

Bass-ic instinct

Remember Roland's classic TB-303 Bassline? Dance music would be devoid of "that" sound without it. It's revived today in software form, to the unabashed delight of Steven Helstrip.

The past month has been quite exciting. Not only have I finally persuaded Internet Explorer 3.0 to recognise my modem, but I've also been inundated by new software releases including updates for WaveLab, Cubase and Recycle. From the products I have received, however, the one to grab my attention and, indeed, much of my free time was the return of Roland's classic TB-303 Bassline. This time around, it's in the form of a software package.

It's hard to believe until you hear it, but the RB-338 Techno Micro Composer from Propellerhead gives you two fully-tweakable and programmable TB-303s on-screen. And that's not all. You also get an equally desirable TR-808 Rhythm Composer, a



Main story The TB-303 is reborn, thanks to those clever people at Propellerhead. Have a go at tweaking those knobs for yourself: the demo can be downloaded from www.propellerheads.se. There are some free samples up for grabs, too

Fig 1 Loudness Maximiser can pump up your mixes with no noticeable loss in audio quality

mid-eighties. Up until now, to get "that" sound, you would either have to have been one of those lucky people who bought one new, or wealthy enough to have bought one from the second-hand classified ad pages.

The RB-338 engine models the tonal characteristics of the 303 and 808 in software: it is not sample-based. This represents a major breakthrough in sound technology and will hopefully pave the way for more classic synths to be reproduced in software. It works with any

digital delay unit and a distortion pedal, all in one package.

The unique sound of the 303 has been

synonymous with dance music since the day it was born. The only mistake Roland made was ending the production line in the

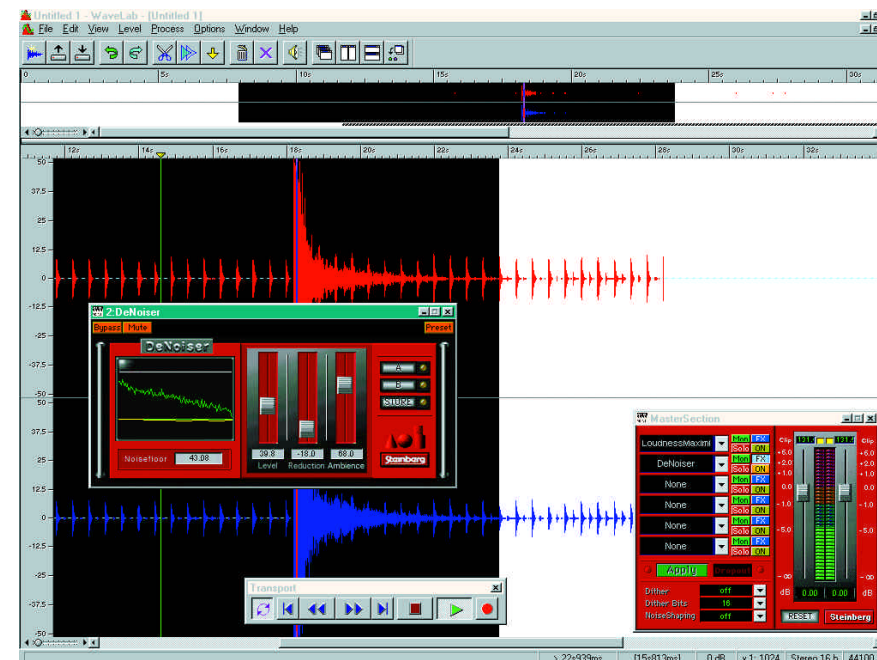


Fig 2 DeNoiser working miracles within a quiet musical phrase

16-bit sound card, including the digital variety, so it's possible to get a decent output signal for studio use.

Although analogue purists will disagree, the RB-338 does sound like the real thing, especially when routed through a valve compressor which can help soften the harsh nature of digital audio. The filter section, which is largely responsible for making the 303 what it is, has been faithfully reproduced and is more convincing than any previous offering. The pattern-based sequencer works in exactly the same way

as its predecessor, and has slide and accent parameters to enable you to get authentic acid riffs.

Once you have programmed your bassline, the RB-338 will sync to an incoming MIDI clock. Alternatively, you can output the sequence to a wave file and import it into any audio-equipped sequencer.

Why the TR-808 was chosen to be implemented rather than the TR-909 I'll never know, since the 909 has far more clout on the dance floor. It's handy to have

The FAT FB383, a serious clone

Throughout the nineties, nearly everyone in possession of a soldering iron has attempted to clone the TB-303. The first successful attempt to go on sale was the Novation Bass Station, followed by the Deep Bass Nine and a string of others including the RB-338. The FAT FB383 (confused with the names yet?) from Freeform Analogue Technologies, is the latest. I chose to review it here because of its staggeringly low price and versatility.

It comes in a 1U rackmount and is quite possibly the most distasteful design I have ever seen. Looks aside, though, it's a gorgeous synth to have in any MIDI setup. From left to right the front panel gives you tweak tuning, wave shape, filter cutoff, resonance, envelope modulation, accent, decay and volume. The knobs are of a much higher quality to those found on the Bass Station and the Deep Bass 9, enabling accurate and comfortable tweaking. This is

important, since they cannot be operated via MIDI. Being an analogue instrument, the inclusion of an auto-tune button is welcome.

So how close is it to the 303? Very close. It is able to create everything from fat, round, basses through to thin, resonant, blips. The filter, although very lush, doesn't quite crank up to the intensity that the 303 can, though. Since wave shape is variable between square wave and saw-tooth, it is capable of producing a wider range of sounds than the 303. And programming is a joy. Overlapping notes glide, similar to portamento, and velocities over 100 are accented.

I would be happy to pay double the asking price for the FB383. It's a serious instrument at a silly price.

Price £199 (£169.32 ex VAT)
Contact Turnkey 0171 379 5148



Creative Essentials — Dance Drums

I like the idea of Dance Drums. One CD, squillions of carefully selected drum samples. This, for once, enables you to find the sounds you're looking for in next to no time, assuming you know what you're after. There are no loops on this CD, though. Oh no. It's better than that. What you get are the sounds used by the professionals to make drum loops; the source code, for want of a better analogy.

As part of the Creative Essentials collection, each sample is provided in .aif, .wav and audio format so there's no audio degradation to endure if you use a soundcard-based sampler. Tracks two to six consist of a complete set of sounds from the coveted 909, 808, CR78, R8 and SP-12 drum machines. Where possible, samples have been recorded with numerous decay settings: for example, there are four 909 kicks.

Although based on just one sound, each has different characteristics — track seven

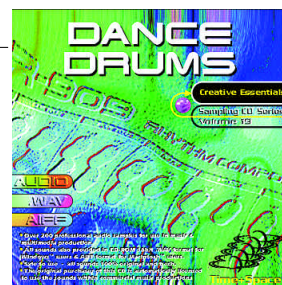
has 30 kick drums to annoy the neighbours with. As ever, there are a handful of fillers, but this is a

handsome collection nonetheless. The remaining tracks contain a mixed bag of snares, crashes, rides and percussion.

On our cover-mounted CD-ROM this month, in the handsound folder, there are ten samples to try out. If they work for you, check out the rest. At less than twenty quid, you can't go far wrong.

Price £19.95

Contact Time + Space 01442 870681



the full 808 kit, though, with tweakable decay for each instrument.

As I write, the RB-338 is still in alpha testing, but it looks set to be released this month. So far it looks and sounds great, and I expect the final will be rock solid. You can't beat being able to tweak the knobs with your own hands, however, so this month's product review is of a true analogue 303 clone (*see page 299*).

Harman Audio will be distributing the RB-338 in the UK but hasn't yet decided on the price. If you happen to be in the United States, you should be able to pick one up for less than \$200.

WaveLab update

By the time you read this, WaveLab 1.6 should be available as a free update for existing users of 1.5. Released last December, 1.5 introduced professional real-time plug-in modules for mastering and re-mastering audio tracks. With the 1.6, you can now master and burn a CD all from the same package. Whole tracks, or selected parts of an audio recording, can be dragged directly into the CD-Track list.

The CD writing capabilities support full PQ coding and editing of PQ markers. Drivers are supplied for most CD writers, allowing up to four-speed CD-writing.

On the subject of WaveLab, I recently checked out two new plug-ins and was seriously impressed with the results. Loudness Maximiser (*see page 298*) is designed to increase the perceived volume of an audio track, to give it more clout. Even tracks that have been normalised to digital

0dB can be raised up to a further 6dB, depending on the type of material. The Soft/Hard parameter enables further modifications. By applying a positive value, the bottom end of the material is tightened up, enabling a higher gain setting. This works well with dance-orientated music and can really toughen up your mix.

DeNoiser (*see page 299*) is based on the non-trivial task of spectral subtraction. You don't need to understand this technology to get great results since the plug-in is intuitive. The display shows an estimation of the noise floor, along with an FFT snapshot of the current signal. This enables you to set up the three parameters ensuring that only noise is taken out, with no loss of signal. I successfully cleaned up some of my own old tracks and was amazed by the results.

Because the modules work in real time, you can listen to the effect they're having while the music is playing. What's really neat is that you can feed a signal into your PC, process the audio and output the results straight to DAT.

Both modules cost £299 (£254.47 ex VAT) and are available from Harman Audio.

PCW Contacts

If you have any hints or tips, MIDI-related items or general comments, contact **Steven Helstrip** at the usual PCW address or email him at sound@pcw.vnu.co.uk

Harman Audio (for the RB-338, and the Loudness Maximiser and DeNoiser modules)
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