The Software Story: Band-in-a-Box

By Norm Weinberg

*[Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of articles covering computer software. In the coming issues of **Percussive Notes**, this column will focus on computer programs of interest to percussionists. We plan to cover a wide variety of software on all of the major computer platforms (Macintosh, IBM and clones, Atari, and Amiga). If you know of software that would be of interest to our membership, please contact **Percussive Notes**.]*

There is no doubt that the drumset is an instrument that is most often played in an ensemble setting. This fact often presents beginning drummers and keyboard percussionists with a "Catch 22" situation: You can't gain experience without playing with other musicians and you can't play with other musicians without experience. Imagine a group of musicians who would rehearse with you whenever you wanted, wouldn't tire of playing the same songs over and over, could play at any tempo you wanted, could learn new tunes in a matter of minutes, and never have any ego problems? Wouldn't this be an ideal musical situation for gaining experience? Band-in-a-Box to the rescue!

In a nutshell, Band-in-a-Box is a program that reads the chord changes to songs and automatically generates instrumental accompaniments for piano, bass, drums, guitar, and strings. Each of the generated parts depends not only on the chord progression, but also on the particular musical style selected. For example, the piano part (both the selection of notes and the rhythmic material) will be different in the "Reggae 2" style (triplet feel reggae) or the "OldMotwn" style—even if reading the exact same chord progression. In addition, since Band-in-a-Box is a type of algorithmic composition program, each performance in the same style sounds slightly different.

So, how can you use Band-in-a-Box as a tool for your teaching or playing? One of the most important features of this program is the ability to turn off (or mute) any of the instruments in the ensemble. By muting individual instruments, you can create the musical ensemble of your choice. Want to do some jamming on the drum set? Simply mute the drums and play along with all the other instruments. Want to work on your vibraphone improvisation? You can

Figure 1

play along with the entire ensemble or mute the piano part to practice comping the changes.

Using Band-in-a-Box is quite simple, even for the computer novice. All it takes is a computer (Macintosh, IBM running either DOS or Windows, or Atari), a MIDI interface, and a multi-timbral sound generator. Once the program is launched, you can select one of the many songs in the "fakebook" or type in your own chord progressions. Press the "Play" button, and away it goes.

As shown in Figure 1, the main portion of the screen is the chord display window. An information bar above the chord window displays the name of the tune, the current style, the key, the tempo, and the length of a chorus. Be-

low the chord window is a panel containing buttons for the most often-used features. Notice that you can print the chord chart, adjust the MIDI setup, edit the song, and even save the perfor-

mance that Band-in-a-Box generates as a Standard MIDI File. This last feature is perfect if you compose, as the program will quickly create a musical performance that can be further edited in any sequencing or notation program that can read Standard MIDI Files.
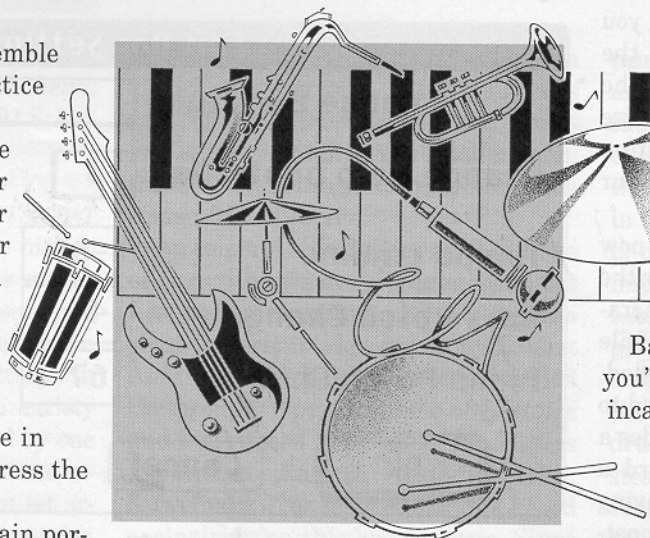
Band-in-a-Box is now in Version 5. If you've seen this program in an earlier incarnation, several new features have been added that make the program easier to use. Adjusting the MIDI settings is now extremely simple, and you can have Band-in-a-Box control such features as overall volume, reverb amount, chorus, and pan position (see Figure 2). You can edit the music at any bar by using the "Edit" button in the main window. After pressing this

Figure 2

	CHANNEL	OCTAVE	PATCH	VOLUME	REVERB	CHORUS	PAN
Bass	2	-1	33	90	40	0	0
Piano	3	0	1	90	40	0	0
Drums	10	0	1	90	40	0	0
Guitar	7	0	25	90	40	0	0
Horns	8	0	63	90	40	0	0
Strings	6	0	49	90	40	0	0
Melody	4	0	25	90	40	0	0
Thru	5	0	25	90	40	0	0

Midi Settings

Midi Port
◉ Modem
○ Printer

1.0 Mhz

☐ Display Thru
☐ MIDI (sync)
☒ Allow Patch Changes
☒ Style GS Patch Changes

☒ Overall Volume Change
☒ Style Volume Changes
☒ All notes off delay

Concert Pitch
Adjust : 0

View GS Map   Ok   Cancel

button, you're taken to the edit screen (see Figure 3). While at this screen, you can change the performance style, the time signature, the tempo, and the patches for the piano and/or bass. Notice in the figure, that there is also a button for setting the tempo to the speed of your mouse clicks—a handy feature.

Special Features—Band-in-a-Box now comes with several MIDI set-ups for the most popular synths and sound generators (see the menus in Figure 4). While several default settings are included, they can easily be edited or adjusted to fit your studio. Version 5 now includes a built-in sequencer. You can record a melody for the tune, or if you're playing an electronic drum set or a MIDI compatible mallet controller (like the KAT or the Silicon Mallet), you can record your performance.

Another new feature can be seen after you press the play button. As shown in Figure 5, the on-screen display during playback offers several real-time controls, including muting instruments and changing synth settings. In addition to the keyboard display that shows the piano and bass parts, there is a new display that highlights the melody's notes.

Band-in-a-Box comes with a large variety of musical styles. In fact, there are one-hundred styles included with the complete package. Styles include everything from jazz, country, rock, pop, funk, disco, and heavy metal; to African, Irish, and Mexican. Each style is useful and unique, but if you can't find a style that you need, you can create your own. Band-in-a-Box comes with StyleMaker™, a part of the program that let's you create brand new five-instrument styles or edit the existing styles. The manual contains a clear description of each feature in StyleMaker™, and a nice tutorial. Creating a new style that sounds good is not an easy task, yet it it not so difficult that it can't be mastered with some intelligent practice.

Overall, this program is not only great fun, but one of the best educational tools you can have in your studio. You can purchase the Professional Edition package (program, and seventy-five styles) for
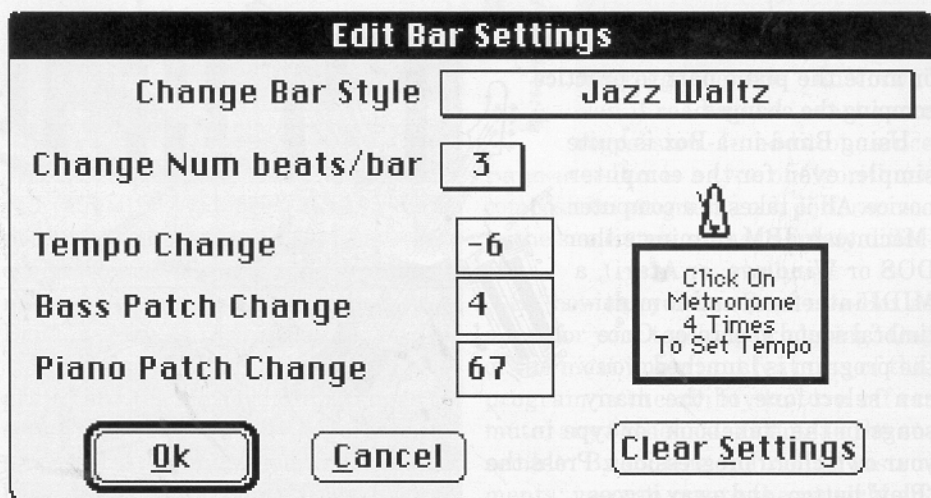
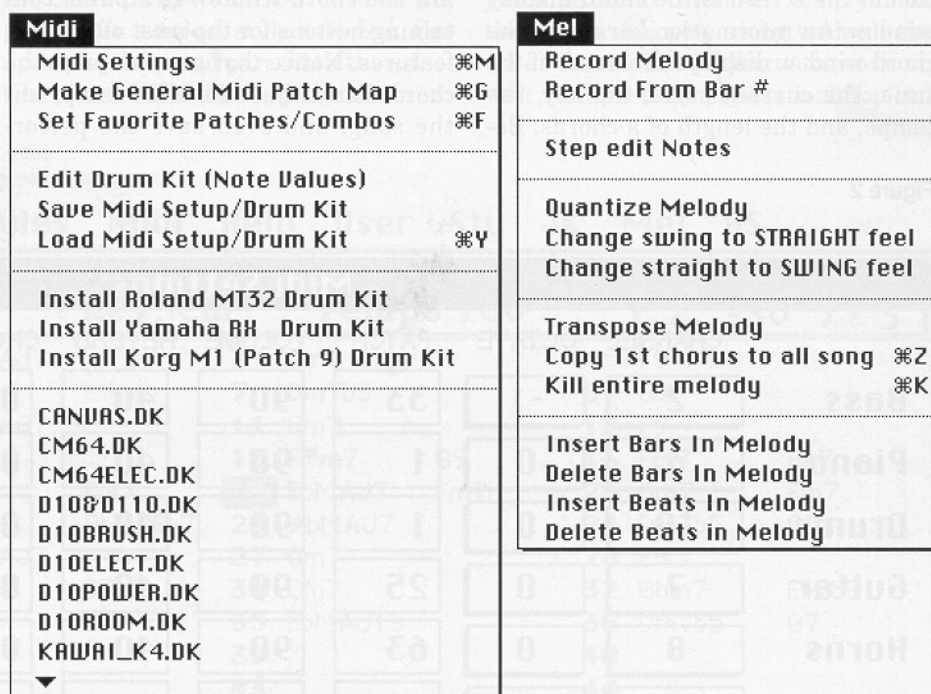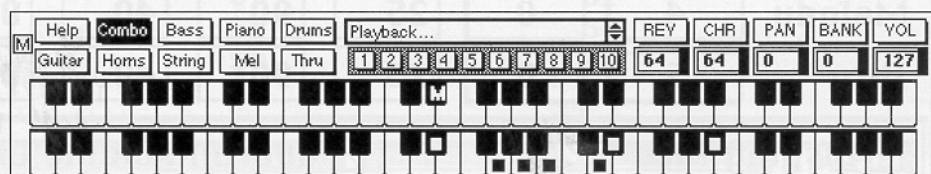**Figure 3**

Figure 4

Figure 5

less than $90.00, or the Standard Edition with twenty-four styles for only $59.00. With such powerful features and reasonable prices, Band-in-a-Box is sure to become one of your favorite programs.

For more information:
PG Music Inc.
266 Elmwood Avenue, Unit 11
Buffalo, NY 14222
800-268-6272

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