

cm / mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, ROMplers and more

Leisuresonic SynthTronica £2.99

Format iPad, iOS 3.2 or later
Contact via website
Web www.leisuresonic.com

Another iOS instrument, but this one is a breath of fresh air in an App Store overstocked with virtual analogue synths and sampled drums. SynthTronica brings the rather scientific-sounding formant distortion synthesis to the iPad. This uses Fourier analysis of samples to come up with a spectral filter that varies over time (a 'formant' in SynthTronica-speak), and superimposes this on a pair of pulse waves. It's a bit like a vocoder, and thankfully, you don't need a PhD in Synthology to use the app.

Source samples (for the formants) can be imported, recorded with the iPad's mic or resampled from within the app itself. The recorded bits can be edited; you can change the start and end points of the loops and truncate the excess. The instrument's Synth View consists of pulse width adjustment, oscillator mix and sync, and an LFO (here called LFM).

The filter section has its own page and a

multitouch panel for manipulating it - swoosh your fingers around and a resonant mode is created for each one. More typical is the ADSR envelope for the amplitude.

Like most synth apps, there's a built-in keyboard with which you can play your sounds. You can choose from three layouts and various scales and tunings. One cool iPad-friendly feature is a 'hold' button that sustains the sound indefinitely while you tweak settings (eg, the filter). You can record your performances and export them as 16- or 24-bit WAV/AIFF (import and export is handled via iTunes), or save them as new formants.

Spectral choirs, cosmic tinklings and pulsating pads are easy to come by using SynthTronica. Vocoding is a snap with this thing. Ambient and New Age musicians are going to eat it up, but it could easily fit into any electronic



style. It's not without flaws: many of the presets sound too similar, and we experienced occasional instability when editing and saving our own formants. Still, it's a good buy, although we understand that the current price is an introductory one - act fast and you might be able to grab it before the increase.

8/10

Apple GarageBand £2.99

Format iPad/iPad 2
Contact Apple UK, 0800 048 0408
Web www.apple.com

Apple's easy desktop DAW comes to the iPad, becoming one of the first iOS DAWs with software instruments and audio tracks living side-by-side. It's important to understand, though, that this is not the complete desktop GarageBand stuffed into an iOS app, but rather a far more limited beast that omits many features and has an eight-track limit, but works in roughly the same way. However, it does offer its own additional multitouch-friendly features.

The basic instruments are an on-screen keyboard (piano, organ, electric piano, synth, etc) and drum kit (real or synthetic sounds), too, into which you can record your own sounds. There are also so-called Smart instruments: virtual guitar, bass and drums that force notes to the project's scale, or generate chords or drum patterns. All of them sound good, with velocity-sensitivity 'faked' via the iPad's accelerometer.

There's an Audio Recorder for capturing live audio, and this is where you can use the guitar

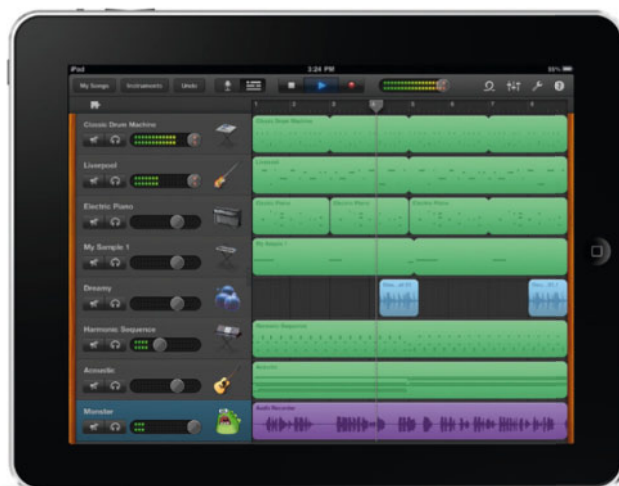
amp sim's nine amps and ten stompbox effects. Four of the latter can be used at once, and you can adjust the tone after recording, too.

Recordings are strictly a real-time affair, and there's a click track. You'll be happy to note that MIDI controllers are supported via the Camera Connection Kit. Effects can be added to sweeten the sound and MIDI parts quantised.

The track view is like the desktop version. You can move, resize, loop, split, trim, copy and paste clips. What you can't do, unfortunately, is alter the notes or timing, because there's no MIDI editing at all. We certainly hope this will come in a future update.

You can drag Apple Loops from the provided library into your songs, but import options are absent - you can't bring samples in without recording them into the sampler, nor can you paste files from other apps. Bummer.

Export options are e-mail (MP4) or iTunes



(AAC or GarageBand projects). However, at the time of writing, the desktop version simply wouldn't open the files - we assume this'll be fixed soon. Also note that you can't load a desktop GarageBand track into the iPad version.

Complaints aside, GarageBand is a lot of fun. We'd be lying if we said we weren't disappointed by the import/export options and lack of MIDI editing, but we can't deny that we thoroughly enjoyed whiling away the hours with this app.

8/10

ESI KeyControl 25 XT £91

Format USB, PC/Mac
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.timespace.com

The XT suffix in this 25-note USB-powered MIDI controller's name implies that it offers something a little extra, and when you pick it up, you sense that that something is weight. First impressions are that, like most ESI gear, the KeyControl 25 is as sturdy as they come, boasting an aluminium case with shiny white plastic end cheeks. It plays nicely, too, while the inclusion of four assignable endless rotary encoders and an assignable modulation slider (as opposed to a wheel) - gives you scope for software control. There's also a pitchbend wheel that feels very smooth, and octave change/transpose buttons, while further functionality (eg. velocity curves and specific CC assignments) can be accessed by pressing the Shift button and the keys themselves.

But there's a catch: as soon as we started using the KeyControl 25 XT, the cap came off the modulation slider. There seems to be no adhesive holding it on, and the push-fit is very flimsy. The knobs don't take much effort to tug off their spindles either, and while they're not positively loose, we can still imagine them going missing over the years. We



had another KeyControl 25 XT sent out to us, and it was the same, so it's not a problem we can dismiss as a one-off, and that's reflected in the score below. It isn't an issue that's beyond user rectification, though, as we expect a bit of strong adhesive would fix it up.

In every other respect, the KeyControl 25 XT performs well. Its considerable heft means that it's probably not one for the musician who's constantly on the move, but it'll do the job in a studio or at a gig. The bundled software - Cubase 5 LE and Toontrack EZdrummer Lite - is one of the more useful such packages too. Just remember to budget for a tube of Superglue as well if you decide to go for this one.

6/10

Native Instruments Scarbee Funk Guitarist \$119

Format Kontakt Instrument
Contact Via website
Web www.native-instruments.com

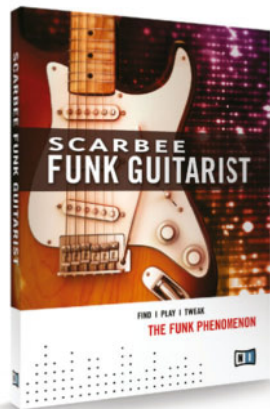
Like previous Scarbee/NI efforts, Funk Guitarist marries an extensive sound library with a functional, instrument-like interface. The instrument has two main aspects: chords and grooves (ie, rhythms).

A collection of preset chord and groove combinations - plundered from classic funk records - makes the instrument easily accessible, while manual chord mapping mode and a groove sequencer will keep advanced users happy. Over 3000 chords have been sampled.

There are controls to introduce swing and increase humanisation, as well as three guitar pickup choices. An FX page rounds it off, offering the likes of chorus, EQ and reverb.

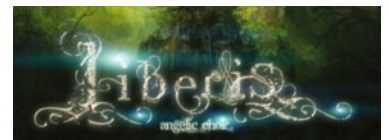
Designed to be played on a keyboard with just two fingers, non-guitarists will feel like they've been laying down the six-stringed funk for years. Instantly usable and genuinely authentic, Scarbee Funk Guitarist not only sounds great, but is lots of fun. A worthy choice for musicians working in a broad selection of musical styles.

8/10



Tonehammer Liberis \$499

Format Kontakt 4
Contact info@tonehammer.com
Web www.tonehammer.com



For one of the smaller players in the ROMpler world, Tonehammer like to think big. Their latest library is a case in point, bringing us an angelic 45-piece children's choir recorded using three mic positions, featuring full chorus and solo patches. They've also included 134 convolution reverb impulses, some captured directly from the church used for the choir-recording sessions.

Fans of Tonehammer's previous Requiem Pro choir library will feel instantly at home with the similar Kontakt 4 interface. As well as the standard choir sustain patches, such as 'mm' and 'ah', there are a number of Latin chants, controlled by either the built-in 'quickchant builder' or via keyswitching. The chants are pretty short but Liberis includes a handy knob to crossfade between them, expanding the possibilities.

All the patches sound incredibly realistic without any need to drench them in reverb to disguise the 'joins', and the true polyphonic legato variations are especially impressive. Coupled with the enormous number of FX presets, including everything from heavenly swoops to demonic children's chatter, Liberis is an inspirational library that's certain to bring theatrical drama to many an epic track.

9/10

Soundware round-up

Sample Magic

Tech House £40

There are tons of tech house sample packs out there, but Sample Magic's is one of the best collections of loops you're likely to find in this genre, covering beats, percussion, bass, synths, FX, vox and more, in all major sample formats. The only potential problem is that the outstanding production level could leave you feeling almost as inadequate as it does inspired!

www.samplemagic.com

9/10



Prime Loops

Harder Faster Louder £22

Pleasingly, this pack avoids the 'Euro rave' aspects of the harder dance styles, with more of a hard-edged, filthy vibe to its 600 high-impact sounds. The loops are great, with bass, guitar, synth and rave hooks. The breakcore-ish drum loops avoid lazy Amen-style patterns but still hit hard. The one-shots are slamming too, but the best bit is perhaps the great multisampled instruments.

www.primeloops.com

8/10



Loopmasters

Total Science Drum & Bass vol 5 £35

Circling around the 174bpm mark, this Hospital Records-sanctioned pack sees duo Total Science serve up 495 beautifully produced samples. It's textbook DnB with heavily processed (but fully usable) beats, deep, warbling bass, and chords that could be straight from the *Blade Runner* OST. It's a futuristic if slightly clichéd affair, but it'll get you 'there' without too much effort.

www.loopmasters.com

8/10



SamplerBanks

Electrolyzium £30

Yet another electro house pack, here with a twist of trance, with a euphoric, almost cheesy feel to it. You get a whopping 1754 sounds (in the major sample formats), but the loops are slightly stiff and dull and the production, while solid, is a tad on the 'digital' side. The kicks and snares are the best thing about this pack, but ultimately, there are better ones out there.

www.samplerbanks.com

6/10



Sounds to Sample

Deep and Dust House £13

While the term "dust house" doesn't mean a great deal to us, it doesn't take long to understand what this pack is getting at - this is a deep, groovy collection, approaching an almost 'sampled jazz' feel. It's not exactly ambient, but at 123bpm, it's slower than the usual house offerings and produced to perfection. Comprising 315 WAV loops, one-shots and chords, this is a wise buy at the price.

www.soundstosample.com

8/10



Sounds of Revolution

Abstract and Weird £17

Despite the name, Abstract and Weird's 200 rhythmic loops aren't a total break from SOR's club-friendly vibe. It's all about ring-modulated percussion and heavily processed FX, and none of it would sound out of place in the Beatport tech house Top Ten. It's varied, fresh and inspiring, and just as good for creating memorable drops as it is for layering with more traditional beats.

www.sounds-of-revolution.com

8/10



Producer Loops

Supalife Drum & Bass: Hard Edition £27

Based on five construction kits, Supalife's DnB: Hard Edition is a relentless affair. Although five kits might not seem like a lot, each has up to 152 total files, including MIDI versions, one-shots, dry loops and unlooped riffs with tails. While quite clichéd in terms of content, the production is top-notch and the beats and effects hard-hitting, making this an overall winner.

www.producerloops.com

8/10



Big Fish Audio

Electri-fried Blues £84

Another 15-construction kit affair from Big Fish, with up to 107 files per pack and over 7.9GB in total. Everything from slide guitar and walking basslines to solos and organs are covered, all with spot-on production and tasty playing from the session musicians involved. Expensive, and maybe not as versatile as Classic Rock, but it's high quality and it nails the genre in one.

www.timespace.com

8/10



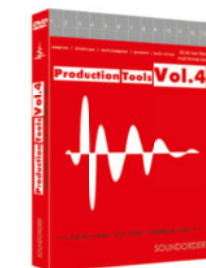
SoundOrder

Production Tools vol 4 £79

The vaguely titled Production Tools series returns, here covering electro, tech and progressive house. There's over 3.5GB content, with 35 construction kits offering one-shots, loops, MIDI files and even Kontakt patches of the instrument sounds. The production is of a very high standard, and while it's quite generic stylistically, there's enough flexibility that you needn't get locked into the 'construction kit' mentality.

www.bestservic.de

8/10



Big Fish Audio

Classic Rock £84

Here you get 15 construction kits (3921 files) of various styles/tempo of 70s-style rock, with live drums (multitracks included), guitars, bass and sometimes organ, piano, etc. The production is very good, and not so overdone that you can't shape it further. For library music, drum backings, or even as a live sample source for electronic musicians, this totally hits the spot. The only real drawback might be the lack of vocals. **cm**

www.timespace.com

9/10

