

A Pair Of Sequencers For Your PC

AutoScore by Wildcat Canyon
JAMMER Professional by Soundtrek

MIDI for "Midiots"



by Michael N. Jacobson

AutoScore

AutoScore, by Wildcat Canyon Software, and JAMMER Professional, by Soundtrek, both fall into the basic category of sequencer, although neither of them are straightforward sequencers. They both have unique twists that make them interesting and fun to use. AutoScore is actually more of a utility program, that lets you record tracks into a sequencer via an acoustic instrument, or simply by singing. JAMMER is an automatic accompaniment generator, that lets you set up rhythm section parts with hundreds of different built in styles. Before I get into a description of these software packages, let me explain some of the terminology I will be using.

A sequencer is a piece of hardware, or software for your computer, that will record and playback MIDI data. Sequencers have the same operating controls as a cassette deck:

RECORD

PLAY

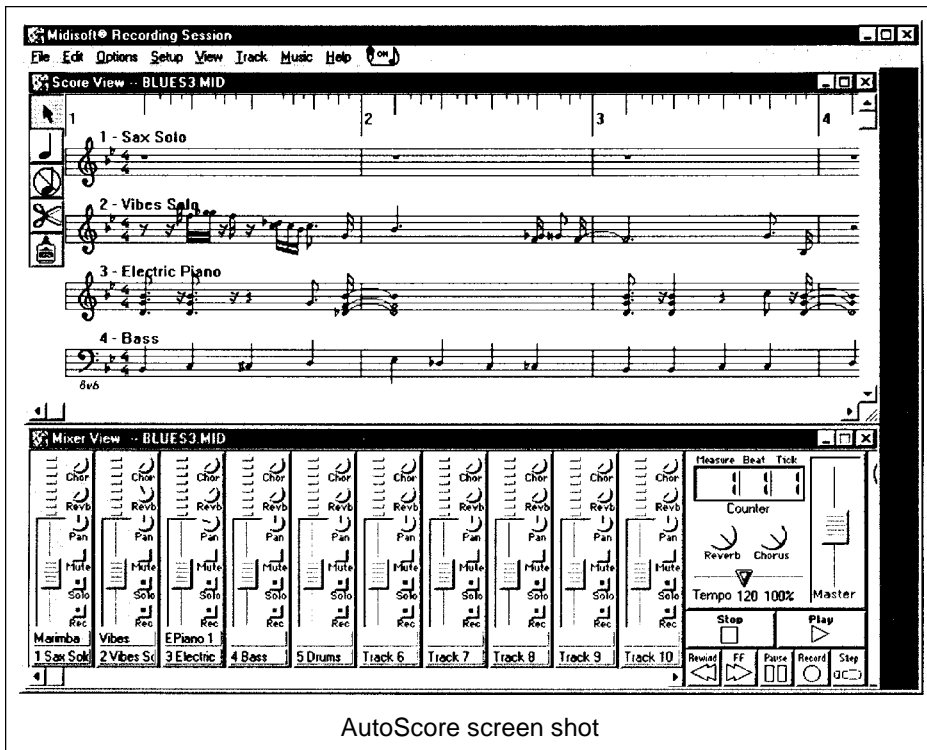
FAST FORWARD

REWIND

They also allow you to record on different tracks, which could number anywhere from eight individual tracks to several hundred, although I've never come across a sequence that used that many! You can cut, copy, and paste parts from one track to another in the same manner that you manipulate text in a word processor. Recording each track separately is, of course, also possible. After tracks are recorded, you can transpose, combine or merge, change tempo, change the sounds or voices you are using, change the volume and balance between tracks, and change the stereo balance between the left and right speakers - referred to as *pan*.

To record into a sequencer, you need to have some kind of MIDI synthesizer or controller. Controllers are simply devices that tell a

synthesizer what to play. They come in all shapes and sizes. The most common are keyboard controllers, but there are also controllers that look like wind instruments, violins, guitars, basses, or percussion instruments. Controllers do not make any sound in and of themselves. They send out data that tells a synthesizer what to play. This same data (MIDI data) is what a sequencer records. So when you record this data, and then hit the "PLAY" button on your sequencer, it sends out the data in exactly the same manner as the controller did when you played it (recorded it) in the first place. This is one of the most common misconceptions about sequencers: They DO NOT record audio signals like a tape deck! Even though they often have the same controls and function much like a tape deck. A sequencer only records MIDI data, which are simply instructions that tell a synthesizer what, and when to play. The fact that MIDI data is comprised of instructions is precisely what makes it so easy to



AutoScore screen shot

manipulate and take up so little space on your hard disk.

So much for this installment of "Everything You Always Wanted To Know About MIDI But Were Afraid To Ask" (for fear of getting more information than you wanted), and on to the discussion of the above software. As I said earlier, AutoScore is not really a sequencer. It allows you to use your sequencer in a manner that you probably haven't done up until now. It allows you to record tracks by playing an (acoustic!?) instrument or singing! I know, I know, I just told you that you needed a MIDI controller to do this. Well, such is the beauty of AutoScore. You play or sing into a microphone (included) connected to your sound card, and the program converts audio signals into MIDI data. So even if you play your sax to record a track (as I did), when you play the track back it will not necessarily sound a saxophone sound, and certainly won't play back your sound. It will playback whatever sound your synthesizer is set to for that track. So it could playback vibes, guitar, piano, strings or seagulls for that matter. AutoScore simply allows you to record MIDI data with your horn instead of

having to use a MIDI keyboard. For those of us that have limited keyboard facility, this is a real advantage. The question is: does it work? The answer is: yes, and no.

Yes, it works for single-line instruments (one note at a time). No, it doesn't work for chords. So piano and guitar are out, unless you constrain yourself to one note at a time. Yes, it is pretty accurate at converting pitches, rhythm and note durations into MIDI data. No, it isn't perfect, and in fact, sometimes it's a long way from perfect. The trouble here is understandable however, and sometimes is not AutoScore's fault. The fact is that AutoScore has to convert frequency into a specific pitch. No problem if we all sang and played perfectly in tune, but we don't. So AutoScore averages or rounds off the frequency to the nearest pitch. You can tell the program to constrain your input to chromatic or diatonic scales of your choosing, but you will still often get unexpected results.

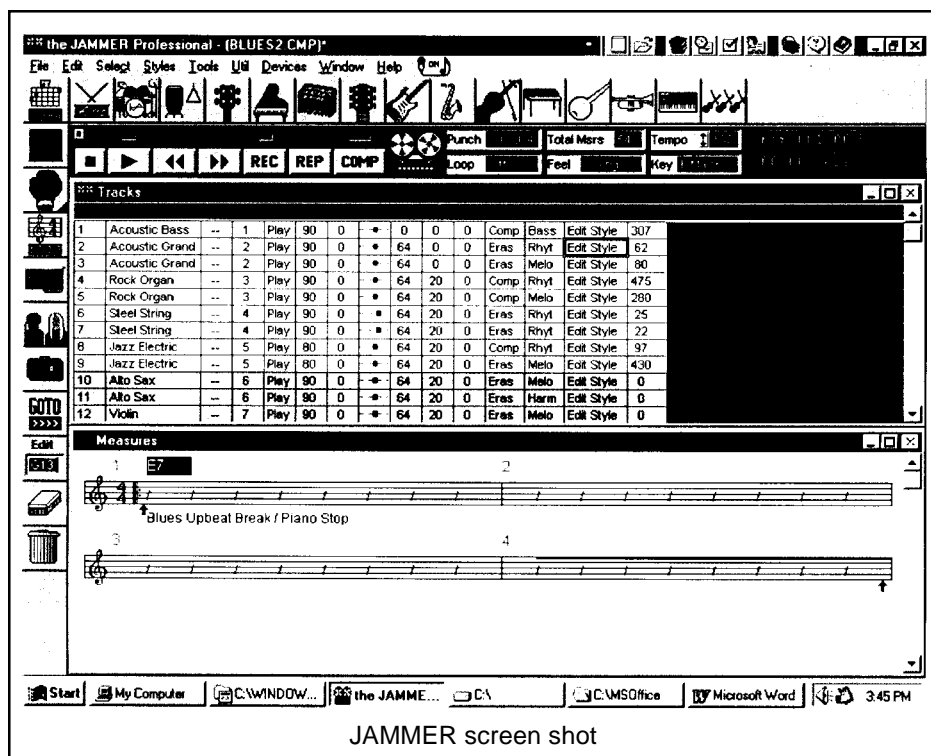
I tried both singing and playing my sax for AutoScore input. You also have to tell the program what instrument your using for input, which it calls an instrument filter. There are several other items

related to volume and note duration of the input instrument which allow you to get the most accurate possible results. There is also an option to turn Pitch Bend Tracking on or off. This tries to follow (or not), slides, scoops or portamentos between discrete pitches. I had much more predictable results with this option turned off.

AutoScore works with the most commonly-used sequencers on the market. When you install the program, it automatically sets itself up as an input device for the sequencer you have on your computer. It also comes with it's own sequencer, Recording Session by MidiSoft. Recording Session is a well-featured, nicely formatted, and relatively intuitive sequencer. It uses a configuration that resembles a mixing board, and allows you to select tracks to record, mute or solo. You can also combine/merge, delete, select and copy/cut, transpose, change clef, etc for each individual track. You can have as many tracks as you like, I quit counting when it got up to number 500 or so. The track name and instrument/voice (patch) assignment is visible for each track, and the MIDI channel assignment is easily set or changed. There is also a handy little utility that lets you turn the microphone on or off, and check its balance and response before you start to record. This utility comes up as a little microphone icon in the window for your sequencer. The software package includes the microphone that is balanced and has plug adapters for all PC/Windows-compatible sound cards. It will also load Standard MIDI Files (created with other programs), or save files in SMF format (so you can import them into other applications). §

JAMMER

JAMMER Professional is a different slant altogether. You will need a MIDI compatible controller for this one. However you won't need to record every track. JAMMER will auto-generate rhythm tracks for you to play along with. Unlike some other auto accompani-



JAMMER screen shot

ment generators like *Band-in-a-Box™*, JAMMER is more sequencer-oriented, and leaves more up to you in how you can configure and combine the program's resources.

With JAMMER you enter your own chord progression (or load a Standard MIDI File, or one of the JAMMER pre-configured files). Then you can set up voices and styles on any of the 256 available tracks. Each of these tracks can have its own assignment in terms of style, note range, volume, note/scale choices, and control over drum fills and comping styles. The user interface here is intended to resemble a studio recording session where you are the producer. JAMMER even calls individual tracks "musicians." You choose the players you want, what their penchants are in terms of style and mannerisms, and the turn them loose to do what they will. If you don't like it, tell them to get lost and bring in some new players. No harm done, no feelings hurt, and best of all, no money need change hands (except the money you lay out for the program, which is very reasonable). There is a six-part harmony composer, automatic fades and crescendos, two screens

of style controls for each musician on each track, and even the capability to combine styles to come up with your own eclectic mixture.

Most of all JAMMER is fun! The style and musician parameters are easy to change or redo, so there's always another solution if you don't like what you came up with the first time. After you find a good mix, you can add your own solo tracks with a MIDI keyboard (or other controller), or just use the sequence as a practice loop like an Aebersold album. Except here you can change the tempo, transpose the key, or change the style (overall or individual parts) at your discretion.

Minimum system requirements for both software packages is a PC compatible with a 386 or better CPU running Windows 3.1 (both are Windows '95 friendly), and a Windows compatible sound card. AutoScore suggests using a 486, but says it will work with a 386 (I had no way to confirm this). For more information on either of these software packages, contact the manufacturers. §

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