Review: Smart Loops Dry Studio Kit and Percussion Kit
by Rick Paul - *10th November 2003 -*

Users of Cakewalk products will likely be familiar with the name Smart Loops and that of its founder, drummer/loop enterpreneur Frank Basile. I've only been a Cakewalk user since Pro Audio 9, which came out in late 1999, but have noted that every major release of Cakewalk's flagship sequencer/DAW products since that time -- i.e. Pro Audio 9 and SONAR versions 1, 2, and 3 -- has included some content created by Frank, from sample audio loops to Sound Fonts to MIDI patterns. Frank and Smart Loops were also the creative force behind Cakewalk's Drumatic and Rockit Fuel loops collections.

This review will focus on two of Smart Loops' classic, but still current sample loops products: the Dry Studio Kit (DSK) and the Percussion Kit (PK). The review is aimed primarily at users of Cakewalk products, such as SONAR 3 and Project5, though these products may also be of interest to users of other DAWs and virtual studio products.

Basics

At their most basic, Dry Studio Kit and Percussion Kit are collections of drum set and percussion audio loops, respectively, for both ACID-compatible and non-ACID-compatible uses. One shot samples are also provided for layering and other custom uses where loops would not be ideal, such as for crash or splash cymbal hits and cymbal swells. Both products list for $69, with street price typically just under $50 as of this writing.

Each sample CD contains ACID-ized loops (approximately 110 MB), non-ACID-ized versions of the same loops at multiple tempos (approximately 485 MB), one shot samples (16-32 MB), and sample loops from other Smart Loops collections (approximately 30 MB). The DSK CD also contains both text and MP3 format audio tips on making more realistic drum tracks using the loops (1MB).

This loop organization is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, you don't have to have an ACID-compatible DAW to use the loops, since WAV files are provided at various tempos for use in DAWs without ACID-type stretching capabilities. On the other hand, for users of SONAR, Project5, and other ACID-compatible DAWs, the extra WAV files are redundant, and are taking up significant space that could have been devoted to providing additional unique loops. The result is that the SONAR user is getting less than 140 MB of unique samples (i.e. ACID-compatible loops plus one shots), and this may affect the value equation versus loop collections that pack a full CD's worth of ACID-compatible loops for a similar price tag.

Not included on the CD, but downloadable for free upon registering DSK, are matching Sound Font, GigaStudio, and DR-008 format samples. This is a nice touch as audio loops can be pretty inflexible when it comes to matching a

beat you have in your head, but which doesn't exist in the sample content, or would have to be stretched too far to sound good. For users of compatible software-based samplers, this means DSK users can simply program the beats via MIDI or play them with a MIDI controller. In fact, SONAR 2 and 3 include Pattern Brush patterns that are already programmed with MIDI beats to match those included in DSK, so it is very quick for SONAR users to get started going down this route.

Dry Studio Kit

The Dry Studio Kit provides loops and one shots to cover basic acoustic drumming. As the name of the product suggests, the kit is recorded dry -- i.e. there is no artificial ambience, nor is there a significant amount of room ambience. This makes it easy to mix and match different loops and one shot samples together, while leaving you options on processing it. The only downside is that, unless you build up loops from one shot samples or using the playable samples via MIDI, you are limited to processing the whole drum kit the same way -- i.e. everything gets the same reverb, EQ treatment, compression, and so on.

The ACID-ized portion of DSK consists of 273 loops (246 at 100 bpm and 33 at 75 bpm), grouped into 16 basic sets of related loops (14 at 100 bpm and 2 at 75 bpm), plus 51 one shot samples. Loop set names range from reasonably indicative of what they are (e.g. "Disco", "Straight", "Triples", etc.) to "you'd have to have been there" obscure (e.g. "Jerry", "Rosie", "Stacie"). In the latter category, Frank Basile indicates all the names have some meaning -- e.g. "Rosie" is for a beat similar to that on Toto's "Rosanna", and "Jerry" is based on a beat played by ace studio and live drummer Jerry Marotta -- but there is no documentation on this provided with the loops.

Within most sets of related loops, there are multiple variations (e.g. "Straight 1", "Straight 2", ..., "Straight 15"), as well as related fills (e.g. "Straight Fill 1", "Straight Fill 2", etc.), and sometimes also variations that use the ride cymbal instead of hi-hats (e.g. "Straight Ride 1", "Straight Ride 2", etc.). This gives a quick feel for what loops are likely to easily work together. The hi-hat and ride cymbal variations, as well as pattern variations with fills, provide some basic clues to suggest where these patterns might fit in a song structure (e.g. try the ride cymbal variations in the chorus and the fills before changing song sections).

If there is a downside in all this variety and mix and match capability, it is that so many of the names are so similar to each other, that it can be difficult to keep straight which loops represent what beats when trying to build a drum track. The related loop groups help narrow down the basic beat, once you've selected a family of loops, but some of the loop families are so large that those of us with a short memory for details may find our eyes glazing over pretty quickly when trying to narrow things down to the individual loop level. This can be especially true if following Smart Loops' excellent advice to vary patterns measure-by-measure to create more human feeling beats than what you'd get by taking the easy route of just stretching a single loop out to fill most of a song section. I'm not sure that file naming alone could ever cure this, but perhaps some additional documentation that provided, for example, notated drum parts could have made it easier to keep track of which beats correspond to which loops. To be fair, this is mainly an issue because there are so many variations of each beat grouping, and having such a large number of variations is a good thing.

Stylistically, DSK seems suited primarily to fairly high energy mid-to-up-tempo songs, primarily in classic rock, pop/rock, and related genres. You will not find, for example, any loops with the side stick hits that commonly replace the snare in country song verses in this collection. Nor will you find any 3/4 time loops, nor the range of dynamic playing that is necessary for a ballad, nor for that matter loop tempos down in the ballad range. Even the two groupings of 75 bpm loops are pretty high in energy.

As such, DSK may not be the ideal first loop collection for a songwriter, especially since it is known fact that most of us songwriters write far too many ballads. However, if the types of songs you are working on suit what DSK provides, the degree of beat variations in DSK's loop families allows significant flexibility for controlling the fine details of drum part construction compared to many more general purpose drum loops collections.

Percussion Kit

Smart Loops' Percussion Kit complements DSK, as well as other drum set loop collections, nicely by adding Latin and other percussion loops. The loops were played by percussionist Eugie Castrillo, who has played with the likes of Tito Puente, Steve Winwood, Michael Brecker, Ruben Blades, and many more. Whereas DSK's loops consist of beats played with a full drum set mix, PK's loops are primarily of the single instrument variety, with many variations for most of the more common instruments, thus offering great flexibility in beat construction.

The ACID-ized versions of the PK loops are supplied at a tempo of 100 bpm, which does somewhat limit the range of tempos to which PK loops are applicable. However, to my less-than-golden ears, it is also possible to stretch PK loops down further than DSK loops can be stretched, perhaps due to their single instrument, as opposed to full kit, nature. One shot samples are also provided for instruments used in the loops, as well as some that do not appear in the loops, so there is also the possibility of using these one shots for constructing your own beats, be it by arranging the audio file locations directly, or by loading them into a sample player for playing via MIDI. Unlike with DSK, however, pre-constructed playable samples (e.g. Sound Font, DR-008, etc.) are not provided directly by Smart Loops.

Instruments covered in the loops include Latin percussion staples such as congas, bongos, claves, timbales, agogos, and many more, as well as tambourine, wood block, triangles, tablas, frame drums, and assorted other utility and ethnic percussion. The one shots add a few more varieties to the mix, with bells, tiny chimes, and even a few somewhat obscure choices such as ocean sounds, bird tweets, and even a rubber ducky. I guess there's everything there needed to create that Rio beach scene -- the Latin percussion, the sounds of the waves and birds, and even the kids' water toys!

Sounds, Quality, Usefulness, Etc.

The recording quality of both DSK and PK is uniformly excellent, as is the playing on the loops.

The sounds are upfront and "in your face", so if you want things further back to sit differently in your mix, you'll be responsible for supplying the ambience. This can be desirable in that it gives you more control, by not presuming any particular room or position in the room, thus giving you more flexibility for fitting the track in your particular mix.

On the other hand, it means more work on your end than with a loop collection that already has the room "in there", so it will be at least somewhat dependent on your tools and skills with reverb and such. With DSK it also limits you to to processing the entire drum kit as a whole, which may be a concern in some cases, such as when it would be desirable to keep the kick drum out of the reverb or to use a different reverb on the snare. However, advanced users may be able to take advantage of their frequency spectrum knowledge, for example, to send the kit to an aux bus which uses an EQ, configured as a bandpass filter to pass only the frequencies covered by the snare drum, then a reverb to simulate adding reverb only to the snare signal (and, of course, any other drum overtones that happen to be in the same frequency range). The ability to do instrument-specific processing is not an issue with PK, as the individual instrument loops allow you to put different instruments on different tracks if desired.

One of the first things I do with any product I review, after just a bit of "new toy"-style exploring, is try to put it to use on a real life project, which generally means one of my song demos. In the best case, the product is directly applicable to the demo that is at the head of my prioritized list of songs to record. If it won't work there, I look at other projects in my list, and bump one up to the front burner so I can "kill two birds with one stone" (i.e. try out the product I'm reviewing while progressing at least something that is on my "to do" list).

Unfortunately, when I started going down this route with DSK and PK, the top project on my list was a ballad, and try as I might to find some suitable loops for the song in question with DSK and/or PK, nothing fit. The loops that were even in the ballpark rhythmically simply could not be stretched down to the 68 bpm tempo that was in use throughout most of the song. I figured that would be a good excuse to try downloading the playable DSK samples, and read the GigaStudio format sample into Native Instruments' KOMPAKT. However, I didn't end up having the

time or inclination to program a drum beat from scratch or sift through MIDI patterns, so I used one of the SONAR Pattern Brush patterns to get just a simple hi-hat pattern to use, more like a metronome than anything else, and punted on that song.

My next step was to look specifically at up-tempo songs I had on my stack. There was one song I hadn't demoed yet, and I initially thought DSK should suit it. However, in actually trying to build a beat, the feels available weren't really close enough to what I was looking for, so I moved on, though I felt I could find some interesting ornamentation in PK once I built a drum track elsewhere. The next song on my list was a mid-to-up-tempo song I'd started working on with Cakewalk's Project5, but it was really too electronic for DSK as I'd have to apply processing to the overall kit.

I finally arrived at an up-tempo country rock song that had some MIDI drum tracks, but where I wasn't happy with those and wanted to replace them. For most of the song, I found some patterns that were pretty close to the feel I was looking for. In the end, there were one or two sections where I really would have preferred some sparser patterns than I was able to find in DSK while still matching the basic rhythm I'd had in mind, but I was pretty satisfied with the track, and felt it was an improvement over what I'd had there previously at the playing and raw sounds level.

After finishing the basic beat, I added some one shots, also from DSK, to strategically place cymbal hits, hi-hat chokes, and such, around the song. I also used one of the one shot "live ending" samples to get pretty close to the feel of the song's ending. I do wish there were more choices on that last count, but managed to get close enough that I felt it would be worth tweaking the other tracks to match the drums, rather than to try and get a believable ending via MIDI and the playable samples. Finally, the track needed more oomph than DSK provides unprocessed, and a bit of judicious use of PSP VintageWarmer for oomph, along with SONAR 3 Producer's new Lexicon Pantheon reverb for ambience, fairly quickly got me in the ballpark of what I needed. Success!

Next up, I thought I'd have a bit of fun adding some percussion, courtesy of PK, to the mix. Okay, so maybe the idea of Latin percussion in a country rock song wasn't the greatest, but I sure did have fun playing around with PK on the song, especially during a final chorus where most of the instruments drop out to just vocal harmonies and drums. Instant Carnival Rio de Janeiro! Also, the tambourine loops were usable in parts of the song, and sounded a whole lot better than playing tambourine samples via MIDI generally does.

My general observation on the usefulness of DSK is that its applicability to a given project is highly dependent on the specific feel you have in mind for that project. That feel will also likely need to be largely at one basic dynamic level arrangement-wise. Thus, for example, even independent of tempo issues, something like a ballad would be tough to carry off in DSK because there aren't enough sparse, lightly played patterns to suit the areas where things get taken down in intensity. By contrast, a more energetic song, such as might be used for dancing (but within the confines of the styles to which an acoustic kit is suited), will more likely find relevant beats.

The one shots don't help much in broadening DSK's applicability in that you can't subtract from a beat, but rather can only augment what is there. The MIDI-playable samples do provide additional options, but then you have to get into MIDI programming or finding MIDI loops to match. (SONAR's Pattern Brush patterns do help in the latter regard, especially since they are match by name to many of DSK's patterns.) Also, with a few exceptions, such as the snare drum, most of the playable samples provide only a single velocity level, thus making it harder to get the kind of realistic timbre changes that come when striking a real drum or cymbal at different velocities and in different locations. The playable samples' main benefit will be for use in projects that are almost completely covered by the audio loops, but where a few special needs would otherwise preclude use of the loops, such as for an intro or ending where the provided one shot endings just don't suffice and programming parts from one shot audio samples would be too tedious.

PK provides more flexibility than DSK in these areas due to the separate loops for different instruments, which yields the ability to build more complex percussion ensembles and rhythmic mixes from the raw rhythms available for each instrument. There is also a certain fun factor with PK that invites experimentation, and SONAR's Loop Explorer's ability to preview multiple loops in parallel by Ctrl-clicking on multiple samples nicely complements this aspect of PK.

Closing Notes

Overall, I have mixed feelings about Smart Loops' Dry Studio Kit. What is there is good, but with a combined loops and one shots unique sample content of just under 130 MB -- the rest of the otherwise full CD is taken up by non-ACID-ized versions of the same loops at different tempos and demo loops from other collections -- there isn't a huge complement of loops compared to some competitive collections in the same general price bracket. Still, the collection does sound good and provides quality playing if your relatively high energy song fits the beats. The uniformity of processing, or lack thereof, throughout the loops also makes it easy to mix and match beats to get more human feels than a collection that had a larger collection of kits or processing styles, or even multiple ACID-ized loop base tempos (i.e. since two loops at different ACID-ized base tempos played back at the same tempo will sound at least subtly different than two loops from the same base tempo played back at the same tempo), might do. But DSK probably is not the best starting point for a songwriter looking for his or her first drum loops collection due to the relatively limited range of applicability of the loops.

As for Percussion Kit, while it also has a relatively limited amount of unique loops and one shots (just under 140 MB), and this may provide less value than similar collections with a larger amount of unique content, I do feel it is a good starting point for getting into Latin percussion loops. For one thing, the single instrument (or small number of instruments) loops make these more flexible for building up unique rhythms. Also, the tempo stretching issues aren't as severe as for a whole kit, and the need for Latin percussion tends to be greater in more energetic material anyway. Not to mention that they're just plain fun.

It is also worth noting that DSK and PK do complement each other pretty well. Try starting with a drum beat composed of DSK loops and one shots, then spice it up with PK loops, and you'll get a nice, energetic Latin beat that just urges you to put on those dancing shoes. Which brings up one final thought:

While DSK may not be the ideal set of loops for adding a beat to an already composed song where you have a pretty solid idea of the feel you want, the combined energy of DSK and PK could well be inspirational for building a song or instrumental composition from the beat up. Now where do I find a good Spanish language lyricist?

Rick Paul is a songwriter living in Southern California. You can contact him at http://www.RickPaul.info.