



Pick 'n' mix

Good production and mixing can enhance your work no end — Steven Helstrip explains how to max your trax. There's a new regular item on chords, too, and news of the latest sampling CDs.

I was considering changing the name of this column to *Hands On Sound and Sampling CDs*. After all, I talk of their wonders all the time and they have become almost as important to making "modern" music as the sampler itself.

Walk into a typical studio and in addition to the mixing console, a pair of Yamaha NS10 monitors and a rack of outboard gear, you can be sure to spot loads of sampling CDs. Whether it's because we can no longer program our own drum loops and bass sounds, or because sampling CDs simply save a lot of time, I'm not sure. But one thing is certain: sampling CDs are here to stay.

Time for a new collection

Just when you thought that there couldn't possibly be any more room for new products, Time + Space brings out a whole new collection called *Creative Essentials*. At less than £20 each, this collection is intended for musicians new to sampling and perhaps the professional who's strapped for cash. There are 30 discs in the series that cover practically every conceivable style of music. They should also appeal to games and multimedia developers who will find hundreds of special effects and weird sounds included. As well as containing audio tracks, each CD provides the samples in 16-bit Wave format on a CD-ROM partition.

So are they any good? I listened to the first ten in the collection and was surprised



Rhythm Guitar & FX, one of the Creative Essentials Sampling CD series

at how many samples you get for your pound; there are between 200 and 400 per disc. The quality of the samples is consistently high, although some of the CDs have a disappointingly limited range of ideas and styles. Two discs that are worth checking out are *Rhythm Guitar and FX*, and *Dance Vocals*. For more info, call Time + Space (see page 327).

Structurally sound

No matter what anybody says, a good song is a good song — even if it has been recorded directly onto two-track tape using nothing more than an acoustic guitar and a vocal. Any record company can spot a good song, so even if you haven't had the opportunity to give it the "big" production, you should still submit your work. Nevertheless, it's incredible what a differ-

ence good production can make. Over the next couple of issues, we'll be looking at production and mixing ideas that can

transform tracks using a few simple tricks.

Laying the groundwork

Once the song has been written, spend some time building a picture in your mind of how you want the finished track to sound. A good song can be recorded with most tempos and styles, so decide what kind of overall feel it needs, whether it's rock, dance, jazz or Bhangra. Also decide what instruments you want on the track; will the whole track be sequenced and use samples? Would a live guitar add to the production?

If you're running low on ideas, listen to a few CDs in your collection and you'll be able to hear what ideas have worked for other artistes. There's nothing wrong with "copying" production ideas, provided your song doesn't end up sounding exactly the

same as somebody else's.

Before committing yourself to recording the track at a studio, work at home or with your band on the pre-production, which is simply building a rough idea of how you want the track to sound. You might not have all the effects and a 20-piece orchestra to work with, but it does give you the opportunity to try out new ideas.

It's always helpful — if not a necessity — to have an outside opinion at the pre-production stage, so take a friend along to the studio or rehearsal. If you have the time, record as many different ideas as you can — listening to the result at a later stage, with a fresh pair of ears, will allow you to be a better judge of what works and what doesn't.

When working on the pre-production don't worry too much about the overall mix — your time will be better spent getting the instrumentation and arrangement right. Do, however, spend time with the vocal: after all, this is the most important part of any song. Try to think of it as the icing on the cake.

Chord of the Month

This new addition to the Sound column is to cater for the high level of interest in chords. Every month from now on, we will be introducing a new chord. Eventually, we will run out of chords and have to start over again, but that won't be for several years.



This month's chord is **A maj7/9**.

The notes in the chord are:

A / C sharp / E / G sharp / B

It's a fantastic chord to go to in the chorus of a song containing a verse written in A minor — try it.

Loopism's AWE32 Compilation

D-Zone was the first company to introduce low-cost sampling CDs and its Loopism collection is great value. The CDs cost around £10 a time, each comprising 25 drum loops and up to 100 instrument samples. Although on each CD you may find only a handful of instrument samples that are worth using, every loop can nevertheless be described as brilliant, professional, inspiring, up-to-date, classy... the praise goes on.

The AWE 32 Compilation contains every loop and sample from the first six CDs: that's over 850 samples covering just about every genre of dance music. Of course, you will need an AWE-32 to access these loops but there are few people who don't own one; if you're one of them, then it's worth the investment if you're looking for a low-cost sampler.

The CD is sectioned into two folders, loops and soundz. Under the loops folder you will find sub-folders arranged by tempo ranging from 64 to 172bpm.

Each loop has been edited and looped and is ready to download to on-board RAM. It is recommended that you have 2Mb installed on your card, since some of the sound banks are larger than 512Kb.

Under the soundz folder you will find a further six folders for each of the six CDs. Samples have been taken from such synthesisers as the Vintage Keys, Korg M1, Juno 106 and Matrix, and drum machines that include the TR909 and TR808. My only criticism of the drum samples is that the sounds haven't been key grouped or mapped across the keyboard. Instead, each sound has to be accessed by sending a program change message. Thus, if you want to

use six of the sounds from the TR909 kit, you'll need to reserve six MIDI channels instead of just one.

This is the definitive AWE collection to date. And at £29.95, it's an absolute bargain.

● *Loopism's AWE 32 Compilation is distributed by Time + Space.*



Loopisms AWE 32 compilation

A big mistake many bands make is to spend all day recording the instruments, so by the time it comes to the vocals it's half past three in the morning. By this time, the vocalist is absolutely knackered and cannot perform to his or her best. If you

have access to a sampler, it's a good idea to record a rough guide track and lay down the vocals first. Later, these vocals can be sampled and added to the track.

Fig 1 Outline of a typical commercial song structure

Intro (perhaps the chorus)	Try and keep it to around eight bars.
Double verse	Two verses; eight bars each.
Bridge (optional)	An eight-bar phrase that links the verse to the chorus. A good section in which to introduce strings and build on ideas.
Chorus	Again, usually an eight-bar section — this is the most important section and should contain the hook. The hook (the catchy bit) doesn't necessarily have to be the vocal; it might by a keyboard riff, or include both.
Link (optional)	A one, two or four-bar section to link the chorus and third verse. It gives the listener a short "rest" from the song, too.
Verse	Try to make this verse "bigger", which might mean adding percussion, a more solid rhythm track, or new musical ideas.
Bridge	The second bridge may use the same lyrics as the first. Musically, it can remain similar to the first.
Double chorus	Your chance to firmly "implant" the hook on the listener.
Middle eight	This section should take the listener on a different journey. It may be in a different key, have new instruments playing and contain new lyrics. It may just be a repeat of the bridge using different instrumentation; strings only, for example.
Outro	Four "full on" choruses. You might have a counter-melody and lots of vocal ad-libs. The easy way to end the song is to fade out, although a definite end can work just as well.

Hook, line and sinker

If you're working to a commercial structure, your track should be no longer than four minutes. Try to get the main hook into the track within the first 30 seconds; usually the chorus. This will keep the listener interested. Starting the track with the chorus is very popular these days and it usually works. I have outlined a typical commercial song structure, in Fig 1, for you to use as a rough guideline.

Probably the most important thing to remember at the production stage is the saying "If it sounds good, then it's right". Regardless of how wacky your idea may sound, or look on paper, try it out. You may be pleasantly surprised. At the same time, try not to be precious about your work; if it sounds good to you but nobody else "gets it", then try something else.

● Next month: more production ideas, and a closer look at mixing.

PCW Contacts

Readers' contributions to the Sound column are music to our ears. If you have any hints or tips, any MIDI-related items or general comments, send them in to the usual PCW address, or to **steven_helstrip@pcw.ccmail.compuserve.com**

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