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The Drummer As DJ

EXPANDING ROLES FOR THE RHYTHMICALLY GIFTED

BY NORMAN WEINBERG

The term "DJ" was coined back in the late '40s and early '50s. An acronym for the vaguely discourteous phrase "disc jockey," a DJ sat in a radio station and spun records. But a half-century later, the DJ has taken on an entirely new distinction. Today's DJs have a more intimate and creative relationship with the music they

play, as well as where they play it. While radio stations still have DJs spinning discs, clubs employ DJs who are performers and musicians in their own right. They are able to compose and record music on the fly while blending a number of musical sources in real time to create an entire artistic experience. Sound like anyone you know? Make no mistake;

drummers are ideally suited to the demands of DJing. What's more, some of them have already jumped on board and are busy once again reinventing the term DJ to stand for "drum jockey."

According to Mario DeCutiis, the owner and CEO of Alternate Mode, a leading manufacturer of electronic drums and percussion equipment, now is a great time for drummers to expand into this new arena. "Much of today's club music doesn't really have melody or complex chord progressions," says DeCutiis. "It's basically textural music for dancing. There's never been a better time for a textural concept for drumming." As a drum jockey, your options are virtually limitless. Just take it from the ones who are already out there doing it. In addition to DeCutiis, we spoke with working drum jockeys Will Calhoun, Evan Ritchie, and Tony Verderosa about their approaches to this exciting new craft. They also offered more than a few words of hard-earned wisdom. But before we get ahead of ourselves, let's start at the beginning.

THE BASICS. The success of the drum jockey is depen-



Mario DeCutiis, owner and CEO of Alternate Mode

It's simple – if you don't understand a particular feature, you won't think of using it in your music

dent on the seamless relationship between hardware and software. Together, these separate hemispheres become a single, potent musical instrument. To get started, you may need nothing more elaborate than a simple laptop computer in addition to your drum or percussion rig. We've probably all seen party DJs pulling a night's

worth of entertainment out of their iTunes collection. Granted, this isn't very creative. But add some drums and the right software to the mix, and suddenly you're interacting with the songs, using the laptop keys and a mouse to control the software and to fire additional audio files, sounds, and effects. But if you really want to take command of the software and produce some really exciting results, you're eventually going to want to add a percussion controller to the equation.

The current crop of electronic percussion tools is far more versatile and flexible than any keyboard, guitar, or wind controller on the market. As a drummer, you can choose between more traditional electronic drum sets, or creative, hybrid designs.

There's a certain visual *wow* factor to watching someone playing something unrecognizable and unique. A drumKAT, malletKAT, Trigger Finger, or PadKontrol will create a lot of buzz as people scramble to try and figure out what you're do-

ing to produce such an amazing array of sounds. When the audience sees you strike a pad and they hear the corresponding pop of a snare drum, it's pretty obvious what's going on. But using a pad to bring loops in and out, build a cymbal swell, or sweep a filter can appear as something akin to magic.

SOFTWARE OPTIONS.

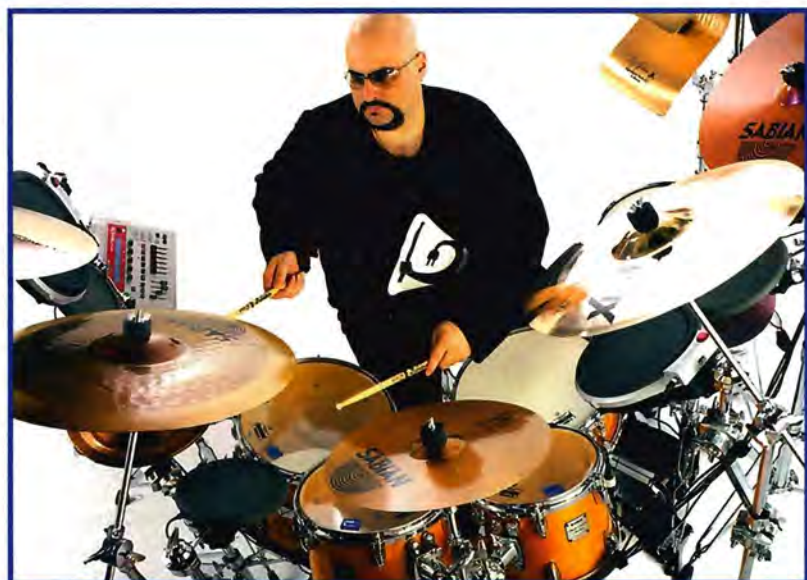
There are two very popular programs for creating this type of music. One is Ableton's Live; the other is Spectrasonics' Stylus RMX. Live has a series of cells placed on a grid that can hold any type of audio, from a single one-shot sample, to a song, to an entire night's set list. Each grid can also be used to play short MIDI segments. Since you can start and stop anything in any cell position with a single MIDI note number, you have total control over when any particular cell is played. With a little advanced programming, you can arrange cells so that they contain songs that start from different places within the form. Want to repeat or swap the chorus, add an extra verse, or jump to the breakdown instantly? No problem.

While the track is playing, you can set up individual hits or even small rhythmic groups and patterns that you can play individually or combine together to create more texture and density. One of the things Live does very well is tempo matching. In other words, once you determine that a track is to be played at 132 bpm, for example, additional notes and audio snippets will automatically play at the correct tempo.

Another feature of Live is the ability to fire sounds exactly on a quantized grid. This means that if you set your grid up to quarter-notes, you can strike a pad whenever you want and the cell will begin on the next quarter. This is perfect for creating amazingly cool cross-rhythms and patterns that interact with each other in totally new ways.



Former Living Colour drummer and solo artist Will Calhoun



Longtime electronic drum jockey Tony Verderosa

The byproduct of this feature is that everything you play is totally in sync and totally in time. No worries here about flammings or losing the 1.

Stylus RMX has a slightly different aesthetic. Designed to control and play loops, RMX can work with a large number of different loops at the same time. The loops can be played as complete patterns or broken up into a number of smaller slices. The software offers an amazing amount of control over how the loops and slices interact with each other, and nearly all parameters are controllable with MIDI messages. This makes it the perfect tool for real-time loop control.

For those on a budget, I would recommend a small drum controller like the Trigger Finger or PadKontrol, coupled with Live or Stylus RMX. If you've got a bigger budget, you should look into the drumKAT or malletKAT Express.

Of course, as advanced and sophisticated as controllers and software have become, it's not necessary to be absolutely state-of-the-art in order to perform. Nobody's been doing this type of performance longer than Tony Verderosa and, as a pioneer, his gear is of the decidedly old-school variety. His rig is composed of nothing more than the Yamaha DTX-treme IIS and an external sampler. "I really just love the older Yamaha A-5000 sampler," explains Verderosa. "And I'm also triggering the Motif live and using a vocoder." Acoustic drums also still play a significant part in his shows, including a bass drum, snare, and two toms, all with

triggers, as well as his Sabian VFX signature cymbals. "It's probably only 60-70-percent electronic based," he says.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER. Getting comfortable with a new software program or a new piece of hardware requires a time investment no different than learning any new musical tool. But by knowing the intricacies of your gear, not only will you be more comfortable in front of an audience, but you will also discover new ideas on how to use technology to your advantage. It's simple – if you don't understand a particular feature, you won't think of using it in your music.

Mario DeCiutiis – the guy who pretty much thought up all the features on the drumKAT – explains one of its key ones, known as Control Path. "In essence, this is a type of timed portamento for a controller rather than a traditional portamento of pitch," says DeCiutiis. "Control Path assigns how many beats it takes for a certain controller to get from point A to point B. Then each time you strike the pad, the value moves to the next point. You could, for example, have a value move over eight beats, from the 9:00 o'clock position to the 3:00 o'clock position. Then, if you play a hi-hat pattern and are controlling the stereo pan position or filter, you could have the output changing in real time. Instead of having the synth's LFO control the pan or filter, it's a human-based LFO." Many drumKAT owners don't even know of this great feature.



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In addition to knowing your gear, you need to know your audience. As a drum jockey trying to get a foot in the door at clubs, it's vital that you be able to demonstrate a real sensitivity to your listeners. Who are you playing for? What do they want to hear? Drumming legend Will Calhoun says that, at times, he'll go to clubs and stand by the DJ "just to hang out and watch the audience. I have to keep abreast of what tempos and sounds are happening. As a producer, this is important to me."

Tony Verderosa takes a slightly different approach. He likes to pick venues and audiences that he either knows to be, or believes will be more accepting of what he most enjoys doing. "I don't like to just run tracks on a laptop of a CD player when I do a live show," he says. "I have experimented with that in clubs in Europe, but it's not my favorite thing to do." Verderosa's performances are aesthetically more like a concert than a dance gig. "I like to go from a drum 'n' bass tune, to a really experimental track, to a down-tempo track, to a completely ambient track. To me, the most fun that I can have borrowing from DJ culture is the fact that the drum pads and the triggers on acoustic drums can use technology and drum loops and elements that DJs would use. This type of performance is going to be appropriate in some clubs but not others."

STRUCTURED IMPROV. Creating music in this way is a completely different way of working for most drummers. While improvisation is an important element, Calhoun, Verderosa, and DeCiutiis all insist improvisation should be kept within a framework that's been structured with specific goals in mind.

During Verderosa's shows, everything is created a little more on the fly. He combines loops with beat-sliced and audio-sliced loops, and improvises with beat fragments and one-shots all at the same time. "Once I'm comfortable with the composition, the program changes; there's a lot of freedom for improvisation within the structure. When I'm finished exploring and working with a particular section of the composition, I can strike a pad that sends all the program change and kit change information to move right into the next part of the piece."

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DeCiutiis sets his compositions up with Live in an 8 x 4 grid so that each pad is assigned to one of the groups. By having the drumKAT play a simple four-note alternate, he can control 32 figures at one time. "If you set up your one-shots, snippets, loops, and tracks in a logical manner, just about anything you play will work together just fine." This way, he's free to improvise around the sonic construction he's designed in advance. But, he says, "The thinking process is very different than just sitting back and striking pads randomly."

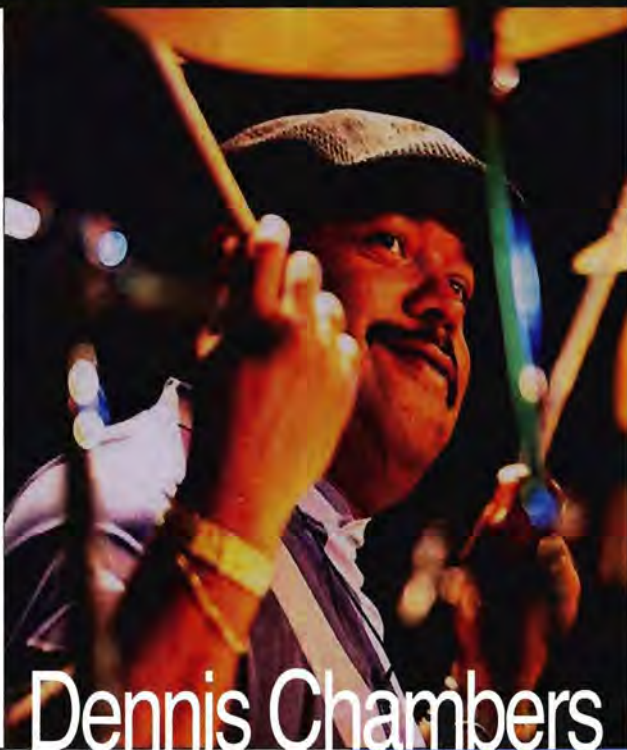
"Once you get used to working this way, it's possible to keep track of where certain events and sounds are on the drumKAT and still keep your place within the grid inside of Live. Once that happens, you're no longer improvising and playing whatever the machine happens to do, you're actually improvising with total control and knowledge of how things are going to sound."

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**"I'm
certainly not a
button pusher
in respect to
loops"
—Evan Ritchie**

DeCiutiis explains that creating a template for your songs is very important. "Once you develop a system of organizing your materials and create a technique, you won't want to change your percussion setup for every single song. Simply load new sounds, loops, tracks, and so on into the default document and you've created an entirely new tune."

With the drumKAT's ability to link pads together, drum jockey Evan Ritchie controls up to three layers of loops on each pad, allowing him to fire drums, bass lines, textural parts, keyboards, and anything else he wants to mix together. As he puts it, "I've got so many choices of what to play. I'm certainly *not* a button pusher in respect to loops. I don't want to turn on loops and play over them. I want to explore them."

In addition to Ritchie's solo performances, he often works in tandem with a DJ. "I work this with a friend of mine who has the knowledge and consideration of what a dance club needs. He works the Stylus RMX filters, modulations, the reverse and chaos functions. In essence, he DJs me - I'm his beat box. If he knows that I'm going to play a snare sound, and can anticipate what I'm doing, he can react to that. He plays me in real time."

INCORPORATING VIDEO, THE NEXT STEP? One of the newest ideas to surface within the industry is a combination of software and hardware that allows you to control and manipulate video in real time. While there are dozens of software programs that work with video, a program called ArKaos VJ is one of the most popular. Both DeCicciis and Calhoun use ArKaos for their live performances. "What I've started doing is making films from my photography and film that I've shot mostly in Africa, South America, and Central America," says Calhoun. "I'm using RMX sonically and ArKaos visually, and I combine those things so I can make my own loops live, affect them live, and have the film play in the tempo of what I'm playing."

Calhoun's even taken this production out of the clubs and into the art galleries, which is where he did his first tour to get the concept out. "It's basically making my own music videos in real time," he says. "I'm now incorporating this into my drum clinics, the Living Colour shows, and the Pharoah Sanders tours. I also just finished a six-day tour of Europe with this system. I'm trying to bring a different experience to drum clinics and playing the drum set and to controlling a crowd."

Calhoun sums it up by saying that he wants to get to a place where he's creating an interactive media performance where "we don't want to have to use the words 'drum' or 'loop' or 'pedal.' I want it to be a performance piece. Drummers have the advantage of being physical and controlling the beats and images live while feeding off the people and feeling their mood. And, I think that it's more interesting to watch a drummer than a DJ." Here, here, Will. ■

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