

# Access Virus KB

The virus is now even more virulent. Christopher Holder gets the bug.

The Access Virus was a real revelation when it busted onto the scene a few years ago. A company really only known for making tactile controllers to program the likes of the Oberheim Matrix 1000, no one saw the Virus coming, and its proliferation worldwide could poetically be called an epidemic. The code has been made available as a TDM plug-in and the hardware version has undergone a series of software updates. These updates have been considerably more than bug fixes, there's been key features added in the operation and effects aspects of the synth – the most notable is a

vocoder would be buried deep inside some FX submenu – after all I've got access to a couple of vocoders in my studio as it is – somewhere inside my Boss SE70 and somewhere inside my Korg Wavestation – and I can rarely be bothered to use either of them. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the Virus does something a little more clever. When you engage the vocoder it commandeers the controls of the VCF section, all there's to do in software is nominate the source of the carrier and the modulator signals. Meanwhile via hardware control you can adjust the band quality (one to 32 bands used



sophisticated 32-band vocoder.

It was great to get my hands back on the Virus for a few weeks. The original Virus has been given a hardware upgrade to the Virus B (or KB if you've got a new keyboard version). I was particularly pleased to be passed the keyboard for this review. It's a very desirable piece of kit. For starters it's built like a Panzer tank (this is a German company after all), weighing in at over 15kg with a chunky steel shell. The wooden end cheeks give the Virus a pleasantly retro feel, and all the pots and buttons look built to last. I'd have no qualms in packing this baby off for a road trip, it looks nigh bullet proof.

The Virus from first glance looks like child's play to operate and program. It's fundamentally a three oscillator synth with a low frequency oscillator to add low end body, there's two assignable LFOs for modulation (with a versatile and extensive modulation matrix), VCF section with two filters, and a VCA section. Simple enough, but there's a good deal of sophistication in amongst a tried and true formula.

What's more important here is the new features, and for my money, the headliner is the vocoder. When I read about this feature I remained circumspect in my expectations. I thought that being added in software, the

by the vocoder); various band pass filter parameters that can be applied to the carrier and modulator (adjust cut-off, Q factor, and the spread of the bell curve); attack and decay of the vocoder's envelope follower; and more. In all, you have an intuitive hands-on approach to tailoring the sound you're after, just like a dedicated hardware vocoder. I was able to obtain some very pleasing results. The Virus allows you to set up the vocoder in a variety of ways making the internal voice as the carrier or an external input as the carrier, or indeed, you can nominate two external sources as the carrier and modulator and use the Virus as a standalone vocoder. I'd hazard a guess that the bulk of use will come from routing a vocal source to the Virus which would modulate an on-board synth patch. I have to admit that this was one of the first things I did: grab a mic, patch a send from my console to the external input of the Virus, call up a suitable preset and talk trash. Using the OscHold function you can hit a note or chord on the keyboard talk away and tweak the controls until get an appropriate outcome. Certain presets are more conducive to vocoding than others but regardless of your choices you'll always come up with something interesting. Being able to route the results to the effects

section and the LFO section allows you to modulate the Q factor of the band pass filter as well as the cut-off frequencies. There's considerable scope on offer.

There's a few things that might have been useful. New Virus B models would have benefited from having the VCF controls being labelled in some way to signify their dual purpose in vocoder mode – you don't necessarily want to tweak a pot just so you can read on the LCD what parameter you're adjusting. Also it would be useful to have a separate mic input, preferably on an XLR connection, with an internal preamp. If the Virus' vocoder is

### **Some of Virus B v3.0's new features**

24 voices.

82 simultaneous effects: five individual effects in 16 Multiparts, 32-band vocoder, stereo delay.

Retro Phaser: 6-stage stereo phaser with 24 filter poles.

Distortion: with different distortion types like saturation, bit reduction and sampling rate infinitely variable.

Analogue Boost: creates the typical bass boost found in analogue synths.

Chorus/Flanger: fully stereo, available for all 16 Multiparts.

Ring Modulator: ring modulates the Virus with an external audio signal.

FM of the oscillators with external input signals or noise.

Futhermore, the upcoming v4.0 update promises reverb, arpeggiator patterns, groove delay, and an intelligent random patch generator among other things.

going to be used in a live context this would save considerable hassle. Also one caveat: be aware that software vocoders are notoriously DSP hungry and this one is no different. You'll find that your polyphony can be as much as halved depending on the vocoder's band quality. Also, as you'd expect, you can only use the vocoder once, i.e. you can't slap a vocoder on all 16 parts in Multi mode.

The Virus is a proven success. It's a true heavyweight when it comes to analogue emulations and the user interface is fool proof. I'm impressed by Access as a company. They seem to be on the ball with their frequent, innovative (and free) software updates, just take a look in the 'New Features' box if you need convincing. Whether you go for the Virus in preference to competition from Clavia, Novation, Korg et al, is inevitably down to taste, but the Virus B's vocoder and other new DSP features will certainly serve to sway many of those who remain uncertain.



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### **Price**

• \$4195, Virus KB; \$3395, Virus B (rackmount)

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