

Mac PC What is it? Virtual drummer for Pro Tools **PRICE: £212**

CONTACT: Digidesign, 01753 655999 WWW.digidesign.com

CONFIGURATION WINDOW
Set up how Strike behaves and access the polyphony restriction setting

BROWSER
Choose your overall settings or simply pick a drum kit from the browser. Click on the speaker icon to audition

PAGE SELECT
Access the four main windows or edit the current style. You can export your performance to separate MIDI tracks

STYLE CONTROLS
These affect the overall behaviour of pattern playback, including feel and timing

INTENSITY
Use this fader to increase and decrease the playing intensity

KIT CONTROLS
From the main screen you have global control over the sound of the kit. The Kit page can be used to make more detailed adjustments

COMPLEXITY
Use this fader to increase and decrease the complexity of your pattern

OVERALL MIX CONTROLS
Make global changes to the kit balance and add some overall EQ and compression

PLAY MODE
Setting the keyboard to Style or Kit affects the way it plays the sounds

LATCH BUTTON
Engage this and you only need to press a key once to trigger a pattern. Pressing another key shifts to the next pattern

On the DVD

AUDIO DEMOS
Demo 1 contains Rock kit patterns that increase in intensity and complexity. Demo 2 is a Latin drum part with fills (using automated parameters for feel, timbre, timing and dynamics).

DIGIDESIGN Strike

computer music PERFORMANCE

Will the new virtual drummer from Digidesign's Advanced Instrument Research have the world's sticksmen looking for alternative employment?

- **SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS**
Mac and PC: Pro Tools HD, LE or M-Powered 7.0 or later, 768MB RAM (1GB recommended), iLok key (not included), DVD-ROM drive for installation
- **TEST MACHINE**
Mac: G5 dual 2GHz, 2.5GB RAM, OS X 10.4.7, Pro Tools LE 7.1

Not so long ago, if you wanted real-sounding drums, you had to get a real drummer to play them. Unfortunately, that also meant a real studio, real equipment and – worst of all – real money. But thanks to a few groundbreaking bits of software (notably FXpansion's BFD and Toontrack's DFH Superior), things have changed forever.

When it comes to creating software instruments, no one could accuse Digidesign of being ahead of the game. However, now that they've jumped on board the bandwagon, the

products are coming thick and fast. For their third instrument (Hybrid and Xpand! being the first two), they've pulled out all the stops to produce Strike, "The Ultimate Virtual Drummer".

Hit factory
Like a number of 'virtual player' plug-ins, Strike is a combination of two elements: a sound library and a pattern library. It comes on two DVDs (thanks to lossless data compression, the 20GB 24-bit library takes up only 5GB of disk space) and is designed to help you program real-sounding

drums. There are five drum kits (each of which boasts up to 12 separate sounds), 1500 patterns, built-in EQ and dynamics, and an audio mixer.

On the face of it – and given the compact library – Strike initially looks pretty simplistic. However, looks can be deceiving; scratch the surface and this reveals itself to be a very serious plug-in indeed. With each drum hit generating up to seven channels of audio (the direct hit plus various controllable room mic levels), you can quite easily find that you've got 100 channels of drum-based audio running

simultaneously (a Voice parameter helps you control everything). Not bad for one instance of a plug-in.

Surprisingly, though, it's the pattern side of Strike that's the more complex facet. With full editing access to the onboard patterns, the sky's the limit. What's more, you can export your noodlings to a series of individual MIDI tracks for extra editing (or so that they can be used to trigger other sounds).

Whole lotta thud

Inevitably, this power and flexibility makes Strike quite a complex plug-in to get to grips with, so here's the lowdown on how it hangs together.

The main presets are called 'Settings' and include everything from a drum kit type to an overall style (anything from bebop to West coast funk). Within the style, you'll find a whole load of patterns, including verses, choruses and fills. These are

they're more to do with sound (tuning, timbre and variation). The Mix section includes overall levels for the dry kit and ambience mics, plus basic EQ and dynamics. Finally, there are a couple of sliders in the middle of the interface that control the overall intensity and complexity of the playing.

But as we've already mentioned, Strike is a serious plug-in, and the Style, Kit and Mix sections also have their own separate windows. Here, you'll find plenty more to keep you busy, including hit-specific parameters for both styles and sounds, a full-on mixer with EQ and two further selectable inserts for each channel.

Beat generation

Fortunately, once you get to grips with its basic concepts, Strike becomes incredibly easy to use. Whether you choose to play the pads on screen or via MIDI, the preset patterns enable



▲ Strike includes a fully-fledged mixer

to have a very specific way of doing things, so if you approach it with your own ideas of what you want in terms of sound, you may find it to be a little restrictive. This is primarily because the core sound set, although excellent, isn't as extensive as some others we've encountered. In fact, after you've loaded a number of different styles, you'll notice that some of the sounds are 'recycled'. This is a bit of a shame; it would be good to see Strike's library expanded in the future, particularly with more kicks, snares and hi-hats.

Hard to beat?

Ultimately, though, this slight limitation shouldn't detract too much from what is a very powerful, reliable and fundamentally quick-to-use instrument, and one that's sure to make non-Pro Tools users just a little bit jealous. **cm**

"IT'S THE PATTERN SIDE OF STRIKE THAT'S THE MORE COMPLEX FACET"

mapped across the white keys on the keyboard at the bottom of the screen (the blue keys trigger single hits and the yellow keys act as mutes).

The main window is divided into three sections – Style, Kit and Mix – and each of these has some fundamental controls that affect the overall performance. In the Style section these are concerned with playing dynamics, timing and hit variation, whereas in the Kit section

you to get a groove up and running very quickly. If you want to program a part sound-by-sound from scratch, you can do that too, but the real beauty of Strike lies in its ability to let you do a bit of both. If you begin by using preset patterns to get things moving, it's then really simple to go in and edit things to taste. And of course, everything can be done from within the plug-in (including EQ and dynamics adjustments).

On the downside, Strike does seem

Performance issues

The grooves and patterns in Strike are based on real drum recordings, and it shows. But as we all know, creating real-sounding drums from even the most well-equipped sample library can be difficult, and requires you to do far more than simply string together a bunch of patterns.

Strike has several features to help you add authenticity. Firstly, the patterns themselves include many variations (intros, fills, etc) and these can be played and then modified as much as you like to create your basic part. However, the genius aspect lies in the variations you can then apply.

At the simplest level, you can adjust the intensity and complexity controls in real time to shift the feel of the pattern. Doing this adds or removes grace notes and changes the overall playing 'power'. This is just the tip of the iceberg, however: the Jam feature adds variation to the samples played, preventing the infamous machine gun effect; Feel lets you push the playing ahead or behind the beat; and Timing adjusts between a tight and a more natural performance. Add in a spot of Groove and some further playing dynamics and you're well away. Remember, too, that all parameters can be adjusted or automated in real time!



▲ Stiff, mechanical 'drum machine' beats are banished with Strike

▶ ALTERNATIVELY

FXpansion BFD
cm68 » 9/10 » £199
Comprehensive acoustic drum module that also comes with an 'automated drummer'

Steinberg Groove Agent 3
N/A » N/A » £170
The third version of this famous virtual drummer should be available right about now

VERDICT

FOR

- + Very flexible
- + Easy to get started
- + Kit sounds are good
- + Doesn't eat up hard drive space
- + Everything happens within the plug-in interface

AGAINST

- For Pro Tools users only
- Library could be more extensive

Strike is far more powerful and complex than it first appears. Once you get under its skin, it becomes an extremely useful plug-in

RATING

