

plugged in

By Jared Cobb



Tina "BEAN" Blaine

THE JAMMER BEHIND THE JAM-O-DRUM

Just when you think you've caught up to the limitless world of high-tech percussion, along comes Tina "Bean" Blaine to show you just how far it can go. Blaine is many things, including an ethnomusicologist and an engineer, and she's sparked a creative brushfire that's now burning through the interactive music scene.

She formed a creativity launch pad when she co-founded the electronic world percussion ensemble band D'CuCKOO. Their high-energy electronic jams brought audiences into the performance through self-made D'CuCKOO D'Vices like triggers on the edge of the stage, juiced up beach balls and virtual puppets.

She drew inspiration for her early electronic percussion instruments from musical experiences she encountered while traveling through Africa and Asia. "I was really impressed by the way they incorporate their community spirit into their music making," she says. "They have a

much more spontaneous approach to music than our Western culture. The way we look at music is really very stiff in a lot of ways, but they helped me see the celebratory nature of music and percussion. Upon my return, I wanted to combine those aspects with technology to create music and instruments that were very welcoming to people of all cultures."

From there Bean teamed up with the brains at Interval Research Corporation to conceptualize the ultimate electronic self-facilitated drum circle, the Jam-O-Drum. Now a permanent installation at the Experience Music Project in Seattle, the Jam-O-Drum hosts six to 12 players around a large amoebae-shaped table wired for visual and audio jamming.

"It's intended to be the exploration of a collaborative instrument for people to play in an ensemble setting without feeling intimidated," she explains. "It provides a vehicle for people to make music

together without having to be trained on specific instruments. As a percussionist and teacher, I think that whenever we can break down the many inhibitions that have been established with music making, we're taking a step in the right direction."

Electric MIDI drum pads embedded in the Jam-O-Drum's surface create the thunder while various interactive graphics provide the lightning. One particular graphics program — Bliss Paint — projects responsive psychedelic images that make the backdrop at an Allman Brothers concert look like a Lite Brite in a blender. The Jam-O-Drum also features Hexapong, a musical pong game in which each strike on the MIDI pad sends one of four virtual balls to the center of the table and back. Another program is designed as a call and response interaction, which initiates a follow-the-leader jam session. All of these sensations materialize on an instrument that is both welcoming to