Crash test dummies

Well, it's one way to test the resilience of your PC — send it hurling out of the boot of your car. Steven Helstrip's Seagate drive survived to play another day. Plus, MIDI matters.

Christmas is coming. I know this because I couldn't get into my house the other week, as about 200 press releases had been deposited through my letter box, stopping me from opening the door. I eventually got in through a small window at the back.

Press releases don't usually make it to the top of my bedtime reading list. About this time of the year they get pretty close, though, mainly because manufacturers actually have something interesting to release in time for Santa's global visit.

You'll be relieved to hear that I'm not going to share every press release with you, just one that I'm sure will be of interest. It came from Turtle Beach — you know, the people who make sound cards, and whose press releases read something like: "Multisound Pinnacle, The Ultimate Pro Level Sound and Music Card". How many times have I heard that? In fact, it actually is, or should I say will be when it's released in October. I've been asking Creative Labs to make this card for the past two years, but it has been pipped at the post.

The Pinnacle is the first affordable card to offer an optional professional SP/DIF digital input and output, 20-bit digital audio processing resulting in a signal-to-noise ratio in excess of 96dB, room on-board for 48Mb of sampling RAM, a pretty hot wavetable synth from Kurtzweil providing 4Mb of high-quality samples, and individual effects for each channel. And that's just the start. It will work alongside the Tahiti to provide four individual audio ins and outs, and provides a WaveTable daughterboard connector for the now mandatory Yamaha DB50XG.

The Pinnacle, which is priced at £489,

Remixing is simple and fun with MixMan. Load the CD, hit a few keys on your keyboard, and that old tune will never sound the same again

or £599 with digital I/O, should set new standards for PC sound cards. One thing is certain: it will make hard disk recording on the PC a worthwhile venture.

Having a crashing time

On the subject of D2D, I can now wholeheartedly recommend Seagate drives to anyone thinking of buying a few gigabytes of space for recording audio to. This follows a recent incident I had the misfortune to be involved in. I won't go into the gory details, but my PC, which was in the boot of a Golf GTI, landed 20 yards away from the car minus its cover. On inspection, the hard drive had taken a serious battering and the PCB was on its last legs. I didn't fancy my chances when I finally reassembled the PC but, believe it or not, when I switched it on, I listened joyously to the whirring of the hard disk and nearly had kittens when I read "Starting Windows 95". The monitor survived the

crash too, although the keyboard was missing a few keys.

In the mix

Hiding beneath the mountain-sized pile of press releases that came into my possession recently was a CD-ROM from Time + Space, called MixMan. Remarkably, it wasn't a sampling CD, so I gave it a spin.

The idea of MixMan is to take a pre-written piece of music, in this case eight kicking dance tunes, and remix them just by hitting a few keys on the computer's keyboard. Each track can be broken down into key elements, chopped and changed around, and mixed in with other tracks' elements.

This is what interactive music is all about— you can have loads of fun with it. If you come up with a particularly stomping tune, you can run it off to cassette and annoy your neighbours while impressing your mates.

At £39.95 this is a "must have", considering the many hours of fun you'll have creating professional-sounding music.
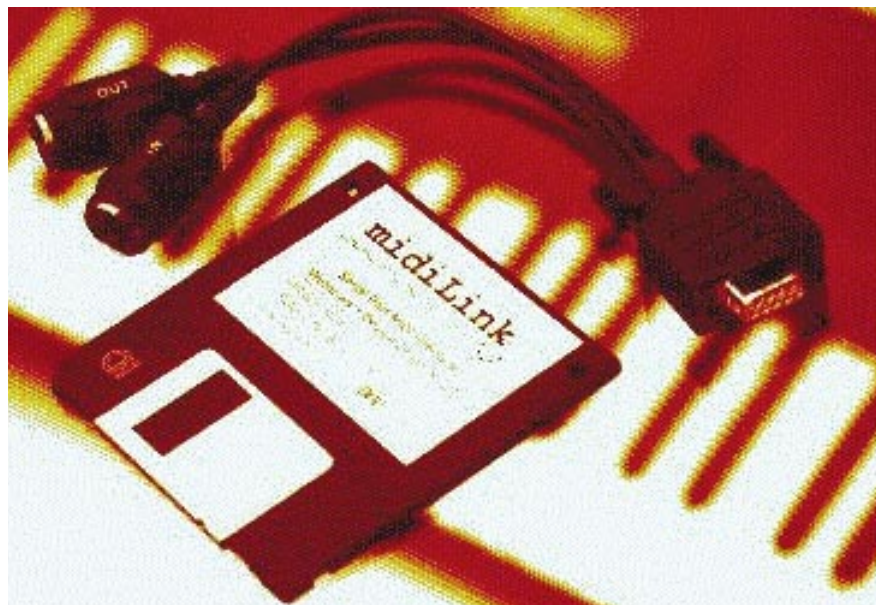
Desperately seeking more MIDI

Q. "After reading your excellent article in a recent issue of PCW, I am after information regarding adding additional MIDI ports to my PC. I am using an AWE-32 sound card as my MIDI port at the moment, and I'm using Cubase as my sequencer. The thing is, I desperately need another port. Can I just add a dedicated MIDI card? How much are they?"

andrew@wmedia.demon.co.uk

A. MIDI ports are akin to computer memory in that you never seem to have enough of the wretched things. If you need just one additional port, the cheapest solution is to buy an additional sound card. You might not need another FM synth, but it will provide you with another MIDI port and a second audio device, enabling you to play back several tracks of digital audio simultaneously. You can buy a basic SoundBlaster Pro card for around £30, or even cheaper secondhand.

So where's the catch? Unlike Macintosh systems, in a PC it can be tricky to get two sound cards to work together, especially if you have other cards installed. What is certain is that you'll have to configure IRQs and port addresses to ensure the new card doesn't conflict with other devices. This is not impossible to achieve, but it could cause a few headaches. If you have MSD installed on your system, this should give you some idea as to which IRQs and ports are not in use.

Alternatively, you could install a dedicated MIDI interface. These come in

More MIDI without tears: Et Cetera's MIDI Link

many shapes and sizes and provide between one and sixteen additional ports. One card I would heartily recommend is the MIDI Edge 1x4. For a shade under 130 notes you get one MIDI input, with four independent outs providing an extra 64 MIDI channels. A wavetable daughterboard connector lets you add Yamaha's excellent DB50XG card. Software supplied with the MIDI Edge enables two cards to be used simultaneously.

For £69, Et Cetera Distribution has a neat little gadget by the name of MIDI Link, a software-driven MIDI interface which addresses a cable that connects to the serial port. This is ideal for use with notebooks, and could save you a visit to a manicurist once you've broken all your nails trying to change jumper settings on sound cards.
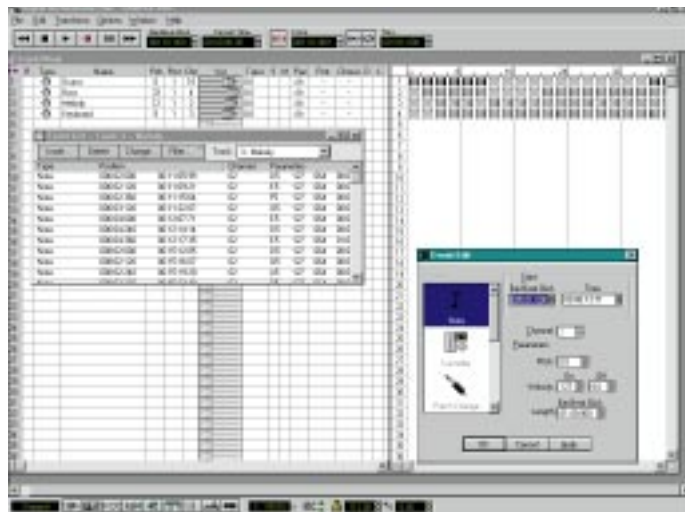
● *See page 307 for contact details.*

Home brew

Q. "I intend to set up a basic home recording studio. I own a MIDI keyboard (a Korg X3) and have a modest 486 PC with 8Mb of RAM installed, which is currently running Windows 3.11. The X3 has a built-in sequencer but I find it cumbersome to use, and restricting. How I can get a sequencer up and running on my PC? Do I need a sound card, and what sequencer would you recommend? I don't have loads of spare cash at the moment and would therefore appreciate a cost-effective solution."

martin@manic.co.uk

A. If you shop around, you'll find there are plenty of good deals out there that will get the X3 talking to a sequencer on your PC. To save you the hassle, I had a little shop around for you, and discovered some pretty amazing deals. First off, let's have a look at the options available.

The Korg X3 has a "host computer" interface on the rear panel that lets you connect it directly to the serial port of a PC or Mac. The cable can be obtained directly from Korg and costs just £8. In addition to this, you'll need software drivers, which will set you back a further £7.50. Together, these provide a two-way MIDI connection to your PC. Now to the sequencer. I have always recommended Steinberg's Cubase; the reason being that Cubase is intuitive and therefore easy to learn and quick in use. It's also the industry-standard package, so if you wind up in a studio some day, you can be sure they'll have the

Digital Orchestrator Plus is currently bundled with Yamaha's Sound Edge, an ideal software/sound card combination for low-cost home recording

Recipe for success: If you're bored with your sounds, jazz them up with LoveTone pedals

software you're used to working with.

The standard issue of Cubase 3.0 costs around £330. If that's too much to swallow in one go, it's worth considering Cubasis, which comes in at £129. It doesn't have all the features its older brother has, but it's a good place to start.

Another option is to buy a sound card and software bundle. The advantage here is that you'll have a device for playing digital audio and MIDI tracks simultaneously. The best deal I came across was from Turnkey, which is currently selling Yamaha's Sound Edge with a free copy of Digital Orchestrator Plus for only £79. This is a good deal because the full retail price of the Sound Edge is usually £149. And to buy Orchestrator Plus, you'd normally need to shell out another £99.

Love those sounds...

Q. "I have been writing dance and techno music as my main hobby for several years. The problem I have is finding quirky sounds that make my music different from everyone else's. I have a 24-channel mixing console, an Akai S3000 sampler and several sound modules. Are there any general tips you could let me and other readers know about, that could transform my sounds?"

A. The S3000, or any other sampler, is a fantastic creative tool and should be the place to start. There are several ways to source quirky sounds. Sampling CDs are fine, but you can be sure other people have access to the same sounds. I suggest you have a go at making your own.

When I'm looking for "off the wall" sounds, I start with a timbre near to what I expect the end result to be. Then the fun

starts. Say, for example, you're looking for a quirky sound that resembles waves crashing. Rather than just using a raw sample of waves crashing, try putting the sound through some effects boxes.

My favourite collection of effects come from LoveTone guitar pedals. Although they were designed to create those grungey, wah wah, and fat chorusey guitar sounds, they also work a treat when digital sounds are put through them. Because the pedals are designed for professional use and built with the best components, they rarely add any unwanted noise and have a great knack of making digital samples sound warm and almost analogue.

The Meatball and Big Cheese pedals (triggerable filter and fuzz box respectively) often find their way into my tracks. TB303 basslines sound fantastically rich, yet dirty when sent to the Big Cheese. Anything that goes through the Meatball more often than not turns to gold.

LoveTone pedals aren't cheap, but you do get more than what you pay for. The Meatball costs £199, the Big Cheese £129 (via mail order only).