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## The Making of . . . Discrete Drums Heavy Mental

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Modern rock beats in multitrack format

By John Krogh

Project studio owners and singer-songwriters have it made. All manner of outboard gear has migrated to the computer, instrument manufacturers continue to pack more features and sounds in smaller packages, and quality microphones and preamps can be had for what you'd expect to pay for a few hours in a commercial studio. Whether you're into tracking guitar, overdubbing vocals, or cranking out complete recordings for commercial release, there are plenty of tools to help you get the job done right. Yet, the great dividing line between most of our rooms and what the major league facilities can handle usually comes down to multitracking a drum kit.

Many factors go into a killer-sounding drum track, not the least of which is a room large enough to allow the drums to breath and ring. Of course, you'll need a choice selection of mics, the engineering know-how to capture the right balance of ambience and close-mic tones, a session-savvy drummer, and the list goes on. In short, you need what most of us don't have.

It was this reality that inspired producer, guitarist, and composer Rick DiFonzo to create the very first Discrete Drums library. Originally released in 2001, Discrete Drums presents close, overhead, and room-miked drum performances recorded with premium mics and outboard at Nashville's famed Sound Kitchen studios. The tracks are divided into song sections, which makes it easy to assemble intros, verses, choruses, and so on. This approach offers the kind of mixing flexibility that stereo drum loops just can't afford. It's a simple-yet-brilliant concept that has caught on.

To date, Discrete Drums has released three libraries, each specializing in certain styles (R&, country, funk, pop, etc.). Over the past two years they've been ported over to a variety of platforms, including Reason, Live, Roland VS, and Pro Tools. Recently we learned Rick was in the process of creating the third installment in the Discrete series entitled *Heavy Mental*. Tantalized by the title, we caught up with Rick, engineer Steve Marcantonio, and drummer Tony Morra to learn how this hard-hitting library came together.

### THE CONCEPT

**EQ:** *What were your main goals for Heavy Mental?*

**RICK DIFONZO:** The main goal with this collection was to cover some bases we hadn't yet gotten to. Eventually we want to have a ton of content in every style that makes sense for us - basically, any style that really benefits from a live drum performance. Obviously some styles are better left to machines, and others don't absolutely require a great drum performance. But I feel that metal and hard rock simply cannot be done properly with a machine or sampler, so it was time to get rockin'.

**With so many drum loop libraries on the market, what was your plan to distinguish this collection from the pack?**

**RD:** Originally the blueprint that set us apart from the pack was the multitrack nature of our products. No one had done it quite that way before. I recorded some stereo drum stuff for my own use eight or nine

years ago, and considered releasing it. But at the time, although there were no real rocking drum collections out there, I didn't feel I could compete with the 800-pound gorillas in the sample library business. Once home studios began to make the switch to powerful computers, however, I realized a multitrack drum library would be the thing that would identify us, and give us an edge, allowing us to enter the market with no competition (at least for a while).

With *Heavy Mental* in particular, I feel the thing that sets it apart is the fact that we went into a world-class studio and set Tony loose. He's a great drummer, his drums sound killer, the playing is phenomenal, and he wasn't afraid to get heavy. This is not a generic collection of performances, although we do get simple in places, as well as cover the balls-to-the-wall flailing. *[laughs]*

## THE SESSION

***With the concept being heavy metal, were you looking to capture current metal styles or did you take a more "best of metal" approach incorporating today's sound as well as sounds from the '80s and '90s?***

**RD:** Sonically I wanted this collection to be very modern. A lot of early metal sounds are too processed, EQ'd, and a bit tame compared with the newer sounds. They also often feature some pretty crappy reverbs. We took advantage of a great room by miking it two different ways. We put a pair of Coles around 10' from the kit and took that in stereo, and also took the ceiling mics that were *much* farther away - also in stereo.

Stylistically, we referenced quite a few approaches from the last 20 years, from flailing speed metal to flat-out hard rock.

**TONY MORRA:** Rick came in with snippets of songs that served as guides to what he was looking for. I think there were about 40 of them! I would listen to a clip and interpret the drum part, the style of the song. Then I'd go to the kit and give Rick a couple intro fills, and then an intro groove (bigger or light). From there I'd build into a verse, then a chorus thing, a bridge. I'd do grooves with crashes and without crashes. I also did some crazy fills - some simple, some quite complex. I did go with some very "common" metal fills like you'd hear on many CDs. This became the process. We weren't sure exactly how we were going to approach it.

**RD:** We also referenced actual songs here and there for "sweet" tempos and general "power" factors, but they were only places to start. Tony took everything to his own place and came up with tons of variations on each "project" or "song." Once in a while I put my two cents in, but mostly, I just let him go. Some of the bits I played for him were things I had done, and things I wanted to have for my own use.

### ***What drums - snares and cymbals in particular - were used and why?***

**TM:** I used my main Drum Workshop [DW] kit that I use here in town for sessions. Steve [Marcantonio] and I have worked quite often together and he loves the way they sound. (Although, Steve can make a tin can sound amazing.) These drums are special for me. This is the first kit I got from DW as an endorser. So there's sentimental value, but damn, these things sound awesome! They're very versatile. We didn't retune the toms at all. If I needed the fills to be big and fat, I'd use my larger toms in the setup. I have four toms, 8"x10", 9"x12", 11"x14", and 13"x16". I used a 16"x 24" kick from the kit I have in my home studio (the Downtown Batterie). It's very big and punchy. As for snares, well, I'm a snare junkie. I think I have 38 right now. *[laughs]* So, we had a lot to choose from. I did use a lot of metal drums, you know, brass shells. Plus an incredible Ochiltree snare I have. On a few tracks I used DW's Edge snare. Let's see, what else? My grandfather's Slingerland from 1929, and an old '40s Radio King that belonged to my dad.

For cymbals I used Paiste 2002's Dimensions. They're bright and cutting, with this incredible "sheen." I went with these thinking that we needed something to blast through a lot of guitar. I know Steve is very particular with overheads, and I knew if I went with the Paistes, he wouldn't have to brighten up the overheads to get the cymbals to speak, which could really alter the overall kit sound. I wanted to give

Steve a clean, bright, yet punchy sound.

But I did change up the ride cymbal, come to think of it. We went with an old washy ride on some of the tracks - an old '60s 22" A Zildjian. I might have also used a 22" Sabian from the '80s. It's all bell and weighs as much as me! It's heavy and has no wash at all. For hi-hats I kept things pretty much the same: Paiste 15" "heavy hats."

**STEVE MARCANTONIO:** We changed up snares a lot and sometimes cymbals. Tony was always on top of the tuning, which is essential if you want your drums to sound good.

I approached these sessions differently from any other date because first of all, I only had to worry about the drums. A lot of times when I'm tracking a band there may be other instruments in the room and I would be concerned with leakage. In this case I had the opportunity to worry only about the drums.

***Describe the microphone setup and signal paths for the session.***

**SM:** We recorded the drums using a Custom API Legacy Plus console. If you visit [www.soundkitchen.com](http://www.soundkitchen.com) you can get a view of the room. It's a nice big room with wood floors and brick walls. There are theater curtains on the wall that can be opened and closed from a remote in the control room. For this session I opened the curtains up all the way. The drums were in the far corner of the room looking in to the control room. There are four Audio-Technica 4051s in the ceiling that live there and I use them all of the time. I find that they really capture the sound of that room. I bused all four mics to two room tracks and compressed them with a UREI 1178. I also used two Coles mics in front of the kit, placed low. These captured a different kind of ambience that punched the drums up without adding too much of the actual room. On the kick I had a [AKG] D12 inside and a Neuman FET 47 outside. I like the click of the D12, and with the '47 I put it up against the front head, which gave me a lot of bottom from it. These two mics were bused to one track. The snare had [Shure] '57s on top and bottom, and the hat had a [Neumann] KM84. For the toms I used Audio-Technica ATM 23s - my favorite tom mics. On overheads I went with Shure SM81s, using EQ to roll off some of the lows, of course. I only compressed the room mics and just a little on the snare's top mic with a [Empirical Labs] Distressor.

***Was "the sound" of these tracks any different from previous Discrete titles - did you go for a different kind of room sound, or use extra processing, for example? Or was your aim to keep it in the style, sonically speaking, of your other libraries?***

**SM:** We definitely went for a different sound on this series, for sure. For one thing, we were in a much bigger room, so it had a much bigger sound.

**RD:** Right, and we had no desire to recreate anything we had done before either stylistically or sonically. It was about getting it right for the idiom, so this one is really punchy. If you mute the rooms, the drums have a lot of impact and tone. When you add one or both of the room tracks, it becomes much more cavernous than any of our previous collections. It's the sound of Sound Kitchen's "Big Boy" - it reminds me a lot of the old Studio "B" at the Record Plant [NY], even though it was twice as large.

***Was there any "creative" processing done to the tracks?***

**RD:** Not really, but we did record a stereo track of a cheesy old Radio Shack stereo mic that Tony hung from his rack. He travels with a fairly extensive rack of outboard, and he would process the crappy sounding mic in different ways for different "songs." He'd add delays, filter the hell out of it, compress it, whatever made it ugliest. He calls that the "Gak Track," and I loved it!

***Tony, from a technique perspective, did you approach these sessions any differently than a regular date? In other words, were you more focused on playing "extra clean" and precise?***

**TM:** I was certainly more focused on playing clean 'cause the only thing you heard back was me! [laughs] I couldn't hide behind the bass player or blame any one else for rushing or slowing down - it was a click and me. Did I accomplish that? Well I'm sure a thing or two were nudged to be tight. You'd have to ask the

Rick - he's the edit guy.

We wanted these tracks to feel awesome - raw power and energy. You know, guys are going to be putting this stuff to use in their studios in their 500 square-foot apartments. We want their tracks to jump off the computer screen or whatever format these tracks are going to be in and hit you in the freakin' puss so hard! Like you took your tracks to one of the best rooms in town and got the drum tracks of your life. Because it was just me in the room meant I could really hone in on something and get it tight. Sometimes I played really tight and other times just went Keith Moon on you guys!

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