



**Article: Ramblings of a NAMM Newbie
by Rick Paul - 19th January 2004 -**



I've been a musician all my life, a musical gear junkie (sometimes known as "gear slut" in crasser circles) at least part of that, and, most recently, a softsynth and plug-in junkie. However, until just now, I had never ventured to Gear Junkie Heaven (or perhaps Gear Junkie Hell when the craving for new stuff goes way beyond any possible budget to actually acquire it). That's right, believe it or not, Winter NAMM 2004 was my first ever [NAMM](#) show. I'm a NAMM newbie.

Sure, I've read all the NAMM reports from magazines like Keyboard and EQ, and imagined what it must be like to actually be there, checking out all the new and old gear and software, bumping into the famous and not-so-famous who were privileged to attend these shows. I've heard the stories about blaring music, all kinds of gimmicks to attract attention to booths selling every imaginable type of musical product, and so on. Still, nothing truly prepared me for actually being there.

For those who haven't been to the Anaheim Convention Center before, the best way I can describe it is to suggest that it reminds me of a 1960s version of futuristic



architecture -- not all that different from the space-oriented rides at Disneyland just a short hop down the road. The front of the Convention Center seemed remarkably vacant, considering the large tradeshow that was going to be starting shortly, but that's probably because all the people were either inside already or still on their way. There were already registration lines when I got inside, and the people were streaming in at a pretty good pace just a short while later.



I'd arrived a bit early to get a chance to meet fellow CakewalkNet editor Glen Heffner, and, after registering, we went back outside to chat and watch the people arriving. The sight of a marching band-like assembly, complete with uniform tops and instruments, inside the doors told Glen the show was about to begin. Glen, who is a NAMM show veteran, told me it is a tradition that a group of people gets together for a Bloody Mary breakfast each year, then marches down the aisles of NAMM to open the show. A short while later, inside the show, they did indeed march down the aisles to play "The Star-

Spangled Banner", and the show was off and running.

Glen and I had entered the show through the doors into Hall A, which tends to be where most of the newer technology vendors, especially those who specialize in software and production tools, congregate. That hall was big enough that it could have contained many whole tradeshows, but there were at least 5 other halls filled with exhibitors. After a short while, there were enough people walking down the aisles to make it pretty easy to literally bump into lots of people, famous or not.



I'm not very good at recognizing celebrities, so I'm confident I walked past several without recognizing them. I did, however recognize musician and television personality John Tesh at the Spectrasonics booth. Or I should say I noticed the name on his badge, and noted that it looked like him from the back as he moved on to his next destination. I might have followed him to try and get a photo, but there are anti-stalking laws, aren't there?

The real celebrities of the show, however -- no offense if you're reading this, John -- at least for gear and software junkies like me, were all the musical products, new and old, common and exotic. Even if you've faithfully read every music-oriented magazine that comes your way, paid regular visits to your local music products superstores, and devoured each catalog that comes your way, if you haven't been to NAMM, to quote the old Bachman Turner Overdrive song, "you ain't seen nothing yet!" The best comparison I can think of is that it was somewhat like going into a downtown shopping district filled with specialty stores, where each of the over 1,000 booths, some of which were actually big enough to be full-fledged stores, housed a boutique vendor, or in some cases more like a department store.



We're talking everything from the newest synths and software instruments to hand made African percussion, walls and walls full of guitars, pyramids of drums, racks and racks of sheet music and music books, enough brass and woodwind instruments to easily cover *The Music Man's* "Seventy-Six Trombones" and then some, and much more. The booths ranged from the most basic informational type to whole rooms with mood lighting that made me wonder if I'd just boarded the Starship Enterprise. Displays ranged from the functional to the appealing to the truly bizarre.



To say this felt like being a kid in a candy store, would be a major understatement. It was more like being a kid in the midst of a whole town full of candy factories. I could have easily spent a few days at NAMM, even if I'd only stayed in Hall A, concentrating on software and recording-oriented products. Unfortunately, I only had a few hours to spend there, so it was a bit of a tease, and a good dose of overwhelming at the same time.

To avoid just walking around gawking with jaw dropped for the entire few hours, I decided I'd take a little time to just take in the sights, just getting some idea of the scope of the show with an eye toward a return visit in the future, then pay short visits to several specific vendors I felt might be of particular interest to CakewalkNet readers, many (most?) of whom are users of Cakewalk products, especially SONAR and Project5.



What better place to start than with the Cakewalk booth itself? Not only did a stop there provide the opportunity to get a look at the latest updates to SONAR and Project5, but it also gave me the chance to meet some of the people behind the products, whom we've come to know to a degree from their presence in Cakewalk's on-line support forums, and who play such a crucial role in making sure Cakewalk's products meet users' (our) needs.

The newly announced and available SONAR 3.1 update, which is free to registered

SONAR 3.0 users, includes multiprocessor optimizations, support for any sample rates supported by your audio hardware, new high quality sample rate conversions, tempos up to 1000 bpm, and a variety of other user interface enhancements and bug fixes. My personal favorite enhancement is the extension of the "Fit to Window" commands to work with the bus pane if a bus was the most recently accessed object. Users of multiprocessor systems have been raving about the significant performance gains the optimizations in that area have provided.



A Project5 1.5 update was also announced, with availability planned for the end of January. Perhaps the most noteworthy enhancement is the addition of step sequencing to the P-SEQ piano roll pattern editor. It is like adding the functionality of SYNCHRON32 on steroids, and should be a big hit with composers and arrangers who want to deal with step entry of their patterns, but don't want an MFX plug-in on every track that needs this treatment. P-SEQ note entry is enhanced with new attributes including tie, legato, flam, and gate. Even

users who don't do any step entry, including users who mainly use Project5 as an enhanced synth rack within SONAR or other ReWire-compatible host applications, will appreciate Project5's new "Track Patches". These allow saving a track's instrument, effects chain, and plug-in settings in a single preset for later reloading in other projects. That one will be a real efficiency boon for those times when getting "that sound" isn't just about a softsynth, but also the complete chain of effects processing the softsynth's



output. A new Resource Browser takes the concept of the Pattern Bin and makes it more like SONAR's Loop Explorer for browsing Project5 patterns and .WAV files wherever they might be on the user's system. This includes the ability to preview resources synchronized with Project5's tempo, and to hear it played through the softsynth of your choice in the case of patterns. Finally, a Bypass Outputs capability allows selectively bypassing unused softsynth outputs to conserve CPU resources. This will be welcome to any users who use multi-timbral synths for only one or two sounds within a project and previously would have had the outputs from all the other outputs of the synth taking up processing power. Although the Project5 1.5 update provides significant new functionality, it will be free to registered Project5 users.



As if the updates for SONAR and Project weren't enough to keep the Cakewalk developers busy, the alliance between Cakewalk and Roland that was announced last summer has also borne its first new product-level fruit, but over on the Roland side of the NAMM show. Roland announced a VS8F Plug-in Effect Expansion Board for its V-Studio series of portable recorders, and Cakewalk will join Antares, IK Multimedia, Massenburg Labs, McDSP, Sound Toys, TC Electronics, and Universal Audio in providing plug-ins for the board. Specifically, Cakewalk's fx:verb reverb and SoundStage

acoustical space modeler plug-ins will be made available for use on V-Studio systems.

As my time at NAMM was limited, after visiting with Cakewalk and taking a general look around the show, I spent most of my time in what I might affectionately call "Software Alley". Packed way over in the corner of Hall A, just a few aisles away from Cakewalk's sizeable booth, were a number of relatively small booths belonging to a set of mostly small software vendors, many of whom are decidedly not yet household names, but who, collectively and individually, have some extremely promising products.

Glen's and my first stop in Software Alley was to visit FXpansion, whose new BFD acoustic drum studio Glen is in the final stages of reviewing for a near future CakewalkNet article. BFD is a software instrument that combines a high quality acoustic drum kit sample library, with detailed control over individual instrument recording parameters, as well as professional MIDI groove files. FXpansion also provided early information on SoL, a set of monophonic instruments and groove riffs, and Drum Nine, which will expand on the



concept initially introduced with FXpansion's successful DR-008 to allow integrating sampled and multisampled percussion, analog-modeling and digital synthesis, audio and MIDI loops, VST instruments, and VST and built-in effects into a single environment for building percussion tracks. Both SoL and Drum Nine are expected to be available in April.



My next stop was the Garritan Orchestral Libraries booth for a firsthand look at Garritan Personal Orchestra. I expect to be covering GPO in an in-depth product review in a future CakewalkNet article, but wanted to get an early look since I haven't yet received the software for the review. I don't want to steal too much thunder from my future review, but let's just say I was pretty impressed with what I saw and heard. The gist of the product is really trying to provide a general purpose orchestral softsynth "for the rest of us" (i.e. meaning people who can neither afford nor take the time to learn and

deal with one of those huge, orchestral sample libraries). Garritan's approach is to couple a Native Instruments KONTAKT player with sample libraries designed directly for the KONTAKT format, with strong optimizations to keep samples small, and thus able to work on modern DAW systems without huge RAM configurations, but also to creatively program the instruments for playability and realistic response. Additional varieties of each instrument are provided for ensemble creation to avoid the typical small instrument collection syndrome where, for example, you have a single, fixed size "string section" sound, or alternately try to build your own section out of multiple copies of the same solo instrument, resulting in unnatural sounding ensembles with phase artifacts and such. CakewalkNet readers may also be interested to know that Garritan was demonstrating GPO in SONAR.

France's Arturia was also present in Software Alley, showing their soon-to-be released Minimoog V softsynth, produced in partnership with Moog Music. Arturia has previously released other vintage clone softsynths, including their Moog Modular V, which emulates a modular Moog synthesizer, and which was also produced in partnership with Moog. Since the original Minimoog was one of the most popular classic synthesizers of all time, the Minimoog V looks to be another potential hit for Arturia. Arturia also introduced an update for their Storm virtual studio, which is now up to Version 3.0.

Also in Software Alley was Poland's PSP Audioware, touting three new plug-ins as well as an update to one of their classic plug-in suites. PSP EasyVerb provides 9 reverb algorithms, 7 of which model analog spaces and the other two which model reverb machines. PSP MasterQ is a high quality parametric equalizer that uses a new proprietary technique called FAT (Frequency Authentication Technique) to reduce phase errors and linear errors in the high frequency range and provide sonic results that approach that of an analog EQ. PSP Nitro is



a multimode filter plug-in. PSP's popular MixPack plug-ins are updated to Version 1.7, including higher sample rate support, higher precision computations, user interface enhancements and more. EasyVerb, MasterQ, and the MixPack updates are available now, with Nitro expected to be available later this month. Look for in-depth product reviews of EasyVerb, MasterQ, and the MixPack updates in CakewalkNet sometime in February. PSP also takes the prize for best tasting promotional item for their new take on PSP VintageWarmer. I just hope they were carding booth visitors!

Leaving Software Alley, another stop was to see Zero-G, located in the East West booth, who were demonstrating LEON and LOLA, the first commercial products to be available based on Yamaha's Vocaloid technology. We've seen all kinds of software-based synthesizers and keyboards before, even virtual guitar players, but now software is entering the realm of creating virtual vocalists. LOLA and LEON are aimed at providing virtual female and male soul singers, respectively, including the ability to sing actual lyrics, not just "oohs" and "ahs" or predefined words as most vocal samples to date have attempted. Of course, the big question with these products is just how human sounding a "virtual vocalist" can get. Unfortunately, the styling of the demos used at NAMM didn't provide much basis upon which to judge that, but perhaps there will be an opportunity to do a hands-on product review in the future.

I also stopped briefly at the booths of:

IK Multimedia: They announced a strategic relationship with sound developer Sonic Reality, including distribution of Sonic Reality sounds and a new Sonik Synth 2 plug-in synth workstation. Also featured was SampleTank 2, which will soon be featured in an in-depth CakewalkNet review by Glen Heffner.



Applied Acoustics Systems: They were touting Tassman 4, which adds an expanded synth and preset library, a performance mode, audio input processing, and more to their modular softsynth. See also Jeff Sorbo's recent review of their Lounge Lizard electric piano plug-in instrument.

Native Instruments: This time out NI wasn't introducing brand new software instruments, but was showing their entire line, and announced availability of their entire line on Mac OS X. See also my recent in-depth review of NI's Absynth 2.

Spectrasonics: They announced new S.A.G.E. (Spectrasonics Advanced Groove Engine) technology that takes them beyond sound development to software development, and previewed the Stylus RMX real-time groove module, an initial product to use the S.A.G.E. technology and slated for availability later in 2004.

Universal Audio: In addition to announcing that they have taken back distribution of their popular UAD-1 card and plug-ins, they announced a new UAD-1 Studio Pak that combines all the plug-ins released to date, including a new Fairchild 670 compressor plug-in, which was also announced at the show.

CamelAudio: Announced and demoed their Cameleon 5000 "additive morphing resynthesizer". The notion behind Cameleon 5000 is to analyze audio samples, then synthesize the sounds, with the advantages being a dramatic savings in space versus actual sampling and the ability to easily morph between different types of sounds to create hybrid sounds, including the ability to morph between two sounds in real time while playing the instrument.

The sampling above is obviously a very small subset of the overall announcements at Winter NAMM 2004, and fairly high-level overviews at that. Hopefully we at CakewalkNet will have the opportunity to bring you hands-on, in-depth reviews of more products from these and other companies in the not-too-distant future. In the interim, I can only confess to being hit with a renewed case of plug-in lust, and a resolve to return to NAMM in the future with much more time to spend, even at the personal risk of developing an even more acute case of plug-in lust than I have now.

**Rick Paul is a songwriter living in Southern California. You can contact him at <http://www.RickPaul.info>.*

