



INCLUDES
AUDIO

MFB Tanzmaus and Tanzbär Lite from £330

MFB update their drum machine line with new names and a smart new look. Si Truss gets into the groove

CONTACT WHO: MFB WEB: www.mfberlin.de **KEY FEATURES** Analogue compact drum machines **SOUNDS:** Tanzbär Lite: Bass Drum, Snare, Rimshot, Clap, Tom/Conga, Cowbell, Clave, Cymbal, Hat. Tanzmaus: Bass Drum, Snare, Rimshot, Clap, Tom, Sample 1, Sample 2 **I/O:** Both: MIDI In, MIDI Out, Stereo Main Out. Tanzbär Lite: Bass Drum Out, Snare Out, Clap Out, Tom Out, Hi-Hat Out. Tanzmaus: Bass Drum Out, Snare Out, Clap Out, SP1 Out

THE PROS & CONS



Gorgeously gritty, raw sounding analogue drum parts

Individual outputs for most channels

Plenty of flexible sound-shaping tools onboard



Utterly baffling sequencer workflow

Almost every function is hidden behind a Shift press

No bpm labelling or tap tempo control



The Tanzmaus and Tanzbär Lite are the latest compact analogue drum machines to reach our shores from German brand MFB. Broadly speaking, they're a new generation of instrument replacing MFB's discontinued 503 and 522 machines respectively. In a very loose sense, the pair are inspired by Roland's classic TR-808 and TR-909 grooveboxes, but these are far from copycat

machines – the similarity only stretches as far as the range of sounds on offer, rather than the machines' sound and functionality.

Visually, both drum machines look completely different from the instruments that preceded them. The 503 was a black plastic box with a sizeable central screen, while the 522 was a red and black plastic device laden with several rows of knobs. Both the Tanzmaus and Tanzbär Lite come in a near identical off-white metal chassis, each equipped with a rectangular bank of

21 rotaries surrounded by click buttons and a row of smaller channel gain knobs along the top. There are no screens on either, just an assortment of parameter labels (in brown on the Maus, orange on the Lite) and a list of hidden parameters in small print down the bottom. Stylistically, both look really smart, and the metal chassis feels reassuringly rugged. Having said that though, in my tests I noticed a bit of unwanted noise when turning a couple of sound parameter knobs, which makes me slightly less

confident about how the build will hold up in the long term.

Curious machine

As well as sharing a visual style, both drum machines have an almost identical workflow, which in both cases is far from intuitive. Given their passing resemblance to Roland's x0x boxes, I wrongly assumed that I'd be able to work out how to step sequence a drum pattern based merely on my knowledge of other drum machines and a little guesswork. In reality, I found myself

THE ALTERNATIVES



Roland Aira TR-8 £389

Roland's 808/909 recreation sits in a similar sonic territory to the Maus and Lite, albeit without some of the tough, gritty edge. It does have a much, much more intuitive workflow though.

www.roland.co.uk



Korg Volca Beats/Sample £120 each

Between them, Korg's Volca Beats and Volca Sample offer similar sounds and functionality to the MFBs. They don't quite pack the same sonic punch, but do come in at a considerably cheaper price point.

www.korg.com



Elektron Analog RYTM £1040

The RYTM is the current gold standard when it comes to hybrid analogue/sample beat makers.

www.elektron.se

needing to read the accompanying manual pretty much cover to cover in order to create a beat. In itself, this isn't necessarily a problem – a lot of my favourite hardware instruments I've initially found a little confusing to navigate (step forward all Elektron gear). It has to be said, however, that there's been a few questionable decisions made when designing the interfaces of these drum machines.

The main problem is that – beyond the main sound parameters controlled by the rotaries – pretty much everything requires a Shift press to access. Seriously, even the Play button requires the user to hold down the Shift button to activate it – and having your primary transport control effectively buried as a secondary function is, frankly, baffling. With multiple button presses required to access different modes and input sequences, combined with a fairly clumsy system of LED indicators, you'll regularly wish you had some sort of

breadcrumb trail in order to remind yourself what you're currently editing and how you got there. The lack of any sort of screen, tap tempo or labelling on the tempo control is a bit of an annoyance too, meaning that you're either going to need a MIDI input or rely on your own rhythmic guesswork if you want to create beats at a specific bpm.

On the flip side to this, however, there are a number of very useful features to both drum machines. Both feature per-step automation of

all the main sound parameters, which can either be recorded in real time or inputted via the step sequencer (both following a cryptic assortment of Shift presses, natch). Both machines feature Last Step and Scale functions that allow users to get creative with pattern lengths and time signatures, and an A/B function allows for two 16-step patterns to be created at once, to be connected or flipped between. The Chain ability allows up to 16 patterns to be linked together too, in

Each has its sonic strengths and weaknesses, but they're full of character and both pack a serious punch

BELOW THE SURFACE

While the majority of sound-shaping functions are controlled by the central bank of rotaries, each drum machine has a number of additional sonic parameters hidden below the surface, requiring a combination of button presses to access them. On the Tanzmaus, these include selecting attack transients for the snare, clap and tom, and changing the active samples. The Tanzbär Lite, meanwhile, offers selectable transients for the clap, volume for the rimshot, pan position for the tom and tuning for the cymbal. The Tanzmaus has an additional Data rotary too, which affects different parameters depending on which instrument is currently selected. It will add drive to the kick, alter the pitch envelope of the

snare, adjust the pan position of the tom and control the attack phase of the two sample channels. Both instruments feature LFOs on several drums too – kick, clap, tom, cowbell and clave on the Lite, and kick, clap, tom and the sample tracks on the Maus – each of which offers wave, speed and depth controls. This is a really nice touch, adding an interesting extra layer of sound shaping along with the ability to add a little movement to your beats.





SP1 & SP2 The two sample tracks can select from a range of 16 built-in samples, all of which have a lovely crunchy, lo-fi quality to them.

DATA The Tanzmaus' Data rotary controls a different hidden parameter dependent on which instrument is currently selected.



FUNCTION BUTTONS The left-hand bank of function buttons are used to switch between different modes. All require a Shift press to activate.

HATS & CYMBAL The hi-hat and cymbal tracks on the Tanzbär Lite have a pleasingly metallic quality to them. It's a slight shame you can't tune the hat, although you can the cymbal.

order to create extended sequences or full songs. In terms of memory, both machines have four banks of 16 patterns. Out the box these come pre-loaded with rhythmic patterns, including 16 by Berlin Techno producer Yapacc. Additional patterns can be purchased online too.

There are also four different levels of assignable Accent, for adding emphasis. There's a flexible Flam function too, with 16 different patterns available (and props to the manual for describing a flam as "something a drummer does to make their playing sound more sophisticated, and to attract girlfriends"). There's an onboard Shuffle feature too, for which you use the 16 step buttons to set the intensity. While it's good having the shuffle there, the button system lacks the subtlety of a rotary, and there's a bit of a jump between having a completely straight groove and something with a fairly noticeable swing.

Design wise then, these two instruments are very much a mixed bag, and at this point it would be easy to write them off as a pair of middling beat makers, slap a six out of ten score on them and be done with it. To do so, however, would be to overlook the fact that both of these drum machines sound fantastic. While each has its sonic strengths and weaknesses, they're packed with character across the board and both pack a serious punch.

INS AND OUTS

Both drum machines feature a 1/4-inch stereo main out along with five individual mini-jack outputs for specific drum channels. Plugging into any mini jack out removes that drum from the stereo output. It's worth noting that the individual outs are all mono, so the stereo drum parts – the claps and toms – are better served by the main output. Both machines feature MIDI in and out too, and both are equipped with a MIDI learn function, which is a very convenient feature for easily hooking them up to be triggered by external gear. Most sound parameters can be controlled via MIDI CC too.

Serious sound

The Tanzbär Lite features a stripped-back selection of nine analogue sounds based on those found in MFB's flagship Tanzbär drum machine. These consist of a kick, snare, rimshot, clap, tom/conga, cowbell, clave, cymbal and hi-hat. On the whole, the sounds are of a punchy and minimal variety; there's definitely a heavy xOx influence here, but the Lite has a certain metallic, raw quality that's all its own. The kick drum has a solid punch with a long, tuneful decay on it. The clap is pleasantly crisp too, while the tom has a very meaty quality that sounds great when tuned down into second kick/bassline territory. The cowbell is a highlight here though, with a lovely raspy quality that sounds great with the decay cranked up and a bit of

automation recorded on the tuning. The only slightly weak sounds here are the hi-hat – which has a lovely metallic sound but only features decay controls and no tuning – and the rimshot, which features just a (hidden) volume control.

The Tanzmaus packs in five analogue drums – kick, snare, rimshot, clap and tom – and a pair of sample tracks. The sound here is grittier and meatier than its Tanzbär counterpart. Each of the two sample sections offers a range of 16 built-in samples with a decay and pitch control. The samples are a range of fairly lo-fi drum and percussion one-shots, which sound great alongside the analogue drum parts, particularly once pitched up or down and with a little automation thrown in. The kick is a real standout here; as soon as

the decay is turned up even a little, it becomes thick and saturated. With a little of the built-in drive thrown in – added via the Tanzmaus' additional 'data' rotary – it sounds beautifully punchy and raw.

Both machines have a fairly specific sound set that's particularly suited to grittier electronic music sounds like underground Techno or Jungle, but for those particular flavours of punchy, raw sound these are two of the best sounding drum machines I've tried. With its lo-fi samples and beefy kick, the Tanzmaus is my personal favourite; without the need for any effects, it sounds ready to be plugged directly into the desk at Berghain in order to unleash its inner Techno fury. Both machines are a long way from perfect but in the end, despite some pretty significant workflow issues and design flaws, I still really want to own both of these. **FM**

FM VERDICT

7.9

Workflow-wise the Tanzmaus and Tanzbär Lite are pretty flawed, but when they sound this good, we can just about overlook that.