

From Kitschy to Classy: Reviving the TR-808

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Aesthetics, Article, Cultural Studies, Digital Media



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Before Roland's new TR-8 Rhythm Performer, a contemporary drum machine, was unveiled this year, the company released a [series of promotional videos](#) in which the machine's designers sought out the original schematics and behavior of its predecessor the TR-808, an iconic analog drum machine from the early 1980s. The TR-808 holds cultural cache—most recently due to its use by Outkast, Baauer, and Kanye West—that Roland is interested in exploiting for the Rhythm Performer. The video features engineers [closely examining the TR-808's sound with an oscilloscope](#), trying to glean every last detail of the original's personality.



"Roland TR-808" by Flickr user Ethan Hein, CC BY 2.0

Things were not always this way. Upon its initial release, the TR-808 was widely dismissed. Because it did not sound like "normal" acoustic drums, many established musicians questioned its utility and many ultimately disregarded it. However, its "cheap" circuit-produced sounds became bargain-bin treasures for emerging artists. Since its sounds now play such a large part in the landscape of electronic music, this essay takes a historical perspective on the [TR-808 Rhythm Composer's](#) use and circulation. By analyzing how Juan Atkins and Marvin Gaye used the TR-808 in the early 1980s, I show how the TR-808 created a sonic space for drum machines in popular music.

Drum machines, though commonplace today, [were once seen as kitschy tools for broke amateur musicians](#). As audio engineer Mitchell Sigman explains, [the 808's low, subsonic kick drum](#) and "tick" snare characterized a departure from the realistic, sampled drum sounds produced by high-end drum machines in the early 1980s. The 808 uses analog oscillators and white noise generators to make sounds resembling the components of a drum set (kick, snare, hi-hats, etc.) And, although these sounds are now commonplace, most contemporary artists use them precisely because they sound robotic, not because they sound like drums. Even though the 808 at first seemed a failed imitation of "real" drums, the comparatively low cost of the 808, which [originally retailed around](#)

\$1,195, attracted musicians who were unable to afford other similar machines such as the [LinnDrum](#) that retailed at more than twice that price. Roland advertised the machine as a “studio” for musicians on a budget and even as they began to disinvest from the 808—as testified by the company’s decision to invest in marketing and research for other products—the 808’s so-called noises began their movement into mainstream American popular culture. In Detroit, electronic musician Juan Atkins, now known as one of the innovators of Detroit Techno, began experimenting with the machine’s sonic capabilities as early as 1981, while other artists such as [Afrika Bambaataa](#) were also using it in the Bronx by 1982.



“Industrial Records Studio 1980” by Flickr user Chris Carter, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

A landmark year for the 808, 1982 saw the release of Juan Atkins’ “Clear” and Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing,” tracks that illuminate the key features each musician realized in the 808. For [Atkins, the machine was something he felt could embody his early career](#); Atkins’ use of the 808 represented a pivotal moment in the American musical landscape, in which the futurism of the sound of synthesizers echoed other segments of the nation’s sonic imagination. Gaye’s use of the 808 was a clear departure from his body of Motown work. Although the instrument enabled different sorts of experimentation for the two, the new sorts of sounds the machine produced allowed them both to explore new possibilities for musical meaning. Just as Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco argue in *Analog Days* that analog synthesizers [required validation](#) by musicians such as [Geoff Downes](#) and [Keith Emerson](#) a decade before, the 808 broke into the mainstream through artistic experimentation.

<https://youtu.be/I280cxs2jvA>

Juan Atkins

In the early ‘80s, Juan Atkins was [learning all he could about electronic music](#). As an able musician and the son of a concert promoter, Atkins was poised to couple his musical knowledge with a new breed of electronic musical instruments such as the 808. Together with a tightly knit group from

Detroit, Atkins succeeded in promoting techno from a subculture to part of a global dance music scene. According to [Atkins](#), the popularity of Detroit Techno came from its adoption in European urban centers like London and Berlin, which lent the music additional meaning stateside. In [an interview with Dollop UK](#), Atkins emphasizes that the 808 was central to this musical development, as he calls the 808 (among other machines) “the foundation[s] of electronic dance music.”



“Cybotron-Clear” by Flickr user Alan Read, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Under the moniker of Cybotron, Atkins released the song “[Clear](#)” in 1982. “Clear”’s proto-techno soundscape pushes the 808 to the front of his mix, and provides the track’s backbone. The solid, resonant kick, swishy open high hat, and the piercing snare are decidedly machinic, departing from most rhythmic trends in popular music to date, since, as music scholar [John Mowitt](#) points out, a sense of “human feeling” comes hand-in-hand with drumming.

Atkins embraced these machine sounds and considered the 808 his “[secret weapon](#).” Its ability to be programmed, manipulated, and warped on the fly lent it a very particular kind of performance and music making that Atkins exploited. Rather than rely on the breaks that DJs could find on records, the 808 allowed Atkins to create beats to his own liking, placing kick, snare, and hi-hat hits where he found them to be most effective. Because of this flexibility, the kitsch of the 808’s sounds empowered the difference between his music and other artists’ creations. The breaks Atkins produced on the 808, for example, were obviously impossible to find on vinyl.



"Juan Atkins" by Flickr user Rene Passet, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

As *Bleep43*, an online EDM collective, notes, [Atkins' vision for electronic music would eventually pick up in London](#), where he relocated in the late eighties. Although Detroit Techno had achieved regional success in the US, record sales and performance dates in London signaled techno had found a larger audience abroad. Although Atkins considers himself an eclectically "Detroit" artist, he recognizes the impact of his work globally, [and thinks of the modern Berlin flavor of minimal techno as a notably clever offshoot](#).



<https://youtu.be/rjISiAssUIs>

Marvin Gaye

Marvin Gaye's struggle with depression, drug use and relationship issues were the context for the subtle and understated 808 rhythmic backing he used in "Sexual Healing." Gaye's use of the 808 in "[Sexual Healing](#)" differs vastly from Watkins' in "Clear," operating as a tool of texture and punctuation from the noticeable timbric changes to the clever placement of handclaps and clave in the composition. While Gaye recovered from his personal crises in Belgium, [Columbia Records](#)

sent him an 808 because it was more portable than a studio drummer. It also offered sonic capabilities new and exciting to Gaye's seasoned ears.

"Synths of Yesteryear 5/5" by Flickr user Jochen

Wolters, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Rhythm Composer, looks

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"Synths of Yesteryear 5/5" by Flickr user Jochen

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"Synths of Yesteryear 5/5" by Flickr user Jochen

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The drum machine's prevalence in "Sexual Healing" shows how culturally marginal sounds move into mainstream musical culture. Gaye and his producers, already squarely in the center of popular American music, experimented with the sound of the 808 not in an attempt to break through, but rather to exercise musical flexibility. Since he was already an extremely successful pop artist, Gaye's use of the 808 marks him as a sonic risk-taker and innovator, weaving the machine sounds of the 808 seamlessly but noticeably into R and B.

The machine's normally powerful snare is invoked only at the quietest of velocities, often being replaced by the now iconic handclap. Unlike many contexts in which the 808 is heard such as "Clear" and Afrika Bambaataa's "[Planet Rock](#)," "Sexual Healing" manages to keep everything low key. Matching the lyrics that espouse peace, harmony, and sense of internal struggle (*Whenever blue tear drops are falling/And my emotional stability is leaving me/Honey I know you'll be there to relieve me/The love you give to me will free me*), Gaye uses the 808 to evoke a surprisingly contemplative and serene atmosphere. It is this use that best shows the machine's strange versatility, as both a harbinger of radically innovative musical genres and its ability to produce tranquil rhythmic textures for popular music.

Transformation



"Roland TR 909 Drum Machine Classic" by Flickr user Juliana Luz, CC BY-NC 2.0

Although Atkins and Gaye's work exemplify the TR-808's early adoption, a long road toward mainstream popularity remained because of Roger Linn's more "realistic" sampled drums sounds included in his high-end machines. [The LM-1 and its successors](#) (famous for hit singles like Billy Idol's "White Wedding", Hall and Oate's "Maneater," and Don Henley's "Dirty Laundry") made [sampled drums the gold standard of computerized rhythmic backing](#). In fact, Roland's next drum machine, the [TR-909](#), implemented samples alongside synthesis. As a result, 808s couldn't be given away until musical innovators gave its sounds gravitas (Sigman, 2011, 46).

The 808's shift from sonically trashy and undesirable to ostensibly hip signifies a culturally important moment within the history of music technology. As shown in the examples above, subtle moments of economic, emotional, and geographic necessity seeded the popular music industry for the eventual 808 boom today. When techno eventually broke through to global popularity, the 808 was so fundamental to the canon of the genre that it has managed to retain a place of fundamental sonic importance for musicians and producers.

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11:40, 6/11/14: This essay was re-edited for clarity, grammar, and flow by Jennifer Stoever.

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Ian Dunham is a musician and music scholar originally from northeast Ohio. He earned a B.S. from Middle Tennessee State University in the Recording Industry within the College of Mass Communications, and then worked as a recording engineer in Nashville and Germany. Afterward, he earned an M.M. in Ethnomusicology from the University of Texas at Austin, where he also operated a home recording studio. He will start a PhD in Media Studies at Rutgers in the fall, where he will pursue research related to music and copyright.

Featured image: “[1980 Roland TR-808](#)” by Flickr user Joseph Holmes, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



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