LUST

Roundup
Next-Gen Plug-Ins
Why be normal? These plug-ins go way beyond vintage-gear emulations

BY CRAIG ANDERTON

THE GOAL of plug-ins used to be emulating "bread and butter" processors, or older or more expensive gear that would be difficult to obtain otherwise, then shoehorning them into computer-based recording programs. Over the years as computers became more powerful, companies started exploiting the things computers could really do—synths started creating sounds that never existed before, samplers ran circles around their hardware counterparts, and effects got deeper, richer, and more interesting. Modeling techniques became more detailed and sophisticated, and the standards for plug-ins themselves evolved to include features such as sidechaining. 64-bit computers allowed for pianos with gigabytes of samples (even when streaming from disk, you still need RAM to hold the attacks), and faster computers lowered latencies to the point where playing synthesizers as instruments, or running guitars through effects,

became an enjoyable experience instead of an exercise in frustration.

In this roundup, you won't find anything getting panned—we took a look at what's out there, and picked the best of—well, a whole bunch of good stuff, most of which we don't have the pages to cover. So we tended to give weight to plug-ins that followed the "why be normal?" ethos, whether that meant modeling something strangely esoteric, striking off in new directions, providing exceptional value, or just opening up a new type of sound altogether.

When you consider that it used to costs thousands of dollars to add a new synth to your studio, and at least hundreds of dollars for something to screw into your rack, the ability to find reasonably-priced super-plug-ins that you can insert into a project almost as many times as you'd like is intoxicating. So boot up your Mac or PC, make sure your interface is connected, and let's get plugged in.

Eventide Omnipressor
eventide.com
$149 MSRP

If you like nasty drums, try this Eventide Omnipressor setting. You'd never know from this preset that you can also get some conventional, more subtle effects as well.

Why it was chosen: I used lots of Eventide gear back when Big Studios had the cool gear mere mortals could never afford. The Omnipressor dynamics processor was a favorite, and I wanted to see if Eventide could manage to translate its manic mojo to a plug-in.

Overview: Although many consider being able to do compression or expansion as the big deal,

that's no longer novel. The hardware version could perform extreme, crazed settings as well as be polite—it was like the gear equivalent of the office secretary who would work diligently during the week, but then down Red Bulls on Friday and go hardcore clubbing.

Specs and caveats: Plug-in formats are Win 7 VST/AAX, Win XP VST, Mac OS X 10.5 AU, Mac OS X 10.6 and 10.7 AAX/AU. You'll also need an iLok2. It's 32-bit only; use with 64-bit programs requires bridging, which may reduce stability. Sidechaining

works only with AU/AAX, and oddly, presets don't remember the Bass normal/cut setting.

Tweaktime: The controls are what you'd expect from a compressor, with two exceptions: The main Function control that goes from expansion to neutral to compression (and beyond that to overcompression), and the accurately-emulated—but arcane—method of optimizing input and output levels with two switches. These provide a total of three preset input and three preset output levels, although there are also trim controls that limit the amount of attenuation and gain. While using the Omnipressor is a bit less straightforward than a standard compressor, it's easy enough to figure out (especially if you take the radical step of reading the manual). It's also easy to come up with unintended but cool presets as you tweak, so save them before you forget how you got there.

The verdict: It's not like we're coping with the Great Compressor Plug-In shortage—but nothing does what the Omnipressor does. The "dynamic reversal" effect gives a sound like the Eric Prydz pumping drum sound, but without the need for sidechaining. The gating can be very musical (I realize that seems like an oxymoron, but it really can add a smoothly percussive quality) or abused into a form of dynamic distortion. Bring automation into play, and you can do serious sound warpage that I've never obtained with any other dynamics processor. And while subtlety is not the Omnipressor's natural state, judicious use of the Gain Limit control can deliver it.

It may be hard to get excited about another compressor plug-in, but this is most definitely not "another compressor plug-in." Fortunately, Eventide has priced it fairly, eschewing the "we have the algorithms and it's vintage, so bend over" mentality—even if you weren't around in the Omnipressor's golden age, you can partake of its mojo in your DAW. I find it wonderful for dance, dubstep, grime, and anything else that celebrates sounds that go beyond the expected—although if you just want to add a subtle lift for vocals, you can do that too. It's good stuff.

MOTU
MachFive 3

motu.com
$495 MSRP

Why it was chosen: I was talking with Steve Fortner from *Keyboard* magazine about soft samplers, and he was raving about MachFive 3. I said "Well, aren't all samplers pretty much the same these days?" to which he replied, "You should really, *really* check it out." So here we are.

Overview: MachFive stayed on version 2 for a long time, and version 3 shows why: It's a complete, from-the-ground up redesign of the interface and underlying capabilities. MachFive has everything you'd expect, with robust importing, extensive editing, built-in effects including convolution reverb, lots of content (a 45GB library with some outstanding instruments), and yes, even scripting. But what make MachFive 3 more than "just another sampler" are the unique elements you won't find elsewhere.

Specs and caveats: Plug-in formats are AU/VST/RTAS (including 64-bit and stand-alone mode) for Windows Vista SP2/Windows 7 and Mac OS 10.5.8 or higher. As usual, more RAM is good, although MachFive 3 can stream from disk—check the MOTU site for full system requirements. Requires iLok 1 or 2 (not included).

Tweaktime: I was taken aback by how easy it was to find my way around; MachFive 3 seems to make finding features unusually obvious. The printed manual—both logical and clear—

MOTU MachFive 3's interface packs a lot of information into an easy-to-parse format. The upper waveform is being sliced; the "synth programming" elements are along the bottom, and the various multitimbral parts are on the left.

doesn't hurt, either. But the "big feature" for me is MachFive 3's dual synthesizer/sampler identity, with multiple synth engines (wavetable, virtual analog, FM, drum, and even granular synthesis, licensed from IRCAM from which they also licensed stretch algorithms). Not only are there a ton of filters, from standard to esoteric, but MachFive 3 bases 37 additional filters on the original Oberheim Xpander filter designs. As someone who often layers synth samples with acoustic sounds, being able to use modeled waveforms is wonderful. You could just treat this instrument as a synth and still be a happy camper.

User-accessible scripting isn't new, but MachFive 3 delivers multiple instruments with advanced scripting. The guitar and bass are particularly impressive, but the other featured instruments—piano, drums, electric piano, and percussion—sound fabulous. Into loops? "Loop Lab" provides slicing and loop creation, exportable as audio slices with a MIDI sequence to trigger them.

And extra credit for the "Tree View"—a hierarchical way to see complex patch structures at a glance with routings, sends, parts, oscillators, etc. Why don't all samplers do this?

The verdict: MachFive 3 isn't cheap in theory, although pretty much anybody and their grandmother is eligible for the $295 competitive upgrade price. Note that if you're expecting its import features to obviate needing anything else, MachFive 3 does indeed come close; I had very good luck with imports, even with ancient Akai and Ensoniq CD-ROMs—MachFive 3 is as open as technically possible. However while it recognizes Kontakt's .nki format, if a Kontakt instrument's WAV files are embedded in a proprietary library format, they're inaccessible.

Overall, MachFive 3 is so much more than just a way to play back samples. The synthesis capabilities and sound design options are as good as it gets, with an interface that's aesthetic, clean, and easy to navigate. Overall, this program makes me think "musical instrument" first, and "software program" a distant second: Even when hitting the rocket-science level, MachFive 3 makes it easy for you.