BandM8 Blog: Vernon Reid on Why Music Technology Should Empower Musicians, Not Replace Them

BandM8 advisor, member of the Iconic, GRAMMY Award-winning and Living Colour, guitarist, songwriter, and artist Vernon Reid joins BandM8 CEO and co-founder Bob Pfeifer to discuss creative ownership, the joy of musicianship, and why technology should help people make music—not make it for them.

What happens when music technology starts with the musician rather than a prompt? For guitarist Vernon Reid and BandM8 co-founder Bob Pfeifer, the answer has as much to do with creative ownership and the satisfaction of playing as it does with software. Their conversation explores why the process of making music still matters.

Bob Pfeifer: When we started building BandM8, we talked about who we wanted involved as advisors. Your name came up almost immediately. You've always pushed the boundaries of sound and creativity, and you've been thoughtful about what technology means for artists. We wanted that perspective in the room from the beginning.

Vernon Reid: Creators are concerned about AI tools being trained on copyrighted material without the creator's permission. Where BandM8 is different is that it reacts to what a player puts into it. That's a fundamental difference. And BandM8 doesn't claim ownership of what somebody creates with it.

Bob Pfeifer: And ownership matters on more than one level. It's not just about the rights to a song; it's about having control over the creative decisions that make it yours. The riff, the

harmony, the direction you take an idea—that should come from the musician. We wanted to build something that helps you explore those ideas, not something that makes the decisions for you.

Vernon Reid: You can't prefab somebody an identity. You find out who you are through what you have to go through, through building calluses. We have to remain human. I think about Stevie Wonder and all the wonderful things he did with analog synthesis back in the '70s. How do we engage with electronics to make human music? That's the thing about BandM8. It's a way to think about engaging with electronics to ultimately make human music.

Bob Pfeifer: That thinking is a big part of why we chose MIDI. We didn't want to build something that depends on taking other people's music. And MIDI gives us the ability to respond to what someone is playing in close to real time. Both of those things were important to us.

Vernon Reid: Being MIDI-based rather than audio-based is great in two ways. It uses a lot less compute; it can run on a CPU, not a GPU. And you can take the MIDI files and use them with Kontakt, inside Ableton, or with another DAW. There's a world of sounds and samplers you can use.

BandM8 is input-dependent. You have to put something into it to get something out of it. It empowers creators and instrumentalists to see what happens—and you can use what happens or not. That's a crucial difference from pushing a button or writing a prompt. It actually works on what you do with it.

Bob Pfeifer: Exactly. I want this to be useful to people who actually want to play and make music. The point isn't to take the musician out of the process.

Vernon Reid: You want to develop something that actually helps, as opposed to something that corrodes the music-making experience. You can use a tool to build, or you can weaponize a tool. The only reason I joined the board is to make sure musicians are supported and protected—not replaced or threatened. I wouldn't be involved if it was going to hurt creators or be unethical.

And if you're working in a group context, you can pass the files around. It's not just about making music in isolation. Maybe you come up with something inspiring, share it with somebody else, and see what they do with it. People's feedback is going to change what BandM8 is. It could be a social tool, too—pass the BandM8 bits around.

Music and technology have always been intertwined. Think about the composer Conlon Nancarrow, who used piano rolls to make player pianos do things they weren't intended to do. It's about creating that unintended moment. People take tools and do things with them that we literally can't imagine. They build something else. That's the beauty of it.

Bob Pfeifer: I've actually written more songs while developing BandM8 than I did during all those years since I was in a band. And I'm not a great player. But I can sit in my room, put an idea into it, and hear something back—a beat, a bass line, maybe a piano part. That gives

me somewhere to go next. I can keep working on the song instead of waiting until I have a whole band in the room.

Vernon Reid: Part of the issue with a lot of AI is that it creates a “why bother?” effect. If AI can beat a human at chess, why bother learning? Well, chess engages your mind. It’s not about whether a machine can beat the best chess player; it’s what chess does for you. It’s what playing guitar does. There’s something about the feeling of accomplishment the first time you can hold down a G chord, go from C to G to D, and have the tones come out clearly. That’s accomplishment, and you can’t take that away.