

Hands On with Band in a Box 2014

Over the last few days I've been playing with the latest version of Band in a Box (BiaB) which is *2014 for Mac*. It's probably the most significant upgrade for many years and I'll go through that in a minute. Firstly, for people new to BiaB, the program is of ancient origin (originally on an Atari computer) but has refined itself over the years to become one of the most useful pieces of music software for teachers, students and practitioners. The core of the programme is a music creation function. I simply type in a series of chords using standard chord symbols such as D, G, A7 or even up to stuff like F#m13, select a style from a huge range of possibilities and then BiaB generates a complete song arrangement with piano/organ, bass, drums, guitar and strings/horns. These were originally created from set patterns using the Mac's internal MIDI sound bank but in recent years Real Tracks have been added using live performances in a variety of styles by leading musicians. BiaB ingeniously manages to rearrange these recordings to fit my own chord patterns. This feature has added an amazing reality to my backing tracks and I can even change the tempo of the song without compromising the quality. In recent years MIDI SuperTracks have also been added to the BiaB feature set. These are actual MIDI recordings by professional musicians and being MIDI means I can change the instruments if I want to. They sound more natural than the auto-generated arrangements, although even these have progressed over the years from obviously robotic in the early years to surprisingly realistic.

But that's just the basics. BiaB has so many other features of great use to people with all levels of musical interest and ability that if I covered them all the AMW server would probably crash! So, may I politely suggest a visit to the [PG Music web page](#) where a series of videos will fill in the gaps and detail the 50+ new features in this upgrade.

This relentless addition of new features has probably driven the complete redesign of the interface which is the killer feature of this upgrade. Whereas the toolbars formerly seemed to be a bewildering array of unrelated functions, the new look now sensibly groups tools according to their use. A new font adds to the spacious look and feel. And it all works. The new interface certainly removes the clutter which has been my only serious reservation about BiaB. It's so much easier to find your way around. It still doesn't really have an authentic Mac look but the abundance of really smart features easily offsets that.

It's now a whole lot easier to select and preview a style. This is important because with so many to choose from it was quite easy to get lost in the maze. An on-screen mixer now gives me access to each track with mute/solo, volume, pan, tone and reverb functions. Very handy to do a quick mix. A keyboard view shows me the notes as they play and I have access to the patches for each track.

This upgrade adds an extra 101 Real Tracks, 54 MIDI Super Tracks and 36 Artist Performance Tracks. These latter feature country guitar hero Brent Mason and bluegrass virtuoso Andy Leftwich on mandolin and fiddle and are a great way to study the pros at work by following the on-screen guitar display and the actual notes as they play.

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The new Real Tracks also feature leading musicians on drums, bass, piano, sax and guitar. And there's a wide variety - Jazz, Bossa Nova, Folk, Swing, Boogie, Celtic and much more.

If I'm still not satisfied the new User Tracks feature lets me record my own track which I can then use just like a Real Track. That might be handy in future, after I've worked my way through what the pros have to offer.

For many years Band-in-a-Box has been my indispensable musical companion, whether I'm knocking up backing tracks for my solo gigs, creating professional-sounding background music for my documentaries, or just having fun. The 2014 makeover absolutely ticks every box and brings the abundant feature set under control. If making music brings joy to your life Band-in-a-Box will make you even happier. Check out the various purchase options [here](#).