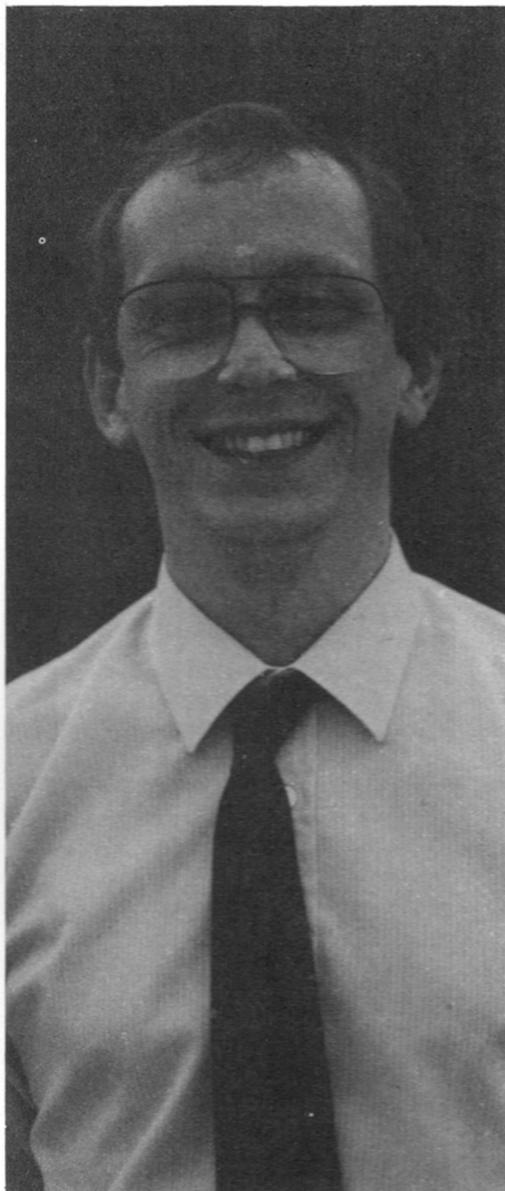


CHAPTER 7

INTERVIEW



An Interview with Dave Simmons

Dave Simmons is the man to whom virtually all the credit is due for the development of the electronic drum kit. His company Simmons Electronics Ltd has been responsible for nearly all the recent developments in electronic percussion, and since the late Seventies has been the undisputed world market leader.

In what direction do you see electronic drum kits going from here?

It must be upwards and onwards. There's one main reason that electronic drums can only go onwards - the advance of technology. All electronic instruments have advanced with the relentless march of technological progress, but their acoustic counterparts can by definition really only stand still.

Do you see electronic drum kits becoming a lot more refined?

Yes, in terms of their playing I see them having all the refinements of the acoustic drum kit. I'm not sure whether we are going to go quite as far as the "damp thumb across the skin", but they will have all the major characteristics of their acoustic counterpart - rim shot, tuning, variable harmonics across the head etc. I even see them offering more "playing facilities" than the acoustic drum kit.

Do you think that electronic kits will become directed more towards the generation of abstract and sampled percussive sounds, or will they strive primarily to emulate the acoustic kit?

The SDS-9 is a mixture of everything we've done and as far as the playability is concerned things are definitely going to go the way of the SDS-9. And as far as the sound generation aspect is concerned, i.e. using sample sounds as a basis for analogue processing circuitry, things will progress a lot further in this direction but in a far more sophisticated manner. We're heading towards a new flagship instrument in 18 months or so, which will be a completely new instrument - it will still be drum based but as far as sound capability is concerned, it will be even better than the SDS-7.

How do you feel about incorporating a sequencer within the brain of the kit?

Every time you add something to a product, such as a sequencer, you increase the cost, and obviously people who don't want sequencers don't want to have to pay for one. So I think our policy will be to produce separate sequencers.

Do you see another pick-up system to the drum or do you think the piezo (a small pick-up that acts like a microphone mounted in the pad) will continue to be utilised?

We are investigating three different types of pick-up at the moment. The one thing you won't be seeing from Simmons is a pick-up system for acoustic drums. What we are investigating is a more complex playing head. I don't think you will see piezos carrying on for much longer. There are far better things around.

Will Simmons drums adopt a more "hi-tech" image in the future?

Simmons has a big company image although we are basically still pretty small, and we realise now that the products we have don't have a particularly hi-tech image compared with, say, the Japanese. I think you'll see, from now on, Simmons products having a more hi-tech image; we

are currently investing in the type of manufacturing equipment that is necessary to do that.

Nowadays many manufacturers are being criticised for making products that are difficult to use and which fail to provide the musician with sufficient visual information to let him know what is going to happen when he plays the instrument. In addition the incremental method of programming is considered to be slow and awkward to use. What are your feelings on this subject?

Consider the very successful synthesizer from Yamaha - the DX-7. Here you have a very clever computer controlled instrument with very limited display facilities - it's very difficult to see exactly what's happening, and slow and difficult to programme. Now if Yamaha had put individual controls for each parameter, such as say the old Prophet 5, it would probably double the price of the instrument. Displaying control information is a problem, especially with an instrument such as the DX-7 and SDS-7 that has the flexibility to change all the parameters. The easiest way to display things is to have a TV screen which can show whatever you want, but generally I don't think drummers like that either.

Actually at the moment "hi-tech" instruments are tending to rely less and less on displays. You may have one or two fluorescent displays or LCDs, but you don't have, what everyone would like to see, a knob with lights round the edge indicating its position. You could twiddle the knob and either use it visually or use your ear - but it would be very, very expensive. Hardware is always the problem. If you could develop a versatile fully programmable instrument that doesn't need to continually display a wide selection of information then you've got it.

So if your machines were totally digital and pre-set they would be considerably cheaper?

Yes, you can look around at the digital machines at the moment - Yamaha being a prime example - and now they've got a £250 retail digital drum machine. It's got very good voices but you can't tune them all individually, you don't have any bends, you don't have any filter on the voice, you're stuck with the voices they have chosen and that's a direct trade off between the versatility and the price. Everybody wants digital drum sounds for their portable studios and there it is for under £300. You can't argue with it but if you want to start messing around with it and you want to do some sophisticated manipulation of digital sounds then you

have to start paying the price.

How do you feel about plagiarism?

Simmons kits have been copied not only in terms of the sounds and electronics, but even in the shape of the pads - you've probably been as much ripped-off as Leo Fender was over the years.

Well, we have managed to defend ourselves quite successfully against both Tama and Pearl and we have managed to force them to change the shape of their pads and really that's been our only strength. We can't defend ourselves on the electronic side, even though every analogue kit that comes out has the controls that I first defined five years ago. But where I did get angry was with the image . . . one Japanese company, for example . . . the way they were advertising and selling it, and even the type of environment they were promoting their kit in was a direct rip-off of our image. They were most definitely selling off our backs and that's where we said, if we let that sort of thing go, we would be flooded by instruments that looked and sounded just like ours. So we fought on the shape of the drums and we won worldwide.

What was it do you think that eventually made the electronic drum kit take off?

The image of the thing and some very basic features, such as the tom toms, pulled in everything behind it. It was a way of getting some exciting new sounds and a new way to use drums and yet maybe it wasn't the drummers who picked up on it. I think it was probably the producers.

Did you envisage, having made the SDS-3 back in the late Seventies, that you would be in this position some six years later?

Yes, I think so. I think you always have to have that vision, otherwise you wouldn't get on with it. Whatever stage you are at you've got to say, "Do I take my money and run, or do I plough it back into expanding the business?" We've done the latter and so far it's worked.