

Roland MC-303

## ByteNoise

### Roland MC-303

Company: [Roland](#)

Year: 1996

Price: £565



The Roland MC-303

The MC-303 is a sequencer, like Roland's other devices prefixed MC. Unlike previous sequencers, however, it also has a built-in rompler. This makes it more akin to a workstation, only without the keyboard. In other words, it's a self-contained tool to write electronic music on.

## The TB-303 comparison

I suspect the 303 part of the naming of this machine was something dreamed up at the last minute by Roland's marketing department in order to cash in on the popularity of the [TB-303](#). To be honest, I suspect the people who put a lot of hard work into designing the MC-303 probably weren't too happy that everyone ended up comparing the two rather than seeing their new product as a radical new concept in its own right.

So how does the MC-303 compare to the TB-303? It doesn't. They're two completely different beasts. The TB-303 does only one thing, but does it very well: it makes very good [acid lines](#). Conversely, the MC-303 does a bit of everything - drums, basslines, piano riffs, pads, leads - but doesn't do any of them particularly well. It's a jack of all trades, but master of none.

## The concept

The concept is a simple and beautiful one: make a single box, as simple to use as possible, that will help a techno producer make music. Not just basslines, or drumbeats, but everything. The closest I can think of to this concept is sequencer/[sampler](#) combinations such as the Fairlight CMI, [trackers](#) on the Amiga, and the Akai MPC series of devices that are ubiquitous in hiphop. However, all of those require you to put sounds into them before they actually do anything, making them versatile chameleons, but intimidating to new users. In sharp contrast, the MC-303 comes with its own sounds built in, making it more akin to having an MPC with a sample CD bundled in, only without the option to load in outside sounds instead.

This is why a lot of producers hate the device. The variation and

interest of electronic music doesn't come from the notes as often as it comes from the rhythms and the sounds used. While rock music always has electric guitars and acoustic drums, electronic music can have wildly different sounds from one song to the next. That's what makes it sound so diverse.

If everyone used one of these devices, however, the music would be homogenised. Everyone would use the same few sounds, without the ability to change or tweak them. In the eyes of many producers, having sounds you can't modify is akin to having a guitar that you can't actually play note by note, that you can only get to play certain predefined riffs. In short, they consider it both cheating and limiting.

Regardless of whether anyone likes to admit it, though, a lot of musicians do use presets. This is especially true of those who are just starting out. Making electronic music spans many disciplines, and everyone has to start somewhere, with many people learning how to make rhythms and play melodies before they learn how to create their own unique patches. You only have to listen to a handful of records to spot the same sounds recurring, even in tracks by respected producers of commercial music.

Bearing this in mind, a sequencer/rompler combination seems like an idea worth exploring, if only as a tool for beginners and a sketchpad for professionals.

## **The sequencer**

When I got an MC-303, I had this utopian vision of a simple sequencer combined with some humble but decent bread-and-butter techno sounds. Unfortunately, that vision

shattered once I actually tried getting to grips with its sequencer.

Romanticising hardware had made me forget why software is so much better at this sort of thing: you can't mass produce cheap, user friendly sequencers made out of tangible components. Generously sized LCDs are too expensive, so you have to use a handful of LEDs. This means the most information the MC-303 can convey is "888 888", hardly a useful amount. It can't even spell its own name, instead calling itself the "nC-303".

Even with sixteen more LEDs lined up below the numeric display, there's no way for the instrument to tell the user "here's where your kick drums are" at the same time as "here's where your snares are", or "here are all the notes I'm going to play in this pattern." It can tell you one drum part at a time, or one note at a time.

This is a real shame. Had it been easier to punch in notes and to go back and amend them, and had it been easier to load, save and copy patterns, this device would have been much more useful than it is. I could even envision people buying it when they first learn to make music, and as they develop their skills over time, they could still use the sequencer even when they've outgrown the device's built in sounds. It would be neat to use it to control a whole rack of, say, Novation rackmounts or even just an improved rompler such as a Korg TR-Rack stuffed with PCM cards.

However, considering how cumbersome the interface is, coupled with the lack of an external medium to save songs to when you run out of internal memory, it's not surprising that no one is using this as a master controller for her studio. In all

honesty, software provides such a friendlier interface for sequencing, you'd probably be better off with even an Atari ST.

## The sounds

For me, this was the real letdown. Noticing the same presets appearing in a lot of my favourite records, and knowing that most of them are taken from various [Roland](#) synths of the eighties, I was hoping that the team who designed this would have simply taken their company's most popular sounds such as the [TR-808](#) and TR-909 drums, the more popular presets from all their Jupiters, Junos and JXs, some nice basses, strings and pads, and a basic piano sound.

Instead, they include a handful of these sounds and a lot of others. There's nothing wrong with that in theory, but given the limit of ROM space, quantity and quality are mutually exclusive factors. I think they trod the middle ground when heading for the side of quality would have been a better option. There are plenty of synth sounds, piano sounds, strings, noises and sound effects that cater for various styles including hiphop and jungle, but with such a diverse selection, there's simply no room in the machine's memory for any given sound to be of a decent quality.

To their credit, the demo songs included with the device sound impressive, proving that although each instrument sounds bad in isolation, you won't notice when lots are playing at once because they mask each other's flaws pretty well, making for a passable mix.

However, I suspect that these demos were created using a software sequencer and then merely transferred to the MC-303

to handle the playing of them, because when using the MC-303's built-in sequencer, it's difficult to come anywhere near making anything that good. I know it sounds like maybe I just have no talent, but my point is that if you're good enough to coax good music out of this device, then you can easily make even better tracks on a fully fledged software sequencer.

## **The legacy?**

I think an all-in-one sequencer/rompler is a brilliant idea, but the combination of awkward interface and cheap sounds doesn't really work. Given the cost of electronic components, I think the task Roland set themselves was impossible at the time, and what they created was an impressive attempt. Whether I'd actually use an MC-303 is another matter, though. It's good for beginners and works as a sketchpad you can noodle with while watching TV, but it's not something for serious producers.

While the MC-303 isn't particularly friendly and doesn't sound particularly good, it pioneered an interesting concept that I think a lot of professionals reject for themselves without realising how beneficial it might be for newcomers. In this respect, I think it was an important first step in a new direction for music making equipment, and has deserved its place in synthesiser history.

When the Minimoog was released, it took the fantastic Moog Modular and turned it into something that comparatively did hardly anything at all, but that enabled the less technically minded to embrace synthesisers that had until then looked intimidating and scary. Similarly, I think Roland's groovebox concept will introduce more people to the craft of making electronic music, while those of us who remember the harder way of doing it or who wish our music to sound professional will

continue to decry its limited usefulness. I could be wrong, of course, and only time will tell if the world's first groovebox truly deserves, or gets, such recognition.

## References

- [Roland UK: MC-303 Manual](#)
- [Wikipedia: Roland MC-303](#)
- [Sound on Sound: Hip Replacement](#)