ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

An Urban beat production virtual instrument incorporating MPC-style interface with sequencing, sampling, FX and a whole lot more!

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

1 Generally simple to use

2 Versatile and sounds on the money

3 Brimming with features and facilities

MOTU BPM | £299

BPM is a rhythm instrument designed specifically for Urban music production. *Dan 'JD73' Goldman* gets the lowdown on MOTU's latest creation

Seems a month never goes by without a new Urban music related product launch. Whether it's a new sample library, hardware piece or virtual instrument, Urban music is a hot ticket. MOTU's Beat Production Machine (BPM) virtual instrument is the newest drum software on the block and looks like it has a lot to offer.

The installation process is fairly slow due to the huge amount of content and the obligatory installation of a dreaded iLok dongle for authoristation (so be prepared to have a large turquoise dongle hanging out of your USB port). Also note that if you forget it on a gig you won't be able to use BPM at all!

Once the iLok is authorised you can then start installing the 15GB of content, which includes individual drums, hits, loops and instruments – make sure you have a permanently free USB port and plenty of free HD space available. Also it's worth reading the manual to find where to drop the content files for your particular DAW as this is initially confusing.

Lots to talk about

Once installed, you can either run the BPM as a standalone plug-in (without having to run your DAW software) or as a plug-in from within your DAW host. For this review, I'm using the BPM as a plug-in within Logic 8 on my Macbook Pro. Once loaded, also be warned that BPM's interface window is a large and you'll need plenty of screen real estate to accommodate it, especially as it can't be resized.

On first look there's a hell of a lot to take in visually and it's fair to say

there's a lot crammed into the interface but after a little time, it's easy enough to get to grips with, plus, if you hover over a button, a message pops up outlining its function.

The top of the virtual hardware hosts three menus. The first is a folder menu that contains several import and export options. Patterns and songs can be imported or exported as MIDI or audio very easily, though it would have been great if there was a way to directly drag the MIDI info in a pattern onto your DAW's arrange page like Logic's Ultrabeat. Note that this can be done with audio exports and it's a very slick process. REX and Apple Loops can be imported too. Also in this folder is a preferences menu that currently seems to crash Logic, though it's the only bug I found.

The second menu deals with MIDI assignments for using BPM with an external MIDI controller. You can route your controller to a single part, a bank of sounds and to individual MIDI channels. Though you could use a mouse to input notes I highly recommend connecting a controller keyboard or MIDI pad controller to get the most out of the BPM.

The large orange window displays the piano roll sequencer, sample editing facilities, step sequencing, FX setups, audio mixer, scene menu (a

scene is a snapshot of current patterns, instruments and loops and can be time-stretched/rendered as audio) and finally song/live modes where scenes are arranged in a timeline/song form a bit like Ableton.

This is great for live situations and loops/sequences can be dragged, dropped or triggered via MIDI on the fly. You can also sample directly into a pad too. It's worth going through the tutorials at the start of the manual (no matter how tempting you think it is to skip them) as there is just so much that BPM is capable of.

To the right of the screen are controls to access the main function areas and global controls for quantize, position (controls the amount of the selected quantise applied) and global velocity, tuning and volume controls.

Racked up

Further right you'll find an intuitive browser for loading sounds and samples into pads or banks. It's set up so most elements can be easily dragged and dropped to pads, banks (a bank contains 16 pads like an MPC) or racks (racks are for BPM's virtual instruments). This really aids workflow. You can load individual sounds into pads, several sounds or samples onto

Samples and Sampling with BPM

BPM allows import of virtually any kind of audio. Not only can you import your existing samples, Apple Loops and REX files, you can sample directly into a pad too, as well as resample BPM's main output.

The quickest way to sample is sample into a pad. Simply click the pad you'd like your sample to appear on, then select the source you want to sample from in the source

window. Next hit the sample record button, hit done when finished and, hey presto, you have a sample loaded on the selected pad.

The captured sample can then be edited using the sample waveform editing facilities, named/saved, then incorporated into your beats. Edit functions including reverse, normalize, silence, fade in/out and unlimited sample layering.

There's also a separate standalone BPM Sampler application included that is used for sampling external sources (such as mics or sound sources connected to your DAW's audio interface) and for capturing the output of any audio track in your DAW host. However, while sampling with the BPM certainly works after a bit of head scratching, it does need explaining better in the manual.

> ## "The drums are some of the best I've heard and there's plenty here for every type of Urban production"
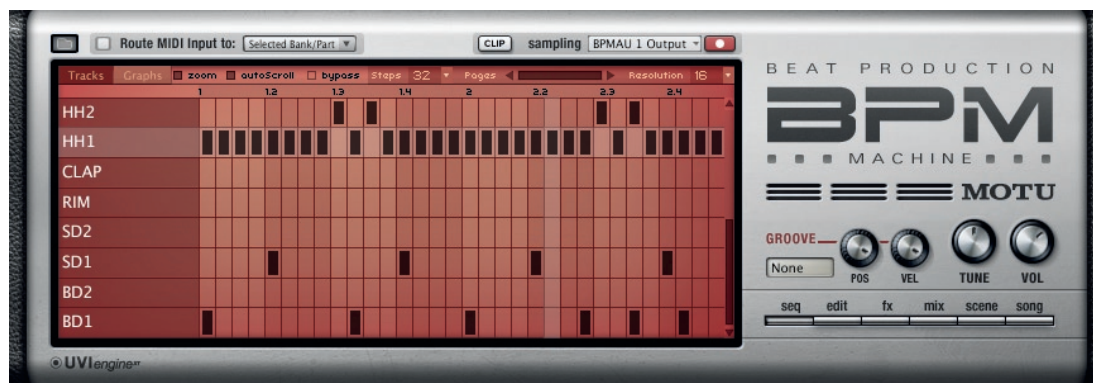
one pad, kits linked with specific patterns, sampled loops and pretty much whatever you can imagine!

Audio can be dragged and dropped into BPM's clip window where it can then be chopped into segments and exported to the pads in slices, much like an MPC or Propellerhead's

Recycle. There's also a transient window just like Recycle's that facilitates chopping of files into easy to manage slices.

Recording itself is a breeze. BPM's interface works very similarly to an MPC but there is much more scope for detailed editing and I love how it

works. Drag and drop sounds from the browser onto pads or load a kit, hit record and off you go. You can easily set the length of the pattern in the piano roll window. Then you can get stuck into editing via the piano roll editor, or if you prefer, you can export the MIDI or audio data to your DAW and edit there in sync with BPM. Replace and Overdub modes are also available and there are authentic-feeling MPC quantises.

MOTU's sequencer section in action – each sound is labelled for easy programming

Under each virtual pad there are also controls for muting each pad and a volume slider. Further to this, to the right of the pads are more sound shaping options including filter, amp and pitch envelopes, a drive control and aux sends for sending to effects in the effects rack.

Sound approach

There are 12 filter modes including various low-, high- and band-passes, plus comb filters and resonant types. These are controlled by the cutoff and resonance controls plus there's an amount to filter envelope control. The filters sound very decent and juicy, save for a little stepping at higher resonance settings. In addition, all of these functions can be automated from your DAW.

Sound-wise the breadth and quality of sounds, instruments and provided patterns are superb. The drums are some of the best I've heard for this style, plus there are some very useable guitar samples, nasty analogue style basses, rich pads and high quality strings too. They all sound punchy and gritty when needed but always remain professional sounding with a pleasant sheen that's obviously been helped by

Mixing and FX

BPM includes a comprehensive mixer that enables fully-finished mixes to be completed entirely within BPM itself. Every part and bank within BPM has its own set of channel strips (much like a DAW) with pan, mute, solo, volume, level meters, output selectors and access to FX inserts. There's also a master mixer and aux channels too for extra

flexibility. Sounds can be sent to the FX inserted on the aux channels via the aux controls in BPM's main window.

The onboard effects are plentiful and cover a wide range of staples including delays, reverbs, convolution reverbs, modulation effects, filters, EQ, stereo enhancers, drive, gates, compressors and more. It's incredible how much has been

packed on board with BPM and their quality is consistently very high throughout the software.

Effects can be added until you run out of processing power and each effect has its own unique set of parameters for sound shaping. It's all very impressive. Finally, to top things off, there's 'SP' mode that emulates the sound of the legendary EMU SP-1200 sampler.
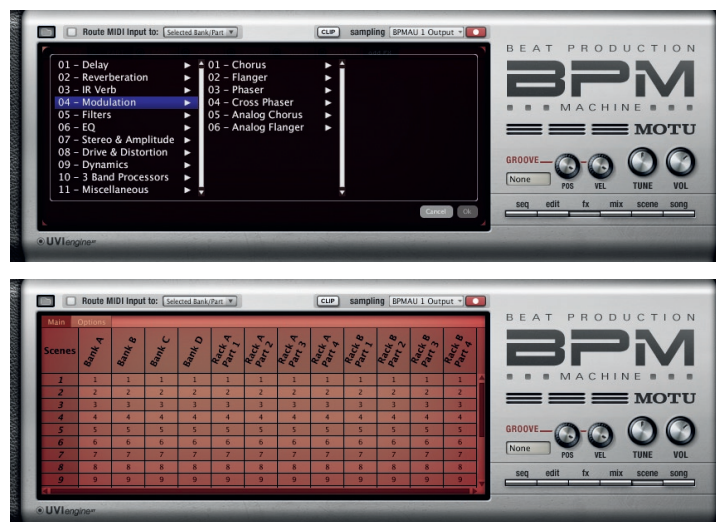
> "You could use BPM's sounds for any style, as the breadth of sounds provided is astounding"

Sterling Sounds mastering. There's plenty here for every type of Urban production from grungy hits and 808s to crisp hats and popping snares. You could of course use BPM's sounds for pretty much any style, as the breadth of sounds provided is astounding. Sounds can also be layered up on a

pad with velocity zoning too for added realism. The effects are not to be sniffed at and really help add that finishing touch to beats.

BPM is a hugely useful and appealing bit of software that's very well-thought-out. Though super-deep and complex within, the interface manages to keep things intuitive, without a huge learning curve. It sounds, looks and feels great and is one of the best Urban music production tools currently available. FM

ALTERNATIVES

Akai MPC5000
£1,799
Flagship MPC sampler, with graphical sequence and sample editing, on-board hard drive and the classic MPC feel.
akaipro.com

FXPansion GURU
£97
Cheap, fully featured and flexible virtual drum machine with FX, flexible routing and automated sample chopping.
fxpansion.com

Native Instruments Battery 3
£150
NI's well-spec'd drum sampling software including 12GB of sample content, time stretching and articulations feature.
native-instruments.com

FX Select (above) and Live-esque Scene Window (below)

FutureMusic VERDICT

STABILITY

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

BPM is deep and powerful. It's learning curve isn't steep and it delivers sonically across the board.