

review: **No World Order**

by Ivan

Type: Interactive Music CD

Publisher: Electronic Arts/Todd Rundgren (800/513-7555)

Retail Price: \$39.95

Street Price: \$27.00

Requires: Macintosh 25mhz/030 or faster. System 7.0+, 4MB RAM, color or 256 grayscale or color monitor.

Protection: None

f all the interactive music CDs currently on the market, "No World Order" is by far the most revolutionary. Rather than a multimedia CD that presents samples of your favorite author's music along with an embarrassing fund of information about that author in some virtual setting, "No World Order" is actually an (almost) standard audio CD, containing all new music, and nothing but music, that lets you program how you'd like to listen to the music via a Mac interface. Not multimedia at all, but instead, a new way of listening to audio CDs. Yes, that's right - it's the very first Advanced Technology Audio CD, or as I like to call it, ATACD (pronounced attacked).

Snippetize It! The way it works is that the ten tracks of music on the CD have been broken into close to a thousand snippets (though you can listen to the whole CD, track by track, if you prefer), and each snippet categorized by a number of different criteria. When you create a playback program, you'll specify what you'd like to listen to and how, and the NWO application will pick out and play back snippets according to the criteria you've defined (HyperMusic?). Thinking about it now, I realize this description doesn't sound terribly enticing - it sounds like you'd wind up listening to a bunch of unrelated bits of sound, strung together, probably with gaps in between, but that's not the case. What you get is a (sort of) original musical composition that's based on all the music on the CD, a sort of Frankensong. Actually, it sounds a lot like the kind of dance mixes you hear at clubs, but if that's what you're into, then the NWO ATACD should make you very happy.

The first thing you'll see on the tour of the "No World Order" ATACD is a QuickTime movie, explaining some of the broader points of using the interface (ok, I lied - there is a something besides music). A pleasant spoken woman, who introduces herself as Kiki, takes you on a brief tour of the interface - but pay attention, because you'll need all she can tell you and

more! For what it's worth, Kiki's audio and video tracks are smooth and glitch-free, and both play well on a standard IICI. Once you're done with Kiki, it's on to the main application - with maybe a quick stop to check out the "Open Me!" document which contains a short list of keyboard commands you can use in the main program.

Interface. The application interface itself is a bit of a problem. For one thing, it's not Multifinder aware, a common personal gripe of mine. There's no standard pull-down menubar, and there's no getting back to the Finder without quitting. While I respect and appreciate the efforts of multimedia designers to create new and interesting interfaces, there's still such a thing as Apple's Human Interface Guidelines. But more importantly, the interface provided is almost completely non-intuitive. Could be I'm just especially thick, but I had to read and reread the printed instructions, and listen to the online audio instructions several times. Particularly vexing is the lack of any cursor, which I found obnoxious rather than revolutionary. Instead of showing you what you're pointing at via cursor movement, on-screen buttons light and dim as you drag the mouse around. Once I got adjusted to it though, it wasn't too difficult to use, but I still would have preferred to see my cursor. Once past that mini-hurdle, I tried experimenting with the various buttons, hoping to figure them out as I went along. Unfortunately, they made little sense. The buttons themselves are easy enough to use, but their functions are not readily apparent, and playing with them doesn't always give you any kind of immediate feedback. Here's where I had to resort to manual and online audio help.

asically, there's three areas of importance on the main screen (there's only one other screen, and it only covers quitting, and saving and restoring playback programs). They are "Flavors," the "Flavor Editor," and a set of standard CD controls - you know, Play, Rewind,

that sort of stuff. It's the Flavors and Flavor Editor (or Flavour Editor for you English folks) that cause all the trouble. Flavors is a list of criteria by which you can define what sort of music you'd like to hear and how you'd like to listen to it, and the Flavor Editor lets you further define those criteria. There are seven Flavors, but really, only four of them are of any importance.

"Program" lets you choose what snippet of music you'll start your program out with, from a list of five, performed by artists Todd Rundgren, Hal Willner, Bob Clearmountain, Jerry Harrison, and Don Was. But since this only effects the first 30 seconds or so of your playback program, it falls into the unimportant category.

"Direction" offers you the subchoices of "Forward," "Reverse," "Fast Forward," etc., and all it does is look at the snippets that are found by the important criteria, and determine in what order and how frequently they're played. Also unimportant.

"Form" offers you the subchoices of "Creative," "Standard" and "Conservative." I don't know specifically how these effect what music you wind up listening to, but just trust that the CD's designers categorized different snippets under each.

"Tempo," from slowest to fastest, will look only for snippets that fall within the range of tempo you've selected.

"Mood" offers subchoices of "Bright," "Happy," "Thoughtful," "Sad" and "Dark." Again, I'm not sure how the designers categorized the snippets, and there does seem to be some cross-over, but choosing any one of these definitely effects the music you end up hearing.

"Mix" offers subchoices of "Karaoke", "Thick", "Natural," "Spacious" and "Sparse." As with Mood and Form, I'm not entirely sure how these effect playback, except that selecting Karaoke will get you only those snippets containing no vocals.

"Video" fills the screen with the image of your choice during real-time editing, letting you choose between the editor screen, the title screen, a black screen, and a couple of AfterDark-like special effects screens. This one's really pretty useless.

Fortunately, you're not forced to choose individual options within the subcategories of the Flavor Editor, because as I quickly learned, the narrower the criteria you define, the fewer snippets will fall under those definitions - therefore, you'll wind up listening to the same few snippets over and over again, because the music never stops until you tell it to. To choose among multiple criteria, you adjust "slack" among the sub choices of the Flavor Editor, which consist of a bright orange bar that can be narrowed broadened to include only one individual criterion, all available criterion, or any number in between.

Once you've created a playback program you like, you have the option of saving it on a separate Quit/Save/Restore screen. You can save up to 5 playback programs.

I'd also like to say a word about the online audio help which, despite the difficulty with the interface, I did find quite pleasant and useful to use. Clicking on any of several question mark icons placed strategically around the screen invokes another pleasant voiced woman (not Kiki - I listened to be sure), who announces that "This is the interactive music help system." Backed by friendly new age music, the help lady explains in a calm, soothing voice, the part of the interface corresponding to the particular help icon you've pressed, and individual buttons light up as she explains them. The quality of the voice recording is crystal clear, and there's never any problem with not understanding what's being said.

Hopefully, someday, standard Mac speech synthesis will reach this level of quality and clarity, so we can all get this kind of spoken instruction from any software package's online help system.

[peed](#). I tested "No World Order" out on both a standard, unaccelerated Ilci with 8MB of RAM, and a PowerMac 8100 with 56MB of RAM, both of them with triple speed CD ROM drives. Running on the Ilci, I experienced regular skips, timed at about every 7 seconds - presumably, the program reading the next bit of music off the CD. Though the skips were minute in duration, they were just noticeable enough to be annoying. Except for that, the music played steadily without any lengthy skips or halts. On the PowerMac, the sound played unhaltingly.

[Bottom Line](#). If you're a die-hard Todd Rundgren fan, but find that none of this appeals to you, you can listen to the entire CD sequentially. However (and it's a big however), here's the rub - the CD will not play on a standard audio CD player, and since the application isn't Multifinder friendly...that's right, you guessed it - it ties up your whole Mac while you're listening to it! Personally, the idea of using my multi-thousand dollar Mac as a two hundred dollar CD player does not appeal. If the producers of this CD had had any sense, they would have made the CD so you could play it on any audio CD player. But then on the other hand, if they'd done that they wouldn't have been able to charge thirty bucks for it.

Price tag aside, I believe "No World Order" represents the future of all audio CDs - whether they're played on a CD ROM drive attached to a personal computer or not, the graphical interface will pervade. Eventually, I have no doubt we'll wind up seeing combination

PDA/portable CD players, that will let you access the music on the CD non-sequentially, and hopefully, those CDs won't cost any more than today's standard audio CDs. In other words, though "No World Order" is the first of its kind, it certainly won't be the last.

Pros

- Revolutionary new way to listen to traditional, sequential-only audio recordings
- Sound quality is top notch - exactly what you'd expect from an audio CD

Cons

- Non-intuitive interface
- Not Multifinder friendly
- Listening to the CD, sequentially or non-sequentially, ties up your computer
- Can't play the CD on an ordinary audio CD player
- A little pricey for what is essentially an advanced audio CD