

by Dan Daley

In the grungier clubs of Manhattan's Lower East Side and in Brooklyn's newly hip Williamsburg neighborhood, musicians pull laptop computers out of their gig bags. At first, the computers were used as sound effects generators — a surrogate for a scratching DJ — or to add sound design elements to surround the main music focus. But lately, the laptop is augmenting and sometimes even replacing the conventional guitar amp, offering players access to the same bottomless pit of modeled amp sounds they're used to having at their fingertips in home studios.

The ability to model amplifier sounds — reconstructing the sonic characteristics of an amp or speaker cabinet based on algorithmically mimicking them — started in the software domain. A seminal product, introduced in 1998, was Line 6's Amp Farm. It offered several classic amp models in plug-in form for Pro Tools, then later as a stand-alone hardware piece, The Pod. Modeling quickly became integrated with guitar amplifiers, and modeling amplifiers remain popular with guitarists seeking a variety of sounds from a single source. But amp modeling in purely software form means the resulting sounds can also be integrated with other software-based signal-processing devices like plug-ins. A laptop is the ideal portable platform to run all of this software and is easily updatable. Plugged into a P.A., computing power meets horsepower.

"This phenomenon is making it very easy for retailers to add laptop-based guitar

Effects-
equipped
laptops
are a logistical
dream for
gigging guitarists.
Can they
ever replace
stomp boxes
— or amps?

ROCKIN'

THE LAPTOP



processing and amplification for their customers, as well as keep traditional amplifiers in the sales loop,” said Jim Beaugez, marketing communications coordinator at Peavey, which is still heavily into manufacturing and selling conventional guitar amps. Peavey’s own entry into this new territory is ReValver Mk III, a software application that models classic guitar amplifiers at the schematic level, letting users customize the preset models.

“The thing that we think differentiates ReValver the most is it lets the user turn a ‘classic’ amplifier into a boutique amp by doing things like [virtually] switching out tubes and other components,” he said. ReValver,

which lists for \$299 (a scaled-back version, ReValver HP, which models only Peavey’s amplifier line, lists for \$99), can also be coupled with an evaluation copy of Reaper. This basic recording software lets users utilize the guitar-laptop combination live or as a studio application, or both — musicians can record tracks and play along with them through the laptop at live performances.

Beaugez said he doesn’t see the laptop as competition for the traditional guitar amplifier. But he does see the phenomenon being driven by musicians, many if not most of whom do some home recording and want to recreate the quality levels they get in their studios in a

live setting. “And many of the customers for this type of product combination are younger, so they’re familiar and comfortable with using software for guitars, even on stage,” he said.

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

Several manufacturers and retailers acknowledge guitarists’ tendency to avoid non-traditional technology, especially the older-demographic and purists who regard anything more than a stomp box between the guitar and amp as heresy. Manufacturers are overcoming this resistance by creating interfaces that mimic stomp box-like controllers.

One example is IK Multimedia’s new StompIO-1, a

hardware controller for the company’s Powered By AmpliTube plug-in amplifier modeling software. The unit, which has a street price between \$900–\$1,000, comes bundled with five IK Multimedia software products (which, like some actual stomp boxes, are branded with classic, licensed rubrics, such as Jimi Hendrix).

“This is the way to overcome reluctance on the part of many guitarists to interface their guitars with computers,” said Starr Ackerman, marketing, promotions and public/artist relations manager at IK Multimedia. “It replaces something they already use regularly, and it’s the portal into our AmpliTube software, which gives them access to hun-

+ LAPTOP GEAR BREAKOUT



Peavey's ReValver Mk III 64-bit amp modeling software captures vacuum tubes' characteristics while giving users control over their tonality and gain structures. It models 15 popular amps, and by controlling these amplifier models from the component level, ReValver models different nuances. This way, players can design their ultimate custom amps and speaker systems. MSRP: \$299.99.

IK Multimedia's StompI0-1 is a USB floor controller, audio interface and modeling software bundle that gives users control over all Powered by AmpliTube software and plug-ins.



Boasting the feel of a traditional hardware floor processor, it comes with five full software packages — AmpliTube 2, Ampeg SVX, AmpliTube Jimi Hendrix, AmpliTube Metal and AmpliTube X-Gear — totaling more than 150 different modern and vintage gear models. MSRP: \$1,049.99.

dreds of amplifiers, cabinets, speakers and effects.”

IK Multimedia and other manufacturers promote the idea of laptops replacing amplifiers as a logistical solution for guitarists with mammoth pedalboards and gear racks. “Some guitarists go to a gig with as many as 20 pedals and multiple guitar amplifiers,” Ackerman said.

RETAIL STRATEGIES

Guitarists have been interfacing their instruments with some type of central processing system for nearly 20 years. Most notable were Roland systems from the 1990s that aimed to give guitarists access to the same sound banks that synth players reveled in. These attempts were less than successful, particularly due to the issues

of tracking — the string's movement made accurate reaction to a guitarist's playing difficult — and latency — the time it takes between hitting a string, having that information tracked, converting the analog input to a digital signal and sent to the processor, and getting the processed signal to a speaker.

The current software generation has largely resolved these issues. But like those early days of guitars and computers, many retail staff don't know where to put this hybrid. Ackerman cautioned that putting this software in the pro audio/recording department, alongside computers, defeats the purpose. “They are missing a lot of traffic headed to the guitar departments and losing the opportunity to evangelize the idea of guitars and

computers together,” she said, encouraging retailers to demo displays of the combination in the guitar department.

That's exactly what Mark Spiwak, sales manager at West L.A. Music's flagship store in Hollywood, has done. Working models of systems from Line 6 and Native Instruments, among others, have been placed where they're accessible to potential buyers. He buttresses that with in-store seminars by manufacturers' reps, who also provide dedicated training for the store's sales staff. “This idea is a new concept to a lot of guitarists — a radically new one to some of them,” Spiwak said. “So it's important that guitarists are allowed to experience it firsthand and get as much knowledge as we can offer about it.”

Spiwak agreed that it's key to play the logistics card. He acknowledged that no technology, no matter how cool, can compete against the notion of the traditional guitar-amplifier combination. “Nothing beats an actual amplifier on stage,” he said. “But this takes away a lot of the gear and the clutter that many guitarists have to carry around these days. We show them that they can have access to hundreds of amplifiers and sounds on a laptop that they can take to the studio or to gigs. People record directly to the laptop and then use that as backing tracks to play solo gigs. I've seen a lot of that lately in lounges in Las Vegas. It's like gigging with Pro Tools.”

According to Spiwak, the guitar-laptop combination is best positioned as a supplement to rather than a replacement or alternative for conventional amplifiers. “I've seen guitarists buy several different systems to have access to many hundreds of different sounds, then run the laptop through another gui-

tar amp to add one more level of tone,” he said.

At the Sam Ash store in Margate, Fla., general manager Steve Price immediately conceded that the guitar-laptop combination is “not an easy sell,” he said. “Given that we've been conditioned by 40 years of guitars being plugged into amps, it's a concept that has to be thoroughly demoed, cliniced, pushed and promoted. They're going to need an incredible video on YouTube to help get it across to a lot of guitarists.”

That said, Price predicted that this guitar-laptop hybrid may be the future. It's a stunning observation considering that it's coming from someone who's also the guitarist of Thor, one of heavy metal's longest-running bands.

“Some things seem like they're never going to change, but look around,” he said. “Suddenly, all televisions are plasma and LCD, and they're about to stop making cathode ray sets. People used to not want to buy an environmentally friendly car because they were afraid that it wouldn't get them into fast traffic on a highway, then the [Toyota] Prius comes along. Someday, the idea of taking a huge amplifier and a ton of gear to a gig might be looked at the same way.”

Price said he wishes more companies in this sector would develop kiosk-type demo stations, like the one he has from Roland in his guitar department. Still, he said manufacturers are getting more flamboyant. IK Multimedia recently sent a Jimi Hendrix impersonator to his store to demo the company's Hendrix tone bundle.

AN AUDIO PRODUCT?

At Guitar Center, though, the opposite view is largely in effect. With the exception of

about 30 of the store's locations, guitar-laptop combos are located in the pro audio departments.

"We've tried putting them in the guitar departments several times, but we've found over time that most of the purchases are made in the pro audio department," said Bryan Bradley, director of pro audio and merchandise for Guitar Center. "The theory seems to be that the proposition really comes down to software, and the sales staff in pro audio are the ones better prepared to support that sale than the people in the guitar department. Customers are going to be asking questions about operating systems and file sizes. Once musicians are ready to take their music to computers, they're going to that part of the [store] anyway."

"The guitar is the antidote to what people do all day: work on computers," added Keith Brawley, who heads up GC's guitar and amplifier department. "When they come home, they just want to rock out. The live amplifier is literally the other half of an electric guitar — there's a reptilian satisfaction to having a huge, loud amp. Once you connect a guitar to a laptop, you're in a different domain, so it should be done in a different department. Besides, a customer coming to the guitar department wants to buy a guitar. If you present this combination to customers, they may decide that they can keep their current guitar and buy software instead."

Both Brawley and Bradley agreed that with the recent technology advances in the gui-

Manufacturers promote the idea of laptops replacing amplifiers as a logistical solution for guitarists with mammoth pedalboards

tar-laptop sector, the logistical arguments make more sense — better interfaces, less gear to lug and the ability to use your own guitar with any laptop. "Bringing product brands like

Line 6, which already has a lot of credibility with guitarists, into the market is smart," Brawley said. "It could help [the category] turn the corner."

Price said he also envisions a day when guitarists will stroll into gigs with their axe and a laptop, or use a Y-cord to switch between or blend software and hardware amp sounds in any venue.

"The laptop is the center of convergence of a lot of things," he said. "We write on them, play music on them, buy music on them, record on them, send e-mail mixes on them. If the companies that are developing these products really made a concerted effort to promote them, they could create the tipping point for how guitarists play on stage and in studios." **MI**

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