

Ableton Live

A Look Inside The World Of Interactive Music Software

by Paul Wells



You may have noticed a lot of references in recent issues of *MD* to a computer program called Ableton Live. Since its initial release in 2001, Live has become a staple for many creative and cutting-edge drummers, including session greats Shawn Pelton, Pat Mastelotto, and Matt Chamberlain. For these incredible drummers, this innovative piece of software is just as important to their sonic arsenal as their favorite snare drum.

So what exactly is Ableton Live, and what does it do? And more importantly, what use does it have for drummers? Let's take a look.

What Is Ableton Live?

In order to describe Live to a newcomer, we need to begin with a brief discussion on the different types of music-making computer programs that are out there. Some programs (such as Pro Tools, Logic, and Cubase) function as entire recording studios inside a computer. They can record and edit digital audio, as well as program and sequence MIDI data. These programs allow you to arrange, process, and mix your music all at once. This type of software is commonly referred to as a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation).

When the first version of Ableton Live was released in 2001, its main function was to manipulate audio in creative ways. Now at version 7, Live has grown into a fully functioning DAW and can do most of the things that programs like Pro Tools can do. Shawn Pelton even uses Live as his primary multi-track software to record drums in his home studio.

Slice And Dice Your Beats

There are many aspects of Live that make it stand out from other programs, and that have made musicians so passionate about it. As we explained, Live initially focused on audio manipulation. And it continues to be one of the best programs for creative digital editing, especially when working with loops and samples of drum performances. For example, you can import a sample of a drumbeat into Live and change the tempo to be faster or slower without altering the pitch. The beat can also be cut into individual hits and re-arranged to create a completely new pattern. This kind of "beat slicing" was origi-

nally developed by hip-hop programmers in the late '80s, but has since become a very popular musical element in all styles of contemporary music. Pat Mastelotto uses this technique on his recordings with progressive rock bands such as King Crimson and Tuner.

One of Live's most innovative tools is warp marker, which allows an audio file to be stretched like a rubber band. If you import a beat that has a late snare hit on beat 2, you can put a warp marker directly over the snare hit and pin that as beat 2. This marker tells Live to stretch the rest of the beat so that the snare hit now lines up exactly where you want it. In addition to correcting imperfect performances, warp markers can be used to drastically alter the feel of a sample or loop in all sorts of innovative ways.

Create Your Own Loops

If you're new to electronic music production, you might be thinking, "Well, I don't have any loops. So what good would Live be to me?" Because Live also works as a DAW, you can easily record your own samples and loops into your computer. You just need a microphone and an audio interface. You'll be surprised how much your beats take on a completely different character once you start messing with them in Live. (Check out Shawn Pelton's *Down And Dirty Loops* video at www.ableton.com/movies to see how easy it is to record yourself in Live.)

If you don't have the ability to record yourself for loop material, you can also use Live to sample sounds off of CDs, vinyl, and cassettes. Or you can purchase some of the hundreds of royalty-free sample CDs that are available.

Another option for creating loops in Live is to use the software's built-in drum machines to program beats and patterns. Many drummers and producers spice up their tracks with programmed percussion textures. Live 7 Suite includes an add-on called Session Drums, which is a gigantic library of high-quality drum samples. You can also use other manufacturers' software drum machines or sample players in the VST plug-in format. Some of these include Native Instruments Battery, XLN Audio Addictive Drums, Toontrack Superior and EZdrummer, Stylus RMX, and FXpansion BFD2.



Explore Songwriting

Ableton Live is also a powerful tool for writing songs and developing arrangements. Live includes a bunch of software synthesizers to help you sketch out melodies and bass lines to go with your new beats. Once you have some basic ideas down, you can then use Live to improvise an arrangement. You can trigger different elements of your composition (beats, melodies, chord changes, percussion, etc.) in real time, and Live will keep track of the order in which each part was played. This is a fun and creative way to build an arrangement "on the fly." Live also comes with a wide assortment of effects for sound processing such as reverb, delay, filters, compression, and distortion. These can be used to color your music in subtle or extreme ways.

Play Live With Live

Perhaps the most unusual and powerful feature of Live is its ability to be used in a performance situation. In fact, Live was originally designed so that musicians could use it to perform and improvise electronic music onstage. Today many bands use various pre-recorded tracks during their shows. Things like background vocals and percussion are often played back on a computer while the drummer listens to a click track to keep everything in sync. Like all DAWs, Live

can play back samples, loops, and backing tracks in a predetermined order, much like a CD player. What sets Live apart is that it allows you to trigger different sections of a song to be played at any time. Before Ableton Live, bands playing to backing tracks were chained to the pre-written arrangement. But Live allows you to integrate samples, loops, and other electronic sounds into your performances while still maintaining a spontaneous musical flow.

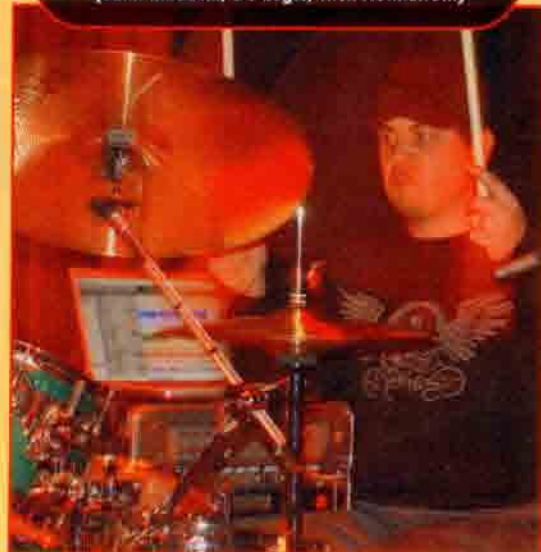
It's Time To Jump In!

All of this technical talk can be a bit overwhelming if you've never used music-making software. Traditionally, the world of DAWs and audio manipulation has not been part of the drummer's domain. However, this type of technology is a big part of the modern music world, regardless of what style you play. So it's important for drummers to embrace these new technologies and methods. Live is one of the best ways to get your feet wet in the world of digital music making.

To give you an idea of how drummers are using this inventive software in the studio and on stage, we sat down with several world-renowned players who are strong proponents of Live. Here's what they had to say.

DONNY GRUENDLER

(John Medeski, DJ Logic, Rick Holmstrom)



MD: How long have you been using Live?

Donny: I've been using Live since version 2. Previously, I had used a sixteen-space rack with Akai S-Series samplers and MPC 3000s. This setup not only took up a lot of space on stage, the samplers were a pain to edit because of their tiny LED screens. If an artist wanted a change the tempo of a track or loop, or make additions to the setlist, it could take hours. Live can make these changes in a matter of minutes. I eventually sold all my rack-mount gear and bought an Apple G4 Powerbook running Live 2. I haven't looked back since.

MD: What do you use as source material when creating loops?

Donny: I have a studio where I can create twenty-four hours a day. A drumkit is always miked up and ready to record. I usually track a couple of grooves per day and save them as stereo WAV files. I then pull these files into one of my Live session templates, which are categorized by style. That way, when I need to program something, I just load a template that's full of my

loops, and I'm ready to go.

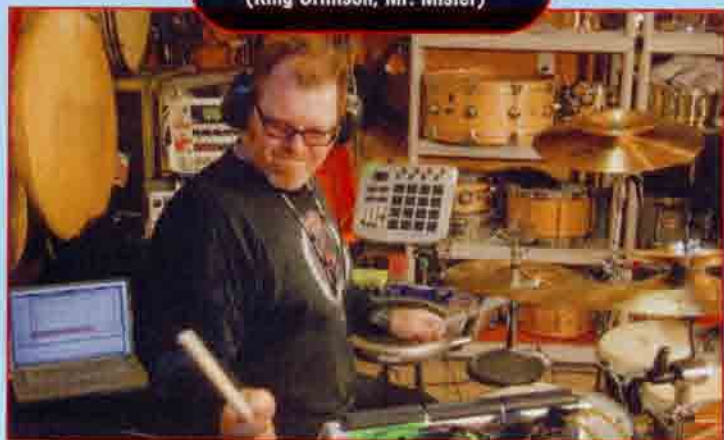
MD: Describe how you use Live, both in the studio and onstage.

Donny: Live has a creative and logical workflow. Not only does this enable me to write and capture ideas quickly, it's also useful for programming loops during a session. I just grab a few of my loops from one of my hard drives, drag them into Ableton, and match the tempo to the song. At this point, the fun begins. I can mangle the groove with Live's built-in effects.

For certain live gigs, I might need to reproduce loops, samples, and sounds from a studio recording. For these situations, I use a Macbook Pro laptop and a drumKAT, as well as my acoustic kit. Using Ableton Live's MIDI Map feature allows me to start a song, change a song's tempo, trigger loops, play Live's instruments, and add effects—all while drumsticks are in my hands! I assign each loop, instrument, or function in Live to a corresponding pad on my drumKAT.

ABLETON LIVE

PAT MASTELOTTO (King Crimson, Mr. Mister)



MD: You've been using electronics for quite a while now. When did you start moving towards software for music making?

Pat: I've dabbled with electronics since the '70s. I got into software as soon as I got a laptop, which was in the early '90s. Besides the sonic and creative curiosities of electronics, a big reason that I moved toward this stuff is that I feel that I have certain limitations as a player. But I can go to a beatbox, sequencer, or sampler and create a version of my vision that I can't always facilitate with my hands.

Someone who helped get me into drum machines is producer Mike Chapman. When he came back to L.A. after doing Blondie's *Heart Of Glass*, he brought an early Roland beatbox into the studio for me to play with. I found I could keep time to that much better than to a regular click track. So I started carrying a Roland Rhythm Ace with me.

MD: Where do you get source material for samples and drum loops? Do you use vinyl or sample CDs?

Pat: I've done that, and I've pulled loops right out of the Ableton library. But more often than not, I pull from stuff that I've played. For instance, there were a couple of things on the first *Tuner* record that were taken from my drumming on King Crimson's *Power To Believe*. I cut up these samples and reprocess them so that they become something new.

Since I have a home studio, I usually record my own custom loops and chop those up. Sometimes I'll go for a very professional sound. Other times I'll just use a really simple lo-fi setup—like a microphone right into my laptop—and record something into Ableton Live. It could be a drum thing or just a bunch of metal or Tupperware that I banged on. Then I tweak it by cutting and pasting parts, or by moving the warp markers. This can turn a beat into something totally different.

MD: You've been using Live quite extensively onstage. Describe the basics of what you do.

Pat: For gigs, I might cut some loops out of previous recordings and assign them to drum pads—usually a Roland SPD, an M-Audio Trigger Finger, or a Roland Handsonic.

MD: Can you list some recordings on which you used Live?

Pat: I have a project called *Tuner* with a German touch guitarist named Markus Reuter. We did ninety-nine percent of the first record, *Totem*, in Live, for logistical reasons. We started working via email, and Markus didn't have a Pro Tools rig, but we both had Ableton Live.

I also just worked on a project for Steve Wilson from Porcupine Tree called *No-Man*. For that, I chopped beats, did some degeneration, and detuned things in Live.

MD: Which of Live's audio effects are you using?

Pat: There are so many good effects, like compressors, gates, auto panners, beat repeat, and filter delay, which is a favorite. I also use the resonators effect a lot. I'll put towels on my drums so that they've got a tone without too wide a spectrum, record a pattern on them, and then add the resonators. It ends up sounding like a keyboard. There's an example of that on the opening track of the KTU record *Eight Armed Monkey*. When the other instruments come in, I used the knob on the Handsonic to fade out the resonators so that it becomes more of an acoustic drum sound.

MATT CHAMBERLAIN (Tori Amos, Fiona Apple, David Bowie)



MD: How are you using Live?

Matt: I'm using Live onstage, along with the plug-in Battery 3, for triggering loops and playing electronic drum sounds in real time. Also, I use Live to process my drums by running mics through some of its effects.

In the studio, I primarily use Live to create loops. These loops might be different lengths, multi-tracked, pitched up or down, and/or treated with some of the plug-ins.

MD: Which of Ableton's built-in effects are your favorites?

Matt: I really like the automated ones like Beat Repeat. When processing my drums using contact mics, I like using the Gate plug-in before any of the more aggressive effects, like distortions, severe compression, etc. The gate cuts down on feedback when you're cranking stuff through guitar amps or monitors.

MD: What do you use as source material when creating loops/samples in Live?

Matt: Ninety-nine percent of the loops I make are recorded straight into Ableton with a mic.

MD: What features of Live do you feel are of specific interest to drummers?

Matt: If you're the kind of drummer who is inspired by combining electronic music with acoustic drums, then this is the program for you. It can pretty much do whatever you can think of—it's a drum machine, sampler, DAW, a studio fool, and a totally stable live instrument. I used it on the road with Tori Amos for nine months and it never crashed.

MD: What are some recorded examples of your use of Live?

Matt: I used Live on my self-titled solo record, Tori Amos's *American Doll Posse*, Dido's upcoming record, *Critters Buggin's Stampede*, and *Floortone*, which I recorded with Bill Frisell.

ANTON FIG (Late Night, Oz Noy)



MD: How do you use Live?

Anton: There are many applications of Live that suit many needs. I'm primarily using it to construct songs out of loops and clips. I use CDs as sample sources and process the pieces using Live's audio effects.

I've been working on a movie score recently, and I'm using sample clips to create moods. In some cases, I take these tracks and add instruments on top, such as acoustic guitar.

SHAWN PELTON

(SNL, Sheryl Crow)



MD: What initially attracted you to Ableton Live?

Shawn: What is so revolutionary about Live is its ability to warp audio and treat it elastically. You can take audio files and loops that were originally done without a click—something like Coltrane's *Live At The Village Vanguard*—put warp markers to it, mix it with Stravinsky's "Rite Of Spring," and then mosh those elements in millions of different ways.

The transparency of the interface is also really inspiring. With Live, if you hear an idea in your head, you can make it happen pretty quickly. Also, the ability to use the program to interact and perform in a live improvisational way is amazing. The software becomes an instrument that you actually play.

MD: You've said in other interviews that you use Ableton Live as your primary DAW.

Shawn: I do. It's a bit unusual to use it that way, because Pro Tools is such a staple that I think there are times when my method raises a few eyebrows. There are hardcore people that think if you're not using Pro Tools then something must be wrong.

But if you're tracking in your own studio, it doesn't matter what program you're using if at the end of the day you're just exporting audio for someone to import into his or her DAW of choice.

MD: Do you use any of Ableton's software instruments?

Shawn: Absolutely. With Ableton, you never feel bogged down by excess information, so you can get right to the music. I like the new drum machines and session drum libraries in Live 7. I also use other VST plugins within Live, like Stylus RMX, BFD, and Native Instruments' Battery. Reason is really strong for drums as well.

MD: Have you used Live for songwriting?

Shawn: The kind of writing I do with my band House Of Diablo involves using a lot of found sounds and chopping things together using a hip-hop style workflow. Ableton is great for working in this way, because you can still be involved in the writing process even if you don't play guitar or piano.

Being into electronic gear and production has opened up opportunities. For instance, I did a project recently at my studio for MTV. I helped produce it, and I got part of the writing credit. That never would have happened if I were just a "drummer."



Paul Wells is a member of the band Spiraling. He has also performed with Joe Williams, Marion Raven, Norman Simmons, Glen Burtnik, Randy Brecker, Dave Valentin, Rufus Reid, and The Duke Ellington Legacy. Paul can be reached through www.paulwells.info.



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