickly address any issue you may have.

Just as you continuously learn about the art and craft of drumming, you should continue learning about the art and craft of electronic music. There are great online and print magazines (like this one!) that focus on the electronic music and electronic drumming community. Much of the information presented can be directly applicable to you and your e-kit. This is especially true if you connect your e-kit to an external device (hardware or software) for live performing or recording.

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