Norman Weinberg throws out a few creative ideas on how to get rich, Rich, RICH . . .

A FEW WEEKS ago, I was talking to some students about wrapping their own marimba and timpani mallets. A few dollars spent on yarn or piano felt, along with a little spare time, can produce several hundred dollars worth of high quality sticks. The discussion eventually worked itself around to small business opportunities for drummers. You know, ways that a drummer might be able to make some extra cash by inventing, building, or designing something that would be beneficial to other drummers.

Admittedly, drumming is a strange breed of animal. Even though there are numerous companies that mass produce percussion instruments of all qualities and price levels, we, more than any other instrumentalists, like to customize or create our own gear.

The percussion world is full of small, home-run businesses that provide high quality products at a fair price. Some of these small businesses have grown into good size companies. Aho, American Drum Mfg, Bolter, J.L. Cooper, DeMorrow, Digidesign, Andrew Feldman, Vic, Firth, Goodman, Great Plains Percussion, Grover, Hinger, Keplerling, Kraft, Lone Star Percussion, Joe Moniawski, Vaughnraff, and Steve Weiss (no name just a few) have found a niche in the percussion market and filled it quite well. They all had good ideas, carried them out, and the drumming community is grateful. And don’t forget that some of the big mega-companies such as Ludwig and Apple Computer once began as garage projects.

Like yourself, I’ve had several ideas of what I would like to see created, produced, and made available. Keep in mind that I’m not talking about things that are impossible, like inflatable drums or a megabyte of additional memory for a kit. But sometimes I get frustrated that I don’t have the time to invent and produce some products that seem to be in obvious need. Right now, I don’t — but maybe you do.

The Entrepreneurial Drummer

LET’S BEGIN BY looking at percussion accessories. If I had the time, I’d make a snare drum stand with a cage that could accommodate larger size drums. Our school owns two beautiful old Ludwig tenor drums that measure 17 inches in diameter. Unfortunately, the only stand that would hold them is an old Marvel construction that’s been around longer than most of my students. It’s rusting and looks like it’s been through a war — and it lost. It’s been repaired so many times it has its own charge card at the music store. I really don’t want to mount floor tom hardware on the shell of the drum. So what are my options once this stand is beyond repair? A company could manufacture such a cage and offer it as an option to their product line. For some styles of stand, it would only require a longer adjusting arm. Perhaps someone will produce that single arm, put a couple of advertisements in RHYTHM, and see what happens . . .

Every so often, a student wants to play the “Concerto for Percussion and Small Orchestras’ by Darius Milhaud. I can’t blame them; it’s one of the standard works in the percussion literature. This composition requires the use of a special attachment for the bass drum pedal and a special holder for a suspended cymbal. You see, there’s a suspended cymbal mounted onto the hoop of the bass drum and when the soloist pushes the pedal, the additional arm on the pedal rocks forward and hits the cymbal as the beater ball hits the bass drum. They used to be very popular in the ‘20s and ‘30s, but I haven’t seen them around lately. They just sort of fall out of favor when the hi-hat pedal became more popular. I guess I was born too late to be able to buy the required attachments. Meanwhile I’ll bet that this composition is played several hundred times a year around the globe. If I had a little free time, I’d build these attachments. Every college and university would have to own one. Who knows? Perhaps the idea of mounting a suspended cymbal on the bass drum could catch on. Two words for the price of one. Call it “laying,” get an endorsement by some heavy metal drummer, and watch the postman drop the checks in the mailbox.

What about a bass drum pedal that could move the beater ball against the head with a stroke from your heel as well as your toe? If I had a little extra time on my hands, I’d try to design one. It couldn’t be that hard to construct. After all, we’re getting ready to build a Star Wars defence system! I’m sure that this pedal could be designed so that it would be comfortable for the player, because I can use a heel-toe technique with my shoe on the floor and it feels just fine. Tap dancers use heel-toe movements all the time. Imagine what kind of things would be possible if you had a pedal like this under each foot. Tommy RHYTHM SEPTEMBER 1989
Electronics Innovations?

THE EMERGING WORLD of electronic percussion is ripe for great ideas. Keyboard players have been screaming for more realistic control over the sounds and style of the drums, but have, to an extent, given up. Perhaps this is just another case of the squawky wheel getting the grease, but currently only a few drum machines and percussion brains read or transmit control change messages. OK, so our hands are busy with sticks and our feet are already playing some pedals, but that doesn't mean that all the rest of our equipment needs to be neglected. As instruments like the Roland RB drum machine become more commonplace, drummers are going to use them in a variety of ways to send control messages.

Keyboard players have a bit more control, but these aren't much help to drummers. If I had some time, I'd make a few as yet unwieldy controllers for my friends.

How about a controller that could read pressure exerted by a drummer's teeth? Clench your teeth together, and you send controller values. The harder you squeeze, the higher the value. It could be about the size of a postage stamp, and be made out of the same material as a football player's mouth guard.

The counterpoint of a drum might be a great place to attach a ribbon controller. No, I've got it. Put the controller right on the drums! To change the sound of the drums while you're playing, just reach a finger up and touch a certain part of the stick. When the stick breaks, just peel the controllers off the old pair and attach them to a new pair. How about a stick that could recognize changes in fulcrum pressure or pressure exerted by squeezing the back fingers?

How about a controller that could read drum sound pressure places on your head? If you flicked your head up or down past a certain predetermined point, a control change or pitch change message would be sent to some external sound generator. By using your head (no pun intended), you could send messages based on the various distinct planes of movement: up, down, left, right, pitch, yaw, and any other motion that NASA has come up with lately.

While I'm on the subject of electronics, let me show you a few more ideas. Let's say a big manufacturer like Roland or Yamaha release a new keyboard or new graphics card. Now, being the creative computer programmers we get to work on building libraries, editors, custom sounds, and the like. But where are the editors and librarians for some of the more popular drum machines or electronic drumkits? OK, I understand part of the problem.

Some drum machines and electronic sets don't include a very complete set of System Exclusive codes. If the machine can't recognize SysEx messages, a computer librarian can't be written. Maybe it's time that manufacturers got the message that full System Exclusive codes need to be implemented in all electronic percussion instruments. Write your congressmen, contact the "Uncle Ed" at SLP and tell them everything you can to raise a stink, and maybe the message will get through.

There are a few drum machines and drum brains that do have good System Exclusive implementation. But the only computer librarian for drums that I'm aware of is "DrumBrute" by Blank Software for the E-MU Systems SP-12, a druming machine. I've got an SP-12, and I use this library all the time! This program alone has saved me hundreds of hours. But what about the poor guys who have Roland, Yamaha, Korg, or Casio machines? Where are their editors and librarians? If I only had a little spare time, I'd make some serious cash. There must be 20,000 Yamaha RX-5 drum machines out there in use. If a programmer sold an editor only 10% of the owners, that would generate 2,000 sales. Even if the editors sold for only $50 (very cheap by software standards), that would create a gross sales revenue of $100,000,000! That's real money in anyone's book. How hard could it be to port that program over for the Yamaha DB drum brain and generate even more sales?

Perhaps that kind of breed isn't enough for the larger software firms to bother with, but what about us drummers? What about "Uncle Ed" at SLP and "DrumBrute"? Even if you've never programmed a line of code in your life, you can be learned. Concern yourself with some other, perhaps a lot more, man than drummers. Programmers know how to program and drummers know how to play drums. Everything you've ever wanted to know about programming libraries and editors can be picked up from reading books and writing code. In many ways, it's just like playing drums: Anyone who wants to learn simple has to take the time and trouble to do it.

While we're on the subject of electronics, there's one more idea. If I had some free time, I'd build a little box with a cymbal stand for data messages. Hitting one side of the box would act as an increment button and striking the other side would serve as the decrement button. Using this little must-have, you could call up different programs, step through them, or even change the value of some parameters during a live performance. A few electronic kits will let you do something of a similar idea by changing the current program, but two little pads like these would be much more versatile.

Any takers?