JAMMIN' WITH THE MAN

Performance-oriented looping devices were rare, expensive animals not so long ago, with several pedal-based units already on the market. Rob W. Jackson takes a look at Digitech's entry to the fray.

It's hard to believe that it's almost 20 years since Digitech released the 99000 delay - a now-familiar twin-pedal design that enabled you to create sound-on-sound loops up to eight seconds in length. The now-discontinued stomper is the inspiration behind this new JamMan model, which, as the specs suggest, is testimony to the huge developments in signal processing and storage technology made over the past couple of decades.

GBINFO

DIGITECH JAMMAN

PRICE: £249

BUILT IN: USA

TYPE: Digital looper/phrase sampler

FEATURES: 99 independent loops, 24 minutes' looping time (expandable) using CompactFlash, MIDI, ADX and balanced I/O inputs, built-in metronome, automatic record mode, USB connectivity, hands-free operation, very loop speed without changing pitch

POWER: 9V power supply (supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 106(w) x 141(d) x 42(h) mm

OPTION: F93A Footswitch, CompactFlash, USB card up to 2GB

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THANKS FOR THE MEMORY

SIX HOURS OF PHRASE SAMPLING, ANYONE?

The JamMan uses standard Type I CompactFlash cards for loop storage – a credit card-sized, robust, reliable and readily available media that turns up in everything from digital cameras to Pocket PCs and PDAs.

The unit ships with a generous 128MB card that offers just over 24 minutes of looping time. If that’s not enough, the JamMan can use cards up to 2GB, and while mixing out the storage will cost you another £100 or so for a 2GB card, it’s an incredibly useful and versatile investment for solo performers with large repertoires. The table, right, shows approximate storage capacity in minutes based on more CD-quality files.

For one, total loop time out of the box is a very impressive 24 minutes, and there’s even more if you’re prepared to shell out some extra dough and upgrade the memory – you can store up to a staggering six-and-a-half hours of audio, and did we mention that’s CD-quality audio? Combine this with 99 loop/memory locations, variable loop tempo without changing pitch, line, mic and auxiliary inputs, optional footswitch hands-free operation and computer connectivity via a USB port, and we’ve got one seriously interesting little box to play with here.

CONSTRUCTION & FEATURES

The JamMan is housed in a sturdy, die-cast chassis, finished in attractive dark metallic blue. The buttons and knobs feel generally positive and smooth, and while one or two of the rotary controls feel a tiny bit wobbly, DigiTech’s established reputation for fully automated recording.

The upper panel controls are laid out logically, with less frequently used controls accessed via a shift-key system. Brightly lit numeric display, buttons and LEDs keep you informed of the various modes, and let you know what’s going on.

Central to the JamMan’s operation, we have a couple of familiar footswitches for basic loop recording, playback and overdub functions.

"YOU CAN STORE AS MUCH AS A STAGGERING SIX-AND-A-HALF HOURS OF AUDIO, AT CD QUALITY"

The JamMan comes with an impressive array of controls and connections. There are low-impedance XLR and 1/4-inch instrument-level inputs, each with a dedicated level control, plus another 1/8-inch aux input for sources such as CD or MP3 players. The standard 1/4-inch output can feed a signal to an amp, mixing desk, or even a pair of headphones. An innovative feature is the inclusion of a USB port, which enables you to transfer loops to and from a computer – see the box on p111 for more on that.

The 1/4-inch footswitch input is designed for use with the optional three-button FS3X for allowing 'hands free' loop selection and minor niggle with our review unit is that spring tension on the pedals is a little stiff. Conventional non-latching DPDT style switches (double pole double throw) might be more appropriate here – in cases where the timing of your loop is critical, you need a footswitch that enables you to hit your start and end points spot-on.

Finally, thanks to the unit’s weighty chassis and grippy rubber pads, this is
one pedal that’s not going to be sliding around on stage.

**IN USE – BASIC RECORDING**

Getting up and running with the JamMan is easy, thanks to the intuitive controls. After making the appropriate connections and setting the ‘mic’ and/or ‘inst’ levels, you select an empty loop using the rotary selector (or optional footswitch), press the ‘rec/play/overdub’ switch and start playing. When you reach the end of the passage you wish to loop, press the ‘rec/play/overdub’ switch again and the JamMan will immediately play your loop from the point you started recording, and then loop the whole passage continuously.

To overdub additional (and unlimited) parts, press the ‘rec/play/overdub’ again to toggle between play and overdub mode. If you make a mistake (who me? never!), the JamMan fortunately has one level of undo accessible by holding down the ‘rec/play/overdub’ for two seconds. To stop your loop, simply press the ‘stop/tempo’ footswitch, and if you don’t want to save the loop, holding down the ‘stop/tempo’ switch will also clear that memory location.

**EASY PC**

**HEARD THAT?**

**YES YOU HAVE JAMMAN LINEAGE EXPLAINED**

The original and much sought-after JamMan was a 1U rackmount unit, introduced in 1994 by signal processing pioneers Lexicon and discontinued three years later. As Lexicon and Digitech now operate snugly in the corporate arms of the Harman Music Group, the Digitech team of designers were able to use some of the original Lexicon technology. While some might argue it’s more operation and lack of MIDI sync doesn’t make the new pedal a true and worthy successor, it’s certainly one of the most powerful looping devices in its class – just like the original more than 10 years ago.

Speaking of memory locations, the JamMan comes pre-loaded with 10 funky backing tracks in various styles for you to play along with, including a one-shot sample of some rapturous applause – handy for those post-tour gigs! We’re also particularly pleased to see the inclusion of an ‘auto record’ mode which you can set by pressing the appropriate button on the pedal, or the optional footswitch. This allows the JamMan to start recording as soon as you start playing, by detecting a signal above a certain threshold. This is a great feature, because, in the opinion of this reviewer, who’s been looping live for several years, the hardest thing to get right timing-wise is the beginning of your loop. Getting the end point of the loop is easier, because you’re generally not playing a note at that precise moment in time. You can also decide if you want your loops to play back continuously or as a one-off/single shot by pressing the ‘loop/single’ button.

**IN USE – OTHER FEATURES**

If you wish to save your loop, simply press the ‘store’ button, select an empty loop location and press ‘store’ again – viola, your loop has been saved onto the FlashCard as a CD-quality (albeit mono) industry-standard WAV file. The same sequence can be used to effectively copy/move loops around. As well as instant recall for live use, this is also extremely handy for capturing those little bits of inspiration that you may wish to make use of at a later date.

The JamMan has a built-in rhythm/metronome guide, the tempo of which is set by tapping the ‘tempo’ button or the ‘stop/tempo’ footswitch. Cleverly, existing loops will automatically slow down or speed up to match the tempo, if you need to practice that tricky solo at slightly less than breakneck speed, for example.

Different time signatures are also available, and you can select bars of two to 16 beats in length. Nine alternative rhythm sounds are also selectable, and include high-quality samples of wood block, kick drums and tambourine, to name but a few. Note, however, that the patterns themselves are simple beats to the bar with an accent or alternative sound on the first beat. If a tempo has been selected, record and playback will occur on the next downbeat of the measure, so pressing the ‘rec/play/overdub’ footswitch a fraction before the beginning of the bar will ensure your loops are the correct length. Tempo and time signature are also saved with the loop, albeit in a separate XML file. Finally, you can adjust the level of your metronome guide independently, but sadly there’s no separate line out for the click track.

When connecting an external source for recording, DigiTech has thoughtfully added some refinements to the way the signal is treated; ‘Center cancel’ mode removes any material that is common to both the left and right channels of a stereo source – typically the lead vocal or solo instruments – great for jamming or singing along with existing CD
"Drinking Beer for a 'Look, No Hands' Comedy Moment Springs To Mind Here..."