Band In a Box grew up and became very mature software, offering a whole new world of possibilities – and we all just missed the progress, thinking that it is still the old toy that we used to know.

by A. Arsov, March 2015
Our proofreader, Dave, an old and faithful user of Band in a Box, told me that this is probably one of the most underrated music programs in the music industry. That was actually the first thing he said to me when I announced that I’d be reviewing this software. Well, it turns out that he might have been right. Band in a Box 2015 is a very powerful and highly impressive tool with a zillion options and additions, but I can’t think of anyone I know who actually owns it. Except Dave.

I have a great number of friends, professional musicians, and we can talk for hours about various musical tools, but we’ve never ever discussed Band in a Box. It simply falls outside of our scope of interest. Some years ago I tried out an older version and I remember it as a fairly compelling and interesting program. But with that corny pure MIDI sound emulation of real instruments it seemed to me more like a toy than a proper production tool. I bet that when you mention it to most people they have the same recollection. But it looks as if things have dramatically changed over the decades.

2015

I don’t know when exactly they added those “Real tracks” integration, but with real instruments, professionally recorded in a big studio, and with even better musicians, renowned instrumentalists in their genre, this becomes a killer tool. Can you imagine a tool where you can simply type in your harmonies, define which well-known instrumentalist will play a particular part, and after choosing a style by simply pressing the “Generate” button you get your song baked and served to perfection?

It happens that when I tell people I’m a producer, an electro musician, they simply imagine that I sit in front of a computer telling the software what I want and the software just spits out the result. At least that’s what rock folk think about electro musicians. “Anyone can do that!” they cry. But here’s the thing: with Band in a Box 2015 realization of that fantasy comes very, very close.

How it works

In the main editing window, a kind of arrangement window where bars are sorted in a time-line, you can freely type names of chords, building your arrangement from bar to bar, adding as many chords as you like inside a bar or even just using one chord for several bars. You can even define where fills should go, and then, using the style picker, find the exact musical style you want. There is an endless number of styles (from 400 in the Pro edition to 2,300 in all other packs), not many electro ones, but otherwise almost every other style you can imagine, such as jazz, salsa, rock, pop, country, blues, reggae, Hip Hop, R&B, even some techno. In addition you get a ton of various sub-styles.
OK, so plenty for rock, jazz, country and similar “live” geeks and freaks, but is there much for electro, EDM, Dance musicians too? To tell the truth, even more than you think. Imagine that you set Band in a Box to the same tempo as your song, typing in the same chords as in your EDM electro song, then picking some crazy Real track style (like Bluegrass—you need to hear it to believe it. Total madness). All you need to do is export some of the tracks, like mandolin or double bass, or even some lead instrument, packing it like a sandwich in your DAW of choice (it could even be RealBand, a DAW that comes with Band in a Box) between your uber fancy four on the floor beats and your synths. Using that technique, you will become some kind of Avicii on steroids in an instant. And that’s only one of many ways to use and abuse this program. You can export MIDI files, or even some of those Real tracks. In fact, you can even record your own Real tracks. Just grab your favorite instrument, download a Real track template from the PG Music website, and record a basic progression in a few different keys (all information can be found inside the template), and your old bass / guitar / piano etc. will become a Real instrument ready to be used in your future arrangements—in all chord progressions and in all tempos. Pure magic. And musicians think that Live and Reason have the best time-stretching algorithms on the market.

A great number of additional free Real tracks can be found on the Band in a Box forum. Actually with some more advanced packs you also get a ton of Real tracks, professionally recorded by known professionals (from 101 up to an impressive 1,800). There are plenty of video clips on the PG Music website where you can listen to some of them. Using Real tracks or even using MIDI “super tracks”, as real tracks are not the only “real thing” in Band in a Box 2015 – those MIDI super tracks are actually MIDI tracks recorded by well known professionals. – It’s almost like hiring the world’s best musicians for just a few bucks to play in your song.

As we mentioned video clips, there are tons of tutorials divided into several basic categories, from those aimed at beginners to those for experienced users. Actually, I was up to speed with the whole program in a just few hours simply by watching the videos. At first, the main program interface can make you feel like you’re sitting in an aircraft cockpit, but actually things are arranged in a very logical order. What is even more impressive is that most of those controls are well-chosen and rather useful (not always the case with those cockpit-style interfaces).

What else

With Band in a Box 2015 you also get an integrated version of AmpliTube guitar amp and SampleTank sampler. SampleTank comes with a good number of high quality instruments, so MIDI clips don’t sound as lame as they use to
years ago. Of course, Band in a Box and RealBand both support VST instruments and effects, the only drawback being that you need to buy a VST bridge if you want to use 64-bit VSTs. (extra $10 USD on PG Music site)

We also mentioned RealBand, a program that comes with Band in a Box 2015. RealBand is actually a fully featured DAW, not exactly on a same level as Cubase or Live, but it allows you to record tracks, edit the arrangement and even make use of most of the features available in Band in a Box. So it’s an ideal tool for making part of your song by typing in chords, using the style maker along with some Real tracks, and adding your own parts after that. Definitely something you can afford alongside your almighty DAW from Steinberg or Ableton. Of course, there are still things that can be done with those high-profile DAWs that can’t be done with Band in a Box or RealBand, like intricate audio or MIDI editing, or mixing and mastering to the same degree. But we should be fair and admit that RealBand has a really nicely designed and fairly powerful mixer, so it’s not so far behind the competition. And secondly you can use all of your VST effects on any track or on the master output.

Did I mention that Band in a Box can extract chords from an audio file? Of course, there’s no such algorithm that can do it perfectly, especially if the song is a bit complicated, but with most simpler songs it comes pretty close. Actually, the whole package can also be a very useful learning and practice tool.

No more “more and more.”

I fear this could become a bit of a boring article if I were to go through all the features of Band in a Box, as it can so easily turn into a never-ending story. Like when you ask an elderly person the innocent question: “So, how are you?” and you get back a full and detailed medical report, covering all their symptoms, diagnoses and surgical procedures.

Well, I should mention there’s an option to export lyrics along with a melody line and send it to a site which has a certain agreement with PG Music. In a flash they’ll send you back a Vocaloid version of your lyrics. And this is just one of many additions—drag and drop for export or import, chord builder and so on. It is almost impossible to name all the things that Band in a Box offers.

So, is there anything that’s not so great about Band in a Box 2015? I didn’t find anything that could ruin my positive impression. The worst thing that you can say about it is that all songs sound like a typical American band. …So, this is the moment when the whole of America stands up and asks what the hell that’s supposed to mean. Here in Europe every band is trying to find its own sound, to sound unique. Meanwhile, at least in the opinion of many Europeans, most American bands have great instrumentalists, but somehow all the songs sound as if they’re emanating from the same source. A bit too “normal” for European tastes. Therefore you won’t find any weirdo indie styles in Band in a Box. On the other hand, almost everything that comes out of Band in a Box carries a high-quality, professional sound, almost identical to what you can hear on the radio—at least from the more “normal” radio stations. And having such an advantage for a pretty reasonable price is a blessing, even for atheists.

I really enjoyed discovering Band in a Box and hope I will find a bit more time in the near future to use even more of its features and implement it into my productions. Hell of a good job, PG Music.

There are several versions and packs of Band in a Box 2015, from Pro, that will set you back for only $129 USD, to the Audiophile edition, offering heaven on earth at $699 USD – and all things in between.
More info about the packs can be found at:

http://www.pgmusic.com/bbwin.packages.htm

and general info about Band in a Box 2015 at:

http://www.pgmusic.com/