

# Akai MPC500

## A Production Standard Goes Compact

by Michael Dawson

If there's one piece of gear that's a near necessity in hip-hop beat production, it's an Akai MPC. This legendary sampling/sequencing machine (designed by electronics wizard Roger Linn) has been a studio staple since it was introduced in 1988. For a great example of just how far you can go with one of these machines, check out DJ Shadow's groundbreaking 1996 release *Endtroducing....* Shadow put this entire record together on Akai's first-generation machine—the MPC60.

Now after nearly twenty years as an industry standard in the studio, Akai has introduced their first portable production cen-

ter—the MPC500—which allows you to hone your beat-making skills while on the road. It also allows for easier application of the gig.

### What's It Do?

Think of the MPC like any other drum machine / sequencer. Tap on a button and the sound module triggers a sample. The record your ideas in real time or piece each phrase together step-by-step.

What distinguishes the MPC from a basic drum machine is its sampling capabilities. Other machines usually contain a finite

The four pad banks allow for each sequence to contain up to forty-eight tracks.

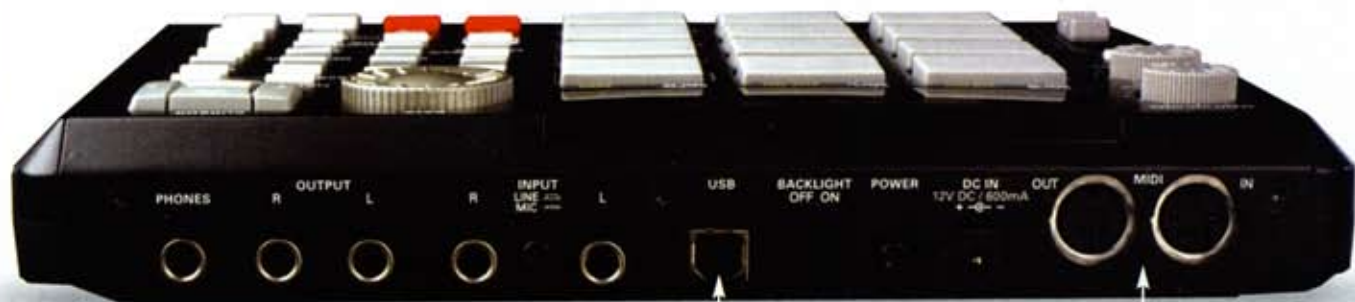


The slider can be used to make adjustments to the pitch or velocity of each track, or it can apply a sweeping low-pass filter.

The trigger pads provide an intuitive way to play samples, enter various edit modes, choose sequences, mute tracks, or select letters and numbers to name your work.

### VITAL STATS

**LIST PRICE:** \$1,099  
**SIZE:** 10 1/2" x 6 3/4" x 1 1/2"  
**FILE STORAGE:** 128-MB memory card  
**POWER SUPPLY:** six AA batteries (not included) or 12-volt DC adapter (included)  
**INPUT:** Two mono 1/4" jacks (can be switched between mic and line levels)  
**OUTPUT:** One 1/4" stereo headphone jack and two 1/4" mono outputs  
[www.akaipro.com](http://www.akaipro.com)



In order to record stereo samples, you need to split the output from your source sound into two 1/4" cables.

Use the USB input to transfer files to the MPC from your computer.

MIDI In/Out allows the MPC to be synced with other MIDI devices.

library of samples, but the MPC is designed so that you can create your own collection of sounds by sampling CDs, by recording directly into the internal memory with a microphone, or by uploading drum hits and loops (or whatever sounds you want) from a memory card or from your computer via a USB cable.

### The Learning Curve

If you've spent any time programming drum machines or working with samplers, you shouldn't have too much trouble figuring out how to operate the MPC500. But if sampling, programming, and sequencing are new concepts for you, it would be in your best interest to work *slowly* through the manual so that you don't overlook some essential topics. For the first-time user, it can be a bit overwhelming.

### Puttin' It To Use

The MPC500 comes preloaded with a few demo songs so that you can get a feel for how everything works. To listen to the demo, press the Play button. If you want to add your own part—like handclaps—find the pad that triggers that sample (Pad 8 of Bank A in the "Top Gun" demo), hold down the red Overdub button, and push Play-Start. Then tap on the pad to record your performance. When you're finished, press Stop and then press Play-Start to listen back. If you don't like what you hear, press Undo and try again.

As for recording samples onto the MPC500, first connect your sound source (CD player, turntable, iPod, or microphone) to the 1/4" inputs on the back of the machine. Then press the Mode button and Pad 4 to activate the sampler. From there, play your source and adjust the Record Gain knob until the input reaches a useable level. Then stop your source, press the Do It button, and restart. The sampler begins

recording as soon as it receives a signal. When you're finished recording, press the Do It button again to stop the sampler. (You can record up to 41 seconds of a stereo sample or 1 minute and 22 seconds of a mono sound.) From there, assign the sample to one of the pads by either pressing the pad you want to use or by scrolling with the data wheel to the desired pad number.

In a perfect world, that's all you'd need to do to have your samples ready to go. But chances are the start and stop points aren't going to be perfect, so you have to go into Trim mode to clean up the beginning and ending of the sample. This is where I found the MPC500 to be a little difficult to work with. In the MPC, the start and end points of samples are represented by numbers. To adjust the beginning of the sample to a later time, you have to make the start number larger. To make the end of the sample occur earlier, the end point needs to be smaller.

The problem with this approach to editing is that it's educated guesswork: There's no way to know *exactly* where to place the start and stop points to have a perfectly trimmed sample. If you have experience editing audio waveforms in computer software, you'll probably find this process on the MPC500 a little frustrating. Fortunately, Akai has included a USB hook-up, which allows you to transfer files onto the sampler after you've trimmed them in Pro Tools or other programs.

### Additional Features

Once you've recorded and trimmed your samples, and assigned them to different pads, you're well on your way to building beats. From there, you should save your samples to a new program so that you don't lose your work. Then you can start recording your ideas onto

the MPC's internal sequencer.

As you're building sequences, you'll want to take advantage of some additional features within the MPC500, like Timing Correct. With this option, you can choose the smallest subdivision you want to use. Then the MPC adjusts your performance so that it lines up with the closest note within that subdivision. You can also impose a swing feel so that any offbeat rhythms are delayed between 50 and 75%.

Other features worth mentioning include the Full Level mode (which sets the dynamics of your performance to full volume), 12 Levels (which assigns one sample to all twelve pads, each at different dynamic levels), and Track Mute (which allows you to silence certain pad hits during playback). You can also assign the Q-Link slider to apply a sweeping low-pass filter to a track, or you can use it to raise/lower the sample's pitch or volume.

There are also several on-board effects that you can apply to your samples, like Bit Grunger (distortion), compression, and reverb. You can apply up to two effects to each sample and one master effect to your entire project.

### What's In It For You?

As a drummer in the 21st century, it's very likely that at some point in your career you'll be asked to program a drum loop for an upcoming studio date or a live show. For that reason, it would be a good idea to get some experience with the concepts of sampling, looping, and sequencing, as well as with the most common tools that accomplish these tasks. Since the new MPC500 is much more compact and affordable than other machines in Akai's catalog, this could be a good place to start.

