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Basement bands see digital light

By Anthony DeBarros, USA TODAY

In the basement of his New Jersey home, Nick Delonas is following his rock 'n' roll dream. Any given night might find the 44-year-old programmer and guitarist jamming with his buddies and recording the sounds for posterity. In another era, Bob Dylan and The Band did something like that and called it *The Basement Tapes*. These days, there's no tape involved. All the recording Delonas does — and any extra instruments he wants — is on a PC running inexpensive digital recording software.



By Larry McCormack, USA TODAY
Members of the musical group Jars of Clay, left to right: Stephen Mason, Dan Haseltine and Matt Odmark in Mason's home basement studio.

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"Once you get a basic little setup, you can do anything you want," says Delonas, who started his home PC-based studio a few years ago for about \$1,500. His music is available for free on his hard-rock band's Web site, [www.ironia.net](#).

The trend of at-home digital recording is having a huge impact. Fueled by plummeting PC prices, low-cost software and other sophisticated tools, this recording revolution is allowing anyone with the time and savvy to produce albums in their bedrooms with quality near that of CDs recorded at professional studios.

Need horns? In the computer. Extra strings? No problem.

"I have no constraints," he says. "We've had over 30,000 downloads, so people are listening, which is what I wanted."

The technology is so good that musicians — wannabes and pros alike — not only have access to hundreds of digitally replicated instruments, but they also can use it to mask a multitude of musical sins, from off-key singing to a note played at the wrong time.

Even playing an instrument is no longer required. Software such as Cakewalk's \$49 *Plasma* lets you cut and paste snippets of audio, mix them and add effects.

Music at the low-end range

You can spend as much as you want to record music on your computer, but it doesn't cost a lot to get started. Most entry-level software will record audio and MIDI (a data format for electronic instruments such as synthesizers), plus allow you to mix tracks and add effects.

Among popular tools:

The shareware program n-Track Studio (\$42) from Fasoft will record an unlimited amount of audio and MIDI tracks, depending on your computer's speed and storage. A "virtual mixer" (a device used on most recording software) lets you adjust each track's volume level, and you can patch in reverb, echo and other effects.

Cakewalk's *Plasma* (\$49) is

"The tools are coming out of the ivory tower and are being put into the hands of the masses," says Cakewalk's Chris Rice. The company's products target "everything from high-end professional musicians to ... people who never had any musical training."

One result is that homegrown music is exploding, especially on the Internet. The MP3.com Web site, for example, has 200,000 artists and 1.3 million songs; about 95% of the artists are not signed to major labels, says Derrick Oien of Vivendi Universal, which owns the site.

One of those artists, Emily Richards, 27, is one of the most-heard pop singers never to have appeared on MTV. By day, Richards is a manager for PricewaterhouseCoopers in Los Angeles. In her spare time, she cranks out songs in her home studio, outfitted with about \$12,000 in equipment.

"You're on your own clock," says Richards, whose digital recording workstation by Roland stores audio on a hard-disk drive similar to those in computers. "You have as long as you want, and it allows you to expand your creativity."

Though her seven albums have sold a modest 22,000 copies combined, the songs she's posted on her MP3.com page have been downloaded more than 1.6 million times, earning her royalties of about \$60,000 — much more than the typical indie artist.

For pros, the technology opens up even more creative options.

Stephen Mason and his multiplatinum rock band, Jars of Clay, recorded most of their new album, *The Eleventh Hour*, in his basement.

Mason spent about \$3,000 for a Macintosh computer and an entry-level version of the professional recording system *Pro Tools*, a \$995 combination computer expansion card, instrument interface and software that allows users to record up to 24 tracks of audio and another 128 of data, called MIDI, from electronic instruments such as keyboards or drum machines.

"We started pretty basic," says Mason, 26, of Nashville, who set up the studio early last year. Just five years ago, the recording devices, synthesizers, effects and other gear that's standard in many entry-level recording packages would have cost tens of thousands of dollars. These days, Mason says, "you can put together a digital studio for a reasonable amount of money."

The band later upgraded to add computers and a professional version *Pro Tools*, ultimately spending about \$30,000. The setup let them "try as many harebrained ideas as we wanted."

Today's digital recorders let artists record hundreds of tracks, allowing bands to play each song in several styles, then piece together a composite track.

"We would say, 'Now we want you to play this take like Keith Moon,' and then he'd get done with that, and we'd say, 'Play without cymbals,' and then, 'Play another one as the lethargic alterna-rock English drummer,'" Mason says. "Then, through the ease of cutting and pasting, we were able to get the best of all of those."

The technology also helps artists clean up musical glitches. "There'll be times when I'll sing a whole take and there's one note that kind of goes flat," says Trent Reznor of the industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails, a longtime *Pro Tools* user. "We can go in and correct the pitch a little bit at the end."

designed for non-musicians: It lets you build songs from snippets of audio called loops. You can add effects and morph sounds using a mouse or joystick. Other Cakewalk products, such as Music Creator 2002 (\$39), Home Studio (\$129) and Sonar (\$479) offer progressive levels of complexity in multi-track recording and electronic instrumentation. Sonar, for example, includes modules that emulate synthesizers and vintage guitar amplifiers, plus drum kits.

Digidesign's Pro Tools has become the de facto digital standard for professional recording studios. The professional version, costing \$7,995 and up, is out of range for many home users. But the Mbox (\$495) and Digi 001 (\$995) are entry-level systems that combine hardware (an expansion card or interface box) with Pro Tools recording and mixing software. One of many cool features: You can record multiple takes on the same track, then piece together a perfect track from the best parts.

Most digital recording software allows for the use of plug-ins to provide extra processing. One of the neatest is Auto-Tune by Antares (\$269-\$539, depending on the version), which adjusts the pitch of a vocal or instrument to correct out-of-tune singing or playing. Experts say this device is used to clean up more superstars than you might think.

www.fasoft.com
www.cakewalk.com
www.digidesign.com
www.antarestech.com

— Anthony DeBarros

Of course, the ability to do this musical sleight of hand is changing the expectations of people who hire musicians.

"I'll be given a show, then I have to write 40 minutes of music and I've got four days," says Shawn Clement of Canyon Country, Calif. Since 1994, he has worked in his home digital studio to record the scores for video games, films and TV shows, including the second season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

To meet the schedule, Clement has an array of instruments he records using PCs and Cakewalk *Sonar XL* software (\$599). "What they expect after a week is a final, mastered, produced soundtrack."

Not everyone believes this proliferation of digital recording technology is entirely an advance. Clement, for example, says that in his field "everybody and anybody can be a composer or songwriter, so the overall quality (of music) is definitely down."

Others say the computer's ability to fine-tune performances is taking the soul from the sounds.

"We can auto-tune that voice so that guy sounds perfect," says Eddie Kramer, the legendary producer/engineer who worked with Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles, Led Zeppelin and others. "You are now messing with (the music) to the point where there is no reality to it."

Reznor agrees — but only to a point. "Sure, there's a lot of bad music that comes out," he concedes. "But there's some good music that wouldn't have been able to come out if you had to spend \$1,500 an hour in the studio."

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