



Review: Drums On Demand®, Vol. 1 by Rick Paul - 29th September 2003 -



As a songwriter and non-drummer, who owns no acoustic drums, nor even a drum- or percussion-oriented MIDI controller (playing drums on a keyboard isn't much fun), it seems I am always looking for new, and better, ways to build high quality drum tracks. Some of the solutions I've tried have included general purpose sample players, dedicated drum samplers and synthesizers, MIDI loops, audio loops, programming beats by hand, recording beats from a keyboard controller, and even beatbox-style accompaniment generators. It seems there are no perfect solutions, and I'm always looking for additional alternatives, always striving to get greater flexibility, better sound quality, more human-feeling parts, and on and on and on.

Sure, I'd love to have a good drummer, with a great drum set, and a great drum room for recording him or her, at my beck and call whenever inspiration struck and I wanted to lay down a part. But reality being what it is -- you know, "realistic" -- I'll have to settle for solutions that get me a bit closer, all the while keeping my eyes out for new products and technologies that will make life easier, and my recordings better sounding, until that genie with drumsticks shows up.

While all the solutions out there have their pluses and minuses, one thing I have found is that audio loops, with recordings of good drummers in good spaces, while perhaps not as flexible as some of the other solutions out there, almost invariably sound good in the projects where I can use them. On the flip side, finding the right patterns for any given song, with a consistent set of sounds (i.e. so it doesn't sound like the drummer is switching sets every few measures), can be a fairly hit and miss thing with many sample collections. Additionally, some of the sample collections I've used that provide consistent drum kits don't provide enough variety in the way of drumming styles and tempos, for example, doing fine for an up-tempo song, but being hopelessly useless for ballads (and everybody knows we songwriters write far too many ballads). What's a non-drumming songwriter to do?

Enter Utah-based Hobby Horse Productions with their Drums on Demand® loop library.

The Basics

Drums On Demand, Vol. 1 (DODv1) is an ACIDized collection of 24-bit, 44.1 kHz stereo sample loops plus single hits that is aimed squarely at the rock, pop, and country songwriter, or anyone else who needs to quickly build good sounding, believable acoustic drum tracks for that matter. The almost 700 MB of samples on the CD includes 852 sample loops and 31 one shot samples, organized into 41 meaningfully named "Song Sets®" (folders organized by tempo and style). Loop tempos range from 72 BPM to 170 BPM, though the ACIDization allows stretching these tempo settings to cover an even wider range and all points in between if you're using SONAR, Project5, ACID, or other products that support ACIDized loops. List price is \$49.95. A REX format version is also available.

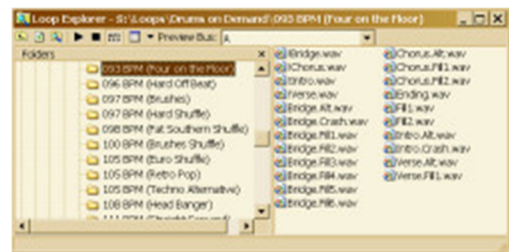
The Drums On Demand Difference

Perhaps the description of Drums On Demand to this point sounds a bit ho hum? Sure, not all drum loop collections provide almost 700 MB of samples (some are less than half that amount), and even those that do provide a healthy-sized collection sometimes provide redundant samples, such as three sets of the same basic beats processed differently, whereas DODv1 is providing a single mix of each beat. What makes Hobby Horse Productions think DODv1 has what it takes to be noticed in a crowded drum loops market, and what good does that do a songwriter in search of process and quality improvements?

In a word: organization. If I may be allowed a few more words, though: song structure orientation.

The Song Sets provided each were recorded at a single tempo, and in a single basic style. For example, the folders containing the Song Sets include names like "073 BPM (Brush Ballad)" and "108 BPM (Head Banger)". Thus, a good starting point for building a drum track for a new song would be to pick a tempo and style that is similar to what you are seeking. Of course, there is no law against mixing and matching styles, or stretching tempos upward or downward, and, while not all styles would easily fit together in a single song, many of them could.

Down at the individual style level, where many drum loop collections would have semi-meaningless names like "Snare Groove 1, Variation 39" or "Hip Hop 05", the DODv1 loops have names like "Verse", "Chorus", "Bridge", "Verse Alt", "Verse Fill 1", etc. That is, the names are meaningful to the songwriter trying to structure a drum beat for his or her song. Or to put it another way, the songwriter gets to take advantage of a professional drummer's judgment on what he might play for various parts of a song. For the songwriter trying to lay down believable beats quickly, this naming convention can provide a significant improvement in efficiency compared to having to audition lots of relatively meaninglessly named loops trying to figure out which ones might go together for which parts of a song.



Mind you, there is nothing preventing you from using, say, a loop named "Chorus" for your verse or bridge or pre-chorus or whatever -- feel free to go wild! It's just that the meaningful names used by DODv1 give the songwriter who has a reasonable handle on the structure of his or her song the ability to fly through building a drum part. While that songwriter might choose to spend more time building a polished demo, DODv1's

organization and orientation means that it is now possible to build quick drum tracks, even for work demos (for the non-songwriter, a "work demo" is the demo you make while still "working on" the song itself, for example to play for a co-writer, individuals who may provide feedback, a professional demo studio you are hiring for the final demo, and so on; and a key goal for work demos is to make them quickly and cheaply since the song may well change later on), while raising the bar on the quality of those tracks. Writers who get inspiration from beats will also find it easy to build a drum track for use at the writing stage.

Sounds, Quality, Usefulness, Etc.

This all sounds nice in theory, but what about in practice? How useful are the beats? Are the sounds and playing good enough to be used past the work demo stage? What about the mix quality? Flexibility?

Let's break with tradition and start with the bad news. Perhaps first and foremost, DODv1 provides mixed audio loops, and while there is a wide range of styles and beats that can lend themselves to many types of music, you won't find everything you ever wanted in a single CD's worth of drum beats. There may be times where you'll need to compromise, trading of that "perfect beat" you had in your mind for a similar overall feel, especially if you are dealing with time signatures other than 4/4. (DODv1 does provide a limited number of other time signatures, but not a wide selection.) This really is no different than for most collections, though there are a few high end collections that break the loops down into individual component drums that provide a bit more mix-and-matching flexibility, albeit at a much higher cost than DODv1, and with the added work required to mix things together. And DODv1 does provide one shot drum hits, too, in case you would like to use these in your sample player for additional flexibility.

If you're looking for electronic sounds, be it for techno and other electronica-oriented styles or for certain flavors of modern pop, hip-hop, and so on, you won't find them here, either. DODv1 is decidedly oriented toward providing real acoustic drums recorded in a high quality space. I might mention, though, that this is precisely what I am looking for a large percentage of the time as there are so many options for electronic sounds already.

It is also true that, while each song set is matched within itself, not all of them mix and match well with other Song Sets. It is far less of an issue here than with many drum loop CDs due to the acoustic concentration within DODv1. It would have been helpful, however, if documentation had been provided to note major differences in ingredients between Song Sets, such as when different snare drums are used or where there are very different ambience levels, where these differences could have a strong bearing on which Song Sets can easily be used together within a song.

I hope you're ready for the good news, though, because I've really run out of the bad. Well, other than I'd like even more of this stuff! Perhaps, though, given that the product package reads, "Drums On Demand Vol.1," there may be some good news in the form of a Volume 2 sometime in the future?

As far as I'm concerned, the good news with any tool, be it a set of drum loops or otherwise, lies in what I can achieve with it and how quickly I can achieve those results. This is where DODv1 shines.

First off, let's get to what everyone is waiting to hear, and that is that the playing quality and sound quality are excellent. We're talking high quality drums, drumming, recording

spaces and techniques, and mixes. From my experience with DODv1 to date, those drum mixes also tend to sit well in my own mixes with little or no additional processing. Given I'm not exactly the golden ears type, this represents both an improvement in quality and a savings of time chasing after that perfect balance at mixdown time.

If that were all DODv1 had going for it, it would be a good investment of \$50. To quote those late night TV infomercials, though, "but there's more!"

The drum loops CD I've used most frequently in the past came with approximately 633MB of sample content. However, that sample content was split into three different kits playing the exact same beats, for only 211MB of unique beats. Mind you, on any given song I'd only be using one kit. By contrast, DODv1 has an even larger library of sample content, but all are unique beats. Thus, we're talking more than triple the sample content! Having choices of beats is good!

That other loops CD also puts all the drums at the same tempo. That isn't as bad as it sounds in that the ACIDizing will allow stretching upwards by a fair amount, and at least somewhat downward. However, to be blunt, that loop collection is totally useless for ballads, there are no brushes to be found, no rim hits for verse (e.g. in a country song), no odd tempos (or even 3/4 time), and, to summarize, it really only lends itself to up-tempo groove-oriented material. If a song varies from that, say starting out more mellow before getting to the beat, well, sorry...

No such issues with DODv1. DODv1 provides a range of beats and tempos that can suit everything from ballads to "I need to stop and catch my breath", with a nice selection of brushes, rim hits, hi-hats, ride cymbals, and so on. Due to the Song Sets orientation, fills tend to fit fairly seamlessly with beats. While none of the patterns were actually labeled as being 3/4 time, I found the one of the 6/4 patterns worked perfectly in a 3/4 gospel song where I'd had trouble finding something to fit prior to DODv1's arrival. Sure, we're still talking premixed audio loops, but DODv1 provides a level of flexibility within that category that most collections I've seen do not even approach, and I was able to use DODv1 on everything from ballads to up-tempo retro-flavored country with good results.

That's still not the end of the story, though. Where DODv1 really shines is in its organization, and how productive this lets its users be as a result of its song-oriented focus.

Say I've got a song idea, and I don't know exactly where it will lead, but I've got a general idea of its structure, and I'd like to get something down to document that. Perhaps there's a 4 measure introduction, a 16 measure verse, a 16 measure chorus, a 4 measure interlude, then another verse, another chorus, an 8 measure bridge, a final chorus, then perhaps a 4 measure tag. With DODv1 it is easy to just pick appropriately labeled loops within a tempo and style that seems right for the song, stretch them out in SONAR (or Acid or ...) to fit the numbers of measures needed, then go ahead and record whatever other parts you want to get down. It's very quick work for putting together a work demo.

If I then want to take that initial recording and refine it to go from a quick, but very good sounding (at least on the drums side), demo to a more polished recording, it is easy enough to go back to the drum tracks with DODv1 and play around a bit more with adding variations -- perhaps alternate verse patterns here, a verse fill there, a chorus crash cymbal here, and so on -- all building on the quick work demo that likely had its drum part put together in under 5 minutes. I defy you to try doing that with a more typical drum loops collection that doesn't take this song-oriented slant. Mostly what I tend to resort to in such

cases is dragging a single pattern out through the whole song for the work demo level. Can you say, "boring!" boys and girls?

Closing Notes

I think it is fair to say that Drums On Demand takes constructing drum tracks from audio loops up a level beyond many, if not most, similarly priced collections for one key reason: focus. It doesn't try to be all things to all people, but rather tries to be exceptionally good at one key thing -- providing high quality acoustic drumming for use in pop, rock, and country songs. There aren't multiple drum sets (though there are multiple snare drums), nor any latin percussion, electronic percussion, different ambiances for the same beats, and so on. Rather, there are just a large number of tempos and playing styles, geared toward musically useful purposes, especially for song-oriented production.

The proof is in the pudding, though. I received the DODv1 package just as I was in the middle of fighting with various other tools to try and build a drum part for a song demo I'd been working on, and dreading putting together the drum beats due to my stylistic ideas' being pretty specific. In particular, it was a Johnny Cash tribute song, and I wanted that train-type beat played with brushes that was found on so many of Cash's classic recordings. Prior to DODv1's arrival, I'd gone through most of my other options, and did not find anything that hit the nail on the head, or really even came close. I was beginning to fear I'd end up trying to play something from the keyboard, which would mean it would probably end up being a pretty sloppy part as I'm not a great keyboard drummer. After loading the DODv1 loops onto my hard disk, I went through the 4(!) Song Sets that had "brushes" in their name. While none were perfect for what I had in my head, a few were close enough that I could get the same basic feel and write the differences off to trying to modernize the beat a bit. As for the results? Well, to quote a colleague who made some comments on my mix, "it's like having a real drummer there."

I do have just one more small complaint, though. Drums On Demand is good enough, and fast enough to use, that I'm going to have to try awfully hard to resist that nagging temptation to revisit batches of my old recordings, seeing if maybe I can improve the drum parts by remixing them with DODv1 on the drum throne. Maybe they should put a warning on the label or something.

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