

LOAD/SAVE OPTIONS
Load and save songs, patterns, kits and more, plus export audio/MIDI

LINE TEMPLATES
Can't be bothered to program a Beat? Then call up a preset rhythm

SAMPLING
Choose your source and Hit Record to sample straight into a pad

GROOVE
Choose from grooves extracted from real MPC and LinnDrum machines, as well as real drummers' playing

BROWSER
As well as kits, you'll find loops, FX and instruments - everything you need for tip-top hip-hop

FILTER
There are a dozen filter types, including these beefy Analog ones

SCENES & PATTERNS
Program 16 patterns per bank (or rack part) and 16 scenes per song

TRANSPORT
Hit Record and jam out some beats - the adjacent Q button enables quantisation of your hamfisted performance!

SP MODE
See that small, grey indented button? That means SP1200-emulation mode is engaged



MOTU PC MAC BPM £299



Can this urban production instrument give NI's Maschine a run for its money or should its creators be confined to a padded cell?

System requirements

PC P4/AMD 1GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 18GB drive space, Window XP/Vista 32/64, VST/RTAS host for plug-in use, USB port for iLok

Mac G4 1GHz, 1GB RAM, 18GB drive space, Mac OS X 10.4, MAS/AU/VST/RTAS host for plug-in use, USB port for iLok

Test system

PC Intel Core i7 920, 3GB RAM, Windows Vista (64-bit), Cubase 5

PC Intel Core 2 Duo, 3GB RAM, Windows Vista (32-bit), Cubase 5, Live 8

> Mark Of The Unicorn have been in the computer music game for around a quarter of a century and can boast of having their fingers in both software and hardware pies, not to mention the world of video. BPM is their latest software instrument, and its full title, Beat Production Machine, makes its application crystal clear - it's evidently inspired by the Akai MPC series of hardware sampling workstations, which are still revered for their swift workflow (and purportedly magical swing quantisation).

BPM comes at a time when several manufacturers are pursuing a similar path to rhythmic enlightenment, most notably NI with their hardware-controlled Maschine. MOTU's offering is one of the more advanced efforts around, and as well as the 4x4 pad banks with step sequencing, it has 'racks' for loops and virtual instruments, tons of effects, a mixer, sampling and pattern sequencing.

You can use BPM in standalone mode, or as a multi-out plug-in, where you can drag-and-drop audio and MIDI between BPM and the DAW. In practice, the success of the latter seems to depend on how the host implements drag and

drop - for instance, Cubase uses a non-standard method, so you can't drag audio or MIDI clips into most plug-ins, BPM included.

The 15GB library of preset patterns, kits, loops, sounds and instruments is sonically impressive and very authentic. Stylistically, it's urban through and through, and if hip-hop is your bag, you'll love the sounds here. BPM can import WAV, AIFF, etc, as well as instruments and loops from MOTU and UVI libraries (but it can't import multisample formats like Kontakt).

Padding it out

BPM gives you four sets of 16 pads, which are made up of layers (velocity ranges are optional, each of which can play a sample or use a simple drum oscillator. Every layer has its own effects; multimode filter; filter, amp, and pitch envelopes; and a Drive knob with three styles. There's also a trio of aux sends for each pad.

Delve into the library and you'll find over 200 preset kits with patterns (you can load either or both), and the component parts are there, too, for creating custom kits. Oddly, despite there being pads named Ride, Tom1 and Tom2, these

"If hip-hop is your bag, you'll love the sounds here"

sounds are poorly catered for, and almost every kit uses the same clangorous 808 ride sample.

A step sequencer is used for programming beats, and you can record straight into it, too. The Graphs view gives precise, per-step control over parameters like Velocity, Roll, TimeShift, Length, as well as ways to manipulate the pan, tuning and the filter. Annoyingly, the length of played notes isn't recorded, and you can't record graph curves using a slider or MIDI control.

When it comes to programming tunes, you'll look to the two racks (see the *On the rack* boxout), as these can hold the supplied multisampled instruments, which really sound fantastic. There are about 80 bread-and-butter ones covering the basics like basses, keyboards, pads, synths and world sounds, and a further 350 X-Samples, which are urban-style hits. You can't make your own multisampled patches, but you can load single samples.

Taking a sample

Click the Clip button and a larger window pops up for slightly more detailed sample editing, with transient detection for the slicing modes – you can then drop the sliced sample into a rack or have slices mapped onto the pads.

Frustratingly, you can't edit slice points at all, so you're at the mercy of BPM's detection process.

Impressively, BPM can sample directly into pads, racks or the Clip window from an audio input or even its own output. And when used in your DAW, BPM can receive audio from BPM Sampler plug-ins placed anywhere in your rig.

The mixer section is straightforward and is a good place to pile on the effects, of which there are dozens, including delays, reverbs, filters, modulation, EQ, dynamics, distortion and more – they sound excellent, too, if a little fiddly to work with, due to their unified interface. There's also something called SP mode, which imitates the lo-fi sound of the E-MU SP-1200 sampler, but it's applied to entire racks and banks – ie, all pads – so it can make your entire beat sound dull.

You can define Scenes of patterns, and sequence these in the Song Editor. The Scene Editor is a grid of numbers, with the pattern names not shown, making it hard to take in, and the Song Editor is similarly flawed – you can't re-order patterns, and if you want to add a new section, you have to manually drag every single scene across to make space! We quickly gave up on using BPM standalone as the sequencing aspect is clearly underdeveloped at present.



Using the TimeShift graph, you can move each hit ahead or behind the beat to create custom grooves



This particular rack part is in sliced sample mode – sadly, you can't edit the slice points yourself

On the rack

BPM has two racks, each of which can hold as many loops, samples or multisampled instruments as you like. All of these have four syncable LFOs and a mod matrix with numerous sources and four destinations: Pitch, Filter, Pan and Amplitude. You can also set the polyphony, glide time, velocity response, pitchbend and transposition.

For loops and samples, there are three playback modes: Sample, which simply transposes samples; Stretch, which ensures they keep their tempo regardless of pitch; and Slice, which deals with chopped up samples, either for automatic synced playback, or for mapping of each slice to a different key.

The supplied loops are in construction kit format, typically comprising a drum loop and an instrument loop that you can play together, as well as loops that have been broken down further into the constituent parts.

Racks can play their contents automatically (fine for loops) or they can be programmed to play tunes via a piano roll. Sadly, this suffers from major issues, such as inserting notes of a different length to the grid size; not allowing you to set notes shorter than a 32nd note; quantising all the notes in a selection if you try to drag them; and other erratic behaviour.

Conceptually yours

The concept behind BPM is excellent, and there's a heck of a lot to it, but it feels like beta software at this stage, with too many issues and limitations hindering the swift workflow we'd hoped for. For instance, there's no undo/redo at all outside of the sample editor – accidentally screw up a great beat and, well, you're screwed!

But there's more... Exported MIDI clips don't have groove applied, so they won't gel with your song; exported audio is always 16-bit; you can't preview drum kits; and there's no MIDI out. We also suffered a crash when using the Shallow Copy function and audio break-up when playing two drum oscillators at once. Oh, and BPM doesn't like 64-bit Windows – it often crashes on loading, and the CPU usage is unusually high. We could go on, but you get the idea.

As a sound source, BPM is one of the best for urban beats – possibly the best – so if you intend to treat it as a ROMpler, it could be for you. We can't recommend it as a general 'software MPC' solution just yet, but MOTU are aware of the usability issues, so let's hope they can realise BPM's huge potential in future updates. **cm**

Contact Musictrack, 01767 313447
Web www.motu.com

Alternatively

FXpansion Guru
cm86 >> 10/10 >> £149
For straight-up rhythm programming, Guru is hard to beat

Native Instruments Maschine
cm138 >> 9/10 >> £533
A software groove box with workflow-enhancing hardware

Verdict

For Great concept

First-class sounds

Many slick effects

It can sample!

Against Too many usability issues

Doesn't like Windows 64

Sequencing has numerous problems

Can't manually edit slice points

As a virtual instrument sound source for urban music, BPM is top drawer, but as a production station, it has some way to go

6/10