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Band in a Box is a versatile program for professionals and amateurs

COMPUSCHMOOZE

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When I was a kid, the year my parents celebrated their 25th anniversary, my dad bought my mother a fancy two-keyboard Lowrey organ. My mom had begun playing a small chord-button organ when I was really little, after my grandfather sent it from the music store, horrified that my parents had not insisted I take up a musical instrument. (I later took up the guitar.)

When they bought the Lowrey organ, the salesman cleverly upsold them on an add-on device called the AceTone Rhythm Ace. (You can see a picture of it here: **http://bit.ly/RhythmAce**.)

It's a VCR-sized box that you plug into the amplifier and speakers of the organ and it produces a startlingly realistic drum track in a range of styles and tempos. For years, members of the American Federation of Musicians were discouraged from using these "electronic sidemen" in their performances because it took work away from real percussionists. Broadway shows still labor under limitations on the use of synthetic performers.

But not independent artists, who now have an amazing teaching, practicing, composing, and yes, performing tool, called "Band in a Box."

Band in a Box, a product of PG Music (pgmusic.com), takes the electronic rhythm machine to a new level by creating tracks of backing musicians for songs in virtually any genre, and it's as easy as just entering the chords from the sheet music to your favorite song, and then selecting the style of accompaniment you want.

Band in a Box comes on an external hard drive that you connect to your computer via USB port. After a quick setup, you run the software from the hard drive, and you save your song

compositions to the drive as well, so you can move it between desktop and laptop computer easily, and take your music with you.

Once you've entered your chords, Band in a Box generates a unique set of backing musicians playing all sorts of instruments simulated by a sophisticated combination of actual recordings, MIDI electronic synthesized music, and drum loops.

I tried it out on several of the songs I use when I lead Shabbat services at Lions Gate (when Rabbi Eron is away), like the Jeff Klepper version of "Mah Tovu," and Julie Silver's "Shiru L'adonai," and the program made it sound like I brought a band with me.

For professional musicians, this can be a versatile program for live or recorded performance. You can export the music files to a recording program, convert them to MIDI files, and even print out "lead sheets" or chord charts, and even music scores that mimic the look of those unofficial "fake books" that musicians have traded for years.

Transposing the key of a song is as simple as telling Band in a Box how many intervals you want to move the key up or down. This came in handy for me as I was entering chords for a song, when I realized I had entered the actual chords instead of the "capoed" chords. Adjusting it using the transpose function was simple.

For composing music, a chord-builder tool provides access to a wide range of chord and harmonic theory options. The Drum Builder module provides complete control over the mix of percussion instruments used, and you can purchase add-on musical styles and instruments.

PGMusic offers a range of purchase options for the program, ranging from an entry level $129-version, up to a $669 Audiophile edition. The website clearly explains the feature differences between all the different levels, which are available either as downloads, loaded on USB flash drives, or on DVD. Higher-level versions are the ones delivered on an external hard drive.

There is also a reasonably discounted upgrade path.

For the music student, music educator, and for the passionate musician, this is definitely a program you'll want to carry instead of all those heavy fake books.

If you have a favorite music software program, drop me a note (or a few, for "good measure") at **steve@compuschmooze.com**. Follow me on Twitter as @PodcastSteve.

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