



Future Retro REVOLUTION

MusicTech
RECOMMENDED
★★★★★

If you want fat, acid sounds you might want to check out this unusual-looking synth from US manufacturer Future Retro. **Hollin Jones** joins the Revolution...

KEY FEATURES

- True analogue circuit design
- Full range of real-time synth controls and filters
- Analogue overdrive
- CV, Gate, Din, and Sync connections
- 16 DSP effects at 24-bit resolution
- 256 Patterns, 16 Songs
- Remix pattern variation

REVOLUTION

Manufacturer **Future Retro**

Price **\$699/€525**

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Among the myriad products from established companies that arrive for review, it's nice to sometimes discover the occasional unexpected gem from a small manufacturer. Usually it's some kind of dedicated hardware, such as a synth or outboard effects processor, and the Revolution, from US-based synth creators Future Retro, is just such an item. A true analogue monophonic synthesizer with DSP effects and a digital sequencer, it is in many ways the successor to the well-regarded 777 synth, made by the same company.

Double take

The first thing that strikes you about the Revolution is its looks. Resplendent in white metal, it also has wooden side panels, which tend to make an instrument feel that bit more special and give it a custom-made quality. The

blue LEDs are striking, and apparently the casing is finished in ultra violet so that you can see the markings in black-light conditions.

The other rather noticeable thing is that it's laid out in a series of concentric circles. It looks a bit like a device you might use to contact the Other Side, and there is some vaguely holistic stuff on the company's website about the cyclical nature of time and music. Don't let this fool you though, what it really excels at is generating terrifying sounds.

TB or not TB

The Revolution isn't necessarily an emulator keyboard, but it does reproduce the sounds of the classic Roland TB303. It's not laid out to look like a 303 and has some different features, which is why it can't be described simply as an emulator. The rear panel sports MIDI In, Out and Thru, phones and audio out, Filter Audio In, Filter CV In, Gate Out and CV Out for using a variety of sources both to modulate the Revolution's sound and for processing external sounds or controlling external gear. Interestingly, there's also a rarely-seen DIN Sync Out port that can be connected to an older device like a Roland TR808.

The front-panel knobs are relatively straightforward, with the outer ring containing parameters such as cutoff, decay, accent and envelope. The Revolution can generate two types of waveform, toggled by a switch on the back: square, which tends to sound rather hollow; and sawtooth, which has a fuller sound.

A second button on the back panel switches overdrive on or off. When activated, the internal signal is overdriven by an analogue distortion stage. There's no controller as the overdrive stage is dynamic, so it changes depending on the sound being routed through it. For achieving the kind of dirty, rasping sounds that the Revolution is so good at, overdrive is a must, bringing out notes in sequences that you can't otherwise hear. We found we tended to leave it on all the time.

Round in circles

As you might expect, there is a traditional step sequencer built-in. This enables 256 patterns to be stored and edited in real time while playing. They are arranged in 16 banks of 16 patterns, with each pattern being up to one measure in length (divided into 12 or 16 steps depending on the chosen



time signature). This works much like a normal step sequencer, only with the buttons in a circle rather than a line.

Each step can be edited for pitch, duration, glide, accent and swing amount and then saved. Patterns can be built-in to songs in any one of 16 locations. The two basic modes, Pattern and Song, are easy enough to get to grips with once you're familiar with the Revolution's layout.

Editing notes, assigning characteristics such as glide or swing

current pattern before moving on to the next one. In a live situation, where the Revolution is clearly intended to be used, this is a great help. The remixes are a little hit and miss, though, sometimes differing wildly from the original pattern, but that is always the way with processes containing elements of randomisation.

Back to basics

The sound produced by the Revolution is very good indeed. It hasn't got

A GREAT-SOUNDING ACID SYNTH FOR THE MORE SERIOUS ELECTRONIC MUSICIAN OR ANALOGUE PURIST.

to them, or changing the loop point midway is all done by selecting a note and seeing which of the relevant indicators are illuminated. To activate something, simply press the associated button.

Mix it up

To extend the scope of the available patterns, there's also a rather useful Remix mode. If you press the Remix button and start to move either of the two Remix knobs, the Revolution uses data from any of the 16 steps of a pattern to generate new patterns. As there are two knobs, each with 16 stages, there are 256 variations available for playing patterns.

Also, as you would hope, when you select a new pattern in any mode, it waits until it has finished playing the

preset patches or soundbanks, it just generates very fat sounds using pure analogue synthesis. It's a very hands-on instrument and the controls cry out to be tweaked as the acid sequences play back. It's a real joy to use live, too, as moving practically any of the controls changes your sounds between spiky stabs, screaming leads, liquid bleeps and huge basses.

To make things even better there are 16 DSP effects for processing both internal and external sounds. There are some decent reverbs, flanger, chorus, low-pass filter, delays and rotary. There are also a couple of presets that combine effects, like chorus layered with reverb. Probably the most effective for acid sequences are the delays. Mix L and R knobs enable you to alter the dry/wet effect amounts in real time.



Measuring up

The TeeBee (www.xs4all.nl/~syntecno/index.htm) is a TB303 clone in a 1U rackmount module, although it doesn't appear to be on sale any more. In fact, unless you can find a real 303 – which is unlikely – there are very few options for a dedicated hardware emulator apart from the Revolution. A lot of synths have 303-like patches, but often lack bite and realism compared to a dedicated instrument. In terms of software, there's a lot more out there, although you lose the hands-on part of sound creation to some extent. Synth-building environments like Reaktor (£379) are capable of decent emulation and much more complex tasks, but are overkill if you just want a synth to play. Probably the most popular emulator is Propellerhead's ReBirth (£134), which has the advantage of integration with Reason. The other alternative is to get a sample collection to load into Kontakt, HALion or another software sampler which you may already own.

The Revolution can, of course, be controlled by a MIDI keyboard or external sequencer and played like an instrument. Simply connect your external gear to the MIDI In port and set the Revolution to External MIDI control to receive program changes. Sync'd to Cubase, we had great fun building some arpeggiated loops and recording ear-splitting sounds as we threw the Resonance and Accent controls around.

Acid flashback

The Revolution is a specialist instrument – and to some extent that is reflected in the price. But what you get is a machine that's very accomplished at doing a few things very well. The Crystal Method name-dropping on the Future Retro website is no coincidence: it's their brand of serious, harder electronic music that would suit the Revolution perfectly. Despite its looks, it's actually fairly easy to use and you're unlikely to find any software or more general-purpose hardware instrument that can match its raw power and bite. A great-sounding acid synth for the more serious electronic musician or analogue purist. **MTM**

METHOD SPOT

The pure analogue idea is implemented in many of the Revolution's features. For example, although it has full MIDI control and can itself control external MIDI gear, the knobs don't transmit any MIDI CC information. They just control the characteristics of the sound. Also, if you bypass the digital effects, the signal remains in the analogue domain from the point it's generated until it leaves the unit via an audio output. There are also more advanced options for using the instrument's ins and outs as sources and destinations for modulating and controlling other equipment, which is characteristic of vintage analogue gear.

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Excellent sounds
- Looks great
- Easy to use
- Inspires creativity
- Comprehensive connectivity options for linking to other gear

WALK ON BY

- Fairly dedicated to acid sounds
- Faithful emulation of 303 means no storable patches
- A little pricey for the keen amateur

VERDICT

For making fat, acid 303 sounds, the Revolution is an excellent choice. It's unusual but easy enough to use and cries out to be played with.

