Hands on with Band-in-a-Box 2016

As a solo musician I create backing tracks to accompany my guitar and vocals. Back in the day I would grab MIDI files from the Internet and tweak them in Garage Band. If I couldn't find a MIDI file I turned to Band-in-a-Box (BiaB). There I simply typed in the chords, picked a style from a vast library, chose a number of repeats and hit Enter. BiaB did its thing in seconds, giving me a nice-sounding backing track, using the MIDI instruments in my Mac, which I then saved out as a sound file. Over recent years however the folks at PG Music have been building up an impressive library of what they call Real Tracks - based on actual recordings of top session musicians which the software algorithms skillfully mould around any chord pattern I choose. So now my first choice is BiaB rather than MIDI. In fact some of my regular patrons have commented in recent months about my 'new' sound. And it's going to get better with the release of BiaB 2016.

The main improvements in this version are in the interface design, the revamped Style Picker and a whole swag of new Real Tracks. The 2015 version was a major attempt to modernize what I had long criticized as a fairly daggy interface, a sort of Windows 95 look and feel. The 2016 version finishes the job, handing me total control of the main notation window where all my work is done. I can now choose font, font size, colour and I can add layers for bar-based lyrics and section notes. And the window is now completely resizable. Very nice!

Over the years I have accumulated an unbelievable 4,743 different BiaB Styles. Although it's great to have a vast palette to choose from, such numbers can make that choice quite difficult. Hence the redesigned Style Picker. Each Style is now listed under a number of columns which show the Style type (Real, Real +MIDI or MIDI) the tempo, the feel (straight or swing) the Style group (country, jazz, latin, blues etc) and the number of instruments in the Style. So I now go to the column headers and quickly narrow down my choice and BiaB lists the most appropriate Styles in order from best to worst.

With a brand-new feature I can type in the name of a (reasonably) well-known song and BiaB will suggest a list of suitable Styles. I'm finding this already quite helpful and I would expect it to get even better as the PG folk build the database of songs. Feature request!

The new Real Tracks include big band jazz with a nine-part horn section as well as exciting new additions to rockabilly, surf rock, country, folk and funk styles, many featuring top professionals cutting their chops. It's really like having your own studio band!

These are only the highlights among over 50 new features in this release. If you head over to the PG Music website a neat little video will run you through them all and you can hear demos of the new Styles. There are other videos which take you through the myriad features of BiaB which I don't have space for here.

If practicing, performing, studying or teaching music is important in your life I suggest that you seriously consider jumping on the Band in a Box wagon. There are a variety of pricing options and again I suggest you consult the PG Music website for details.

Pros: the ability to create professional backing tracks in a few seconds from an amazing array of authentic musical styles; vastly improved interface with total user control; a fantastic teaching and learning tool.

Cons: none serious (now the interface issue has been addressed!)

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