



Roland TB-03 Bass Line

£349

The latest Roland classic to get the Boutique treatment is the TB-303. **Bruce Aisher** gets his Acid on with the all-digital TB-03

CONTACT WHO: Roland TEL: 01792 702701 WEB: www.roland.co.uk **KEY FEATURES** Digital recreation of the TB-303 Bass Line. Adds a four-digit LED display, overdrive and delay effects, fine tempo control, swing and additional step recording mode, CV/Gate outputs for controlling analogue gear, Dedicated trigger input to drive the internal sequencer, USB audio and MIDI input and output, Battery-operated or USB-powered, Built-in powered mini-speaker



THE PROS & CONS



Recreates the sonics, parameter editing and programming system of the original

Swing. It escapes the confines of 1/16ths and triplets with a fully variable swing parameter

All synth parameters and sequencer data is sent and received over MIDI and USB



No real-time recording mode

No way of automating synth parameters from the internal sequencer

Too many (hidden) multiple key-presses. A good reason to have added a larger menu-driven display?

Roland's latest Boutique box is a silver unit laden with the small knobs and miniature button keyboard recognisable to any Acid House aficionado – those of the TB-303 Bass Line. The new TB-03 is Roland's second shot at a 303-style box. The TB-3 Touch Bassline (part of the Aira range) revived the single oscillator synth plus sequencer combo idea, but with a very different approach to design and functionality. It drew criticism for

being too much of a departure, especially as the marketing hyped it as being a faithful recreation of the original – at least in sonic terms.

But what requirements does a true inheritor of the 303 crown have to fulfil? In terms of synthesis the original TB-303 is incredibly simple. It offers a single oscillator switchable between sawtooth and square waves. This is then routed through a 24dB/octave four-stage diode ladder filter – not an 18dB/octave filter as sometimes gets mentioned. The filter has controls for filter cutoff and



It offers the quirkiness of the 303's sequencer as well as a Step Recording Mode

resonance. The filter does not extend into the realms of self-oscillation, but does offer a very pronounced peak. This comes into its own when combined with the simple two-stage attack/decay envelope generator. In reality the attack is fixed, so only the decay gets its own knob. Pushing up the envelope mod and adjusting the decay time facilitates the classic 303 filter squelches. This isn't quite the full story, as the signal also passes through a VCA stage linked to the Accent control that raises the sound level when required. There's little else in terms of amplitude refinement – notes are generally on or off, so it is the filter that provides the main contouring here. That's not much for something that fetches over £2k secondhand – this could be one of the most expensive secondhand synths on a cost per knob basis.

However, this isn't the full story. The 303 also plays host to a pattern-based sequencer that controls the pitch of the internal synth. But, as well as automating note sequences, it also allows you to specify accents and pitch slides. The addition of these are where the recognisable sound of the 303 in full flow comes together.

The TB-03 takes the original 303 as its starting point and makes a few functional and sonic additions. One of the 'features' of the TB-03 was its quirky sequencer's programming system. This facilitated entering note pitches separately to note lengths and rests – a big contributor to the 'press some buttons and see what happens' approach to pattern creation. The new box offers this as well as a Step Recording Mode that allows you to enter notes, rests, accents and slides (tied notes) while stepping through

THE ALTERNATIVES



Roland TB-303 (used) £2,000+

When a real 303 is the only option. Very expensive, and often hard to find one without plenty of battle scars.

www.ebay.co.uk



AudioRealism Bass Line 3 – ABL3 £91

A plug-in recreation of the TB-303 for those happy with the convenience of software and who don't need direct hardware control.

www.audiorealism.se



Cyclone Analogic TT-303 Bass Bot MkII £389

Moving to a less copyright infringing design for the MkII, the TT-303 remains a great-sounding analogue alternative to the original.

www.cyclone-analogic.fr



SYNTH The sound of the internal synth engine is adjusted via only four controls. Despite being so minimal, this is where most of the action happens.

SEQUENCER The 303's sequencer was famed for its quirkiness. This is recreated in the TB-03, though a new Step Recording Mode makes things a little more straightforward.

AROUND BACK The original only had a DIN Sync input. The TB-03 loses this, though gains MIDI and USB comms to carry timing, note and control changes in and out.

ANALOGUE TRICKS Trigger In allows analogue clock pulses to control sequencer stepping and CV/Gate lets the internal sequencer engine play notes on external analogue gear.

each note in the sequence. The Value knob (linked to a stepped continuous encoder) allows you to move back and forwards in the sequence. However, despite maintaining the Tap Writing mode of the original (for entering real-time note timings) there is no real-time recording mode. Given that the TB-03 can be mounted in the Roland K-25m Keyboard Unit, or receive notes via MIDI, this seems a missed opportunity. Also, although it's understandable that the TB-03 stays close to the TB-303 interface, this means many of its convoluted key presses remain. Roland could have gone further with the display. Adding a menu button and a few others

combined with an alphanumeric display wouldn't have broken the bank. Digital devices are easily updated to add new features but with a fixed interface they have to resort to adding unlabelled key combinations.

In its latest iteration the Bass Line also adds built-in Overdrive and Delay/Reverb effects. While both are useful, it is the distortion element here (with three different selectable flavours) that is perhaps the most immediately alluring. There are countless classic 303 tracks where what you hear is a heavily driven version of the Bass Line sound, so having this directly to hand is a nice addition – even if some will prefer the

sound of their own specific nasty guitar pedal. The CV/Gate outputs from before are joined by a Trigger In that facilitates external analogue control over the sequencer (making it a nice pairing with TR-09's Trigger Output). Full size MIDI in/out as well as USB MIDI and audio in/out are also included. So if you find the internal sequencer frustrating you can control it directly from your DAW (or capture sequences for further arrangement). A further benefit of the external DAW approach is parameter automation, which is not supported by TB-03's internal pattern/track sequencer. Taking this into account begs the question as to why studio-bound musicians wouldn't just use a plug-in such as AudioRealism's Bass Line 3?

There are currently a number of alternatives to the TB-03, many of which employ 'real' analogue circuitry. If you must have analogue, then the TB-03 isn't for you. But for everyone else looking for that classic tone it is well worth checking out. **FM**

THE SOUND OF A 303

The TB-303's tone has been the subject of many forum rants and YouTube videos, and the belief that nothing matches the real thing has a bearing on the secondhand price. It could be the simplicity of design and limited range of tones that makes it so easy to focus on the subtleties, unlike, for instance, a vintage polysynth. In both these cases though, the difference between apparently identical units should not be underestimated – and don't expect comparative tests of clones and digital models at similar parameter positions to deliver definitive results either. That is the nature of analogue. The TB-03 sounds very good. There are times when it lacks the original's magic but others where that bubbling liquid squelch or hollow tone gets exceptionally close.

FM VERDICT

7.8

Captures the essence of the original 303 and adds a twist. But Roland could have gone further in updating the sequencer and interface.