SYNTH HACKS #06
MOST VALUABLE LAYER

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Korg Senior Voicing Manager Jack Hotop mixes it up.

Voices from my Prunus radio [love that name!] make crazy rhythms when gated by the Bass Station's arpeggiator.

"IT'S NAMM," grinned Jack Hotop, demoing a rich sound on Korg's latest synth [Figure 1]. "If we didn't add strings with piano, something *clearly* would be wrong."

Layering is a fantastic creative tool, whether you're adding body and sustain to a piano patch or stirring emotions in a movie. [Sound designers mixed animal growls into the torpedo sounds in The Hunt for Red October, stimulating our primal fears.] Layering different synths, like fuzzy analogs and crisp digitals, can fill out the sound. The Roland D-50 "Fantasia" patch is a great example. At https://tinyurl.com/D50fantasia you can hear how the subtle inharmonic "plink" adds bite.

Another technique I like is to assign samples of performance noises like scrapes and squeaks to one layer and set the layer to respond to a narrow velocity range. [The GM "Fret Noise" patch is good for this.] The limited range makes the noises trigger almost randomly. Often, I add field recordings to music to evoke a feeling of space. Traffic noise is a favorite glue; for excitement, I add cheering crowds. The trick is to keep the level so low that your listeners sense the sound rather than consciously hearing it.

If your synth offers external oscillator input, you can expand its palette dramatically. I've created crazy grooves by playing talk radio into my Novation Bass Station II and chopping up the sound with the synth's envelopes and arpeggiator. [See Figure 2.] Connecting a MIDI cable to a crunchy old sound module and running it through the external input added spicy attack transients. It even let me play chords on the otherwise monophonic synth.

You can also hack an external input by wiring guitar pedals into a feedback loop [Figure 3]. I sent the Bass Station's output into an amp simulator, plugged the effect's output back into the Bass Station, and then monitored on the headphone jack.

Fig. 3

Creating feedback loops with guitar pedals produces wild layering effects. I found distortion and delay worked best.

Layering monophonic and polyphonic synths offers surprising performance possibilities. Hear a demo at batmosphere.com/layers.

Adjusting the input level created everything from metallic toughening to squealing feedback. I especially liked the watery sounds I got by looping in a chorused delay.

Another cool layering technique is to MIDI mono and poly synths together. Set the monosynth to a lead sound and the polysynth to a swelling pad. When you play quickly, you'll hear just the lead. Hold notes longer, and the pad glides in, adding ambience. Play an arpeggio and hold the keys, and a chord echoes the melody. [See Figure 4.]

When layering, I like to imagine what Oscar-winning sound designer Randy Thom calls amplified reality: Think how an instrument or situation would make you feel, find sounds for that emotion, and then blend in just enough of the "real" sound to complete the picture.