

Let me be absolutely clear: the drum machine is not dead. The 808 will not disappear.

Wooden cylinders will not kill the trigger. Skin heads will not usurp silicone. The drummer will not supplant the supple subtlety of Bambaataa or Squarepusher. The unity of the DAW will not be lost to the vagaries of numerous, unreliable musicians. Bulky, white-noise-corrupted vinyl will not drive out the flexibility and convenience of MP3s. You will not need to visit a specialist during specific hours to hear songs you will be unable to name; you will not have to trust gatekeepers of taste in person or in print to inform you of what has and what is to come. You will not have to wait for a physical object to experience new music.

How easy it has been to forget that when physical drums were first invented, they were ignored by media publications as niche pursuits for “gear heads”, another fad to have its moment and then fade away as users realised that the usability and practicality of the machine could not be replicated. Yet here we are, and those same publications are declaring the demise of the Drum Machine, as the hype of the analogue drum travels around the world, from hand-drums to gong-drums. There are even companies starting to manufacture portable variations of the physical drum, long before any business model or profitability can be discerned, as if admitting themselves that the versatility of the Drum Machine is unmatchable.

It has changed so much of our lives that it can be hard to remember a time before the analogue drum, when everything was digital. But to do so is the only way to see how drums became so important to so many so fast.

Naturally, when analogue drums were first invented and proudly displayed at festivals and conferences, they were pale imitations of their digital forefathers – near-perfect reproductions of the visual, dynamic language of the digital without any of its functionality or spirit. Recall the interstitial middle ages of the “Trap Set”, sprawling desperately to recreate anything that

one Pollard Syndrum could. Or the CD, or MiniDisc player, which parodised the benefits of the digital and the analogue into an overwhelming loss for both. Battle lines were drawn between the oligarchy of the binary and the incipient analogue. Those who grew up with digital laughed at these early iterations, dismissing the idea that analogue instruments could ever have value beyond a novelty replication, an echo, of the digital experience. They would never, they swore, use the analogue to make sound. What would the point be? Why transport heavy, awkward tubes of rare and ecologically unsustainable wood to perform when you could take everything ready your pocket, a weightless and expansive series of 0s and 1s? It simply wouldn't be the same.

However, analogue drums and instruments began to take off among the young and the old: the former revelling in the near endless possibilities that physical ownership presented, the latter embracing the simplicity and limited demands made upon the user by the analogue. Phenomena of home-made, scratch instruments grew, as users realised that found sounds and items could be remixed, stuck together, struck and sounded in ways that replicate the work of complex and sophisticated digital tools. Others still discovered that they could perform whatever they wanted alongside their favourite songs in the comfort of their own home, or even together as a group, without a programme, publisher or platform limiting their expression. Time became, as it were, of the essence: they had escaped the grid.

People have come to understand that once an analogue instrument or record is purchased, they truly own a personal edition of that record or means of music. There are no limitations to what they do with it. There are no licences they need to fulfil, no subscriptions to renew, no terms and conditions to not read and acquiesce to. The analogue requires no legal contract whatsoever. It can be given or kept, cherished or neglected, but will remain theirs. At last, with the analogue, we have grown to understand what it is to own information, not to lease or rent it. We can destroy, cut up, lend, send across the world in ways that digital refuses permit.

If we wish to make a change to the digital, we need to re-purchase, re-licence “our” digital products again; but the analogue remains accessible no matter how or where or when we choose to use them. It is a truly “open” platform. Is it any surprise that digital titans initially fought so hard in the courts against the inevitable rise of the analogue? They feared it would rewrite the rules of engagement between creator and consumer. They were right.

There are few today who say they wish analogue could be uninvented. It could be argued that our lives pre-analogue were less cluttered, less dense, when information and sounds existed only in digital form, connected by a click, and filled with connections to other information and sources that led to other information and sources, content piled upon content. A rabbit hole without end, and which we didn’t want to end.

It takes a necessary humility to appreciate the past perspicacity of precocious technophobes, like Beck, who bravely went on record to state the glut of digital influence resulted in homogenised auditory worlds in which everyone was influenced by everything and nothing stood out.¹

Everything we heard and performed in those days was instantaneously shareable, to anyone in the world. But, without our realising, that sharing had little or no presence. A single shot-trigger on, say, Ableton, was hard to distinguish among other countless and ceaseless streams of patches, comments, mods and codes shared at the same time. We existed in a stream, touched by a few drops, while oceans swept by unnoticed.

Even if someone sent you a sound or song, via email, Twitter, or bounced from hard-drive to hard-drive, the exchange was swift and soulless. Its association with the formless versatility

¹ In a *book*, nonetheless! Beck, in Tyler Cowen, *Creative Destruction: How Globalisation is Changing the World’s Cultures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 52.

of the medium cheapened the information itself and that very aspect that made it so beloved, no matter how meaningful its content or intent.

Today, we can give someone music as a gift, a means of music-making as a gift. We can lend them a personal, personalised copy of the music. We can physically place into their hands playlists specifically to reflect ourselves to them, or spread and share what we feel would interest them in a far more personal and memorable way. By occupying space, by having weight, by wielding tactility and scent as part of the narrative, the analogue has impact.

The analogue has helped us notice things that we didn't realise were missing from our digitally-lived existence. Our streaming services, for example, have no fixed chronology: they can re-uploaded, patched, changed at any time. The result is constant relevance, evolving in relation to artistic vision or the world they inhabit. But they can disappear without trace, exist only as suggested ghosts on platforms, be that owing to lawsuits, political attitudes or school-board votes. While archives exist, they are elusive and often inaccessible. Whatever version you currently hold is the only version to exist.

Infamously, so many digital records have been silently removed from circulation, after the exact nature of the rights of the content or form were called into question, when rights were sold, challenged or when politicians or the public decided that the content had become outdated, incorrect, harmful or inciteful.

It seems absurd, but there is much we can learn from fixed information. Through the analogue, we can witness human thought in action, tracing artistic and cultural development as it happens. Without the analogue, we can only do this by scrapping together archival snippets and supposition. The digital can be hard-wiped, erased – by accident or deliberately – or even corrupted.

The invention of the analogue has shown us the value of linear engagement. We no longer have to hear everything, create everything, share everything all at once. The analogue has a beginning, a middle and an end. We cannot shuffle or skip; it sits alone as the result of a unified effort of creators but proud within its totality. We need not parse our interest into two-minute bursts or thirty-second trials of interest. The popularity of a new kind of record, the aforementioned vinyl, shaped by analogue thinking – being long-form, disconnected, linear and precious in and of itself – has emerged as a result.

Thanks to the analogue, listening itself has become a more social pursuit, with renewed focus. No longer do we block out the world with our earphones, headphones and noise-cancelling, as though we would happily walk around wearing a blindfold, or a nose-plug. We invite our friends and neighbours to share with the sonic experience the analogue presents, sharing ideas and reactions in real time and space. No adverts pop up between or within songs to sell us goods we have tangentially searched for online. No extraneous chat windows suddenly appear and drag our attention away from what we were attentively listening to. Numerous studies have shown that the arrival of analogue has made us less lonely, less isolated and more content with ourselves and others. Analogue is changing the way we think, perceive and live.

Today, we exist in a resolutely analogue landscape. Hardly can you go to a gig now without seeing guitars, live drums or live singers on stage. Strange as it may have seemed a few years ago, the thought of seeing the hologrammed form of a revered but inconveniently deceased artist on stage confuses the younger audience. Records and instruments are being realised and celebrated on all subjects, from all countries, in virtually every language. No longer the private reserve of monied nerds, the analogue can be found in almost every Western home, and every street corner. There are collector's editions and limited runs. There can be no return from this point.

Little of this was in the minds of early analogue pioneers. Yet today every digital company cannot afford to ignore the growing presence of the analogue on their creative or business model. Analogue and digital are not at war, but in a dance. Analogue or digital? The question is as redundant as asking which is better: red or yellow? We live in an analogue and digital world, better for each other's existence, each medium learning how to overcome the limitations of the other.

For the digital, those strengths are connectedness, unlimited and instantaneous supply, multi-platform capabilities and the near-constant updating and worldly relevance. For the analogue, it offers presence, physicality, tactility, ownership, personalisation and the sociality of engagement. Even briefly here, we see complementary modes of existence.

Early advocates were mocked, even as they created new musical languages by blending the digital and the analogue. But their experiments were flawed, each ultimately forced by circumstance into partisanship. Jojo Mayer, retroactively admired, was laughed off stage for playing techno on his analogue drums. Binkbeats was derided for relinquishing rhythmic input to analogue instruments, even as he returned control to his worthwhile effects and pedals. Today, this is no longer true: the analogue and the digital have become collaborative rather than competing forces. Once-theoretical complementarity has evolved; now the 0s and 1s are as intrinsic to the analogue as the human is intrinsic to the 0s and 1s. The distance between the 0 and the 1 is shrinking and is finally ready to be overcome.

Thanks to the irruption of the analogue, we can now see that the digital was never at its zenith – it was and is just getting started. It can be said that we are entering a new golden age of the digital as it grows with and reacts to the analogue. The drummer and the drum machine – the primordial and prototypical seeds of the analogue and the digital respectively – are entering a new creative synergy, heretofore unimaginable, and encapsulating and exploiting the

advantages of both analogue and digital systems. This is an important time to be a musician, a programmer, a listener, an engager.

The drum machine is dead: long live the drum machine.