

In the Studio: Donny Gruendler

A master of digital drum loops, Donny Gruendler incorporates seemingly static samples and MIDI drum tracks into improvisational performances. He has created rich and even epic mixes on the fly for artists like Kenny Burrell, John Medeski, D.J. Logic, and Rick Holmstrom. He also teaches drummers how to tie loops together at the Musicians Institute in Hollywood and has written a book entitled "Playing with Drum Loops." To do it all, he uses Logic Pro running on a PowerBook G4.



"I was trained as a jazz drummer, but I learned that if I really embraced the technology, I could do more with my music, and, ultimately, I could get more work," says Gruendler.

Breaking It Down

In his Encino, Calif., studio, Gruendler breaks songs down to its basic components that can be triggered during a gig. "I'll get master sessions and I'll go through all the tracks," he says. "I'll listen for what's going to be played live and I mute those tracks. I'll chop everything else into eight- or 16- or 32-bar segments and put them in to Logic for a performance." Those segments often include instruments or parts that would be difficult to pull off live without a full accompaniment — orchestra hits, choral groups, or string quartets.

"There are so many things to think about when I'm on stage, I don't have to think about my computer — it just works. And the less time I have to think about my system, the more time I have to do my music."

Gruendler, a Berklee-trained jazz drummer, likes to take basic parts and embellish them using Logic Pro filters. "A lot of looping, from a drummer's perspective, is mangling things," he says, "but you don't want to change the loop completely. You want to change its texture. That's where Logic really excels — it has all kinds of effects and filters that you can pile on in real time."

Gruendler also created loops for his book, "Playing with Drum Loops," in his home studio with Logic Pro. "In Ultrabeat I can create things very quickly," he says. "In one day I would need to make 30 loops because I was on publication deadline. It was no problem — I made them, put them into iTunes, and burned them to CD for the publisher. It's a really simple workflow in Logic. It's all about creating music more than working like an engineer. The workflow is quick and I can make the tracks sound really good."

Live Loops

Once Gruendler has dissected a track, he's ready to jam. The drummer uses a 10-pad DrumKat to select and trigger samples and licks while he's playing. "When I'm on stage, I feel like the tracks are someone I'm having a duet with," he says. "Sometimes electronic music producers don't think that samples and loops can adapt to a live situation. I have an improv background. I don't think of the parts as rigid dance beats. I bring the loops in and out of the performance in real time. I can pick through them and I'm not thinking of them as fixed things. The computer is just another live instrument to me."

During a concert, Gruendler uses Logic Pro and Ableton Live to set off samples and snippets while he's pounding out beats. "I use Logic to make beats in Ultrabeat, funkify them with the oscillator or the noise generator filter. I rewire some tracks to Ableton Live and use both programs. I hook an M-Audio USB 1x1 interface into my PowerBook and depending on the pad I hit, I trigger beats from Ultrabeat or Ableton. I can do drum loops, background vocals, keyboards, or background textures. I can trigger all those in time with the band and have sections loop as long as I need them to."



Gruendler's PowerBook G4 is always on stage with him. "It never breaks down, and I love it for that," he says. "And I love that it's tiny, because it's always with me. It's small and light. The screen is big. I already have a truck full of gear. The last thing I need is a heavy laptop. There are so many things to think about when I'm on stage, I don't have to think about my computer — it just works. And the less time I have to think about my system, the more time I have to do my music."

Gruendler's latest music project is JuliaFly, a rock band that takes full advantage of his electronic expertise. "We all met at Berklee," he says. "The band has a really high-tech sound with a hard edge and we use all of the technology live. We have about an album's worth of material and we hope to get it released within the year." Gruendler's also working on a second drum loops book and a teaching DVD. "I feel blessed because I enjoy teaching, writing, and making music," he says. "I get to do all those things for a living. I'm pretty lucky."



In the Studio

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Putting It on Paper



Gruendler's "Playing with Drum Loops" is one of the first books about programming and playing with digital loops for drummers. "It's everything I know about loops laid out for drummers" he says. "It comes with two full CDs of loops, including keyboard parts and backing tracks. It's all material I created for my lectures using GarageBand and Logic Pro." The musician wrote and laid out the book using his PowerBook G4. "I did everything for the book on my PowerBook," says Gruendler.

Quick Loops

Gruendler often doesn't have much time to compose percussion pieces for a studio project. To crank out unique loops quickly and efficiently, he uses Logic Pro and Propellerhead Recycle. "I use Recycle to loop a WAV or AIFF file of a drum groove, then I chop it up into its separate components — the kick, snare, hi-hat," he says. "I export each component as its own file, then import those files into Logic Pro. That's where the fun starts. I can rearrange the parts using the Bar Ruler to create a collage, a new and interesting rhythm. Sometimes I'll overdub a MIDI drum part using Ultra Beat to smooth things out. Once I have a good loop, I bounce it to the disk." The loop can then be imported to the master studio session file and incorporated into a score.

Equipment List

Studio Hardware

- [PowerBook G4](#)
- [Apple Cinema Display](#)
- [Power Mac G5](#)
- [Digl002 Rack](#)
- [Mbox](#)
- [MOTU 828mkII](#)
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Live Hardware

- [Alternate Mode DrumKat](#) 10 pad Percussion MIDI interface
- M-Audio 1x1 USB to MIDI interface
- DW drum kit
- Paiste cymbals
- Remo drumheads
- Vic Firth sticks
- Ddrum 4se MIDI drum triggering sampler
- 5 Ddrum Triggers
- Peavey LM16 line mixer
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Software

- [Logic Pro](#)
- [Ableton Live](#)
- [Propellerhead Reason](#)
- [Propellerhead Recycle](#)
- [Digidesign Pro Tools LE](#)
- [iLife '06](#)
- [Microsoft Office](#)
- [Sibelius 3](#)
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Recording Gear

- [Mackie Onyx 800R](#) 8-channel rackmount mic preamp
- M-Audio BX8 Monitors
- Yamaha NS10 Monitors
- [Electro-Voice Mics](#)
- [AKG D112](#) with MAY internal mic system in kick drums
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Plug-ins

- [Spectrasonics](#) Stylus RMX, TRILOGY