

*The Music of***JAN  
HAMMER***Miami Vice*

Selby Bateman, Features Editor

*Almost singlehandedly,  
composer and musician  
Jan Hammer has  
altered the sound  
of network television*

Each week, from a computer-controlled 24-track music studio on his ten-acre estate in New York, Hammer composes, performs, and mixes the musical score for another episode of the innovative action series, *Miami Vice*. He creates for the program an eclectic mix of synthesizer-based pop-rock; powerful, haunting melodies; and background themes ranging from reggae to rockabilly. Hammer draws from—and contributes to—what has become the unique *Miami Vice* look and feel.

Despite crushing weekly deadlines, Hammer has drawn both critical and popular acclaim for the consistently high quality of his compositions and performances. Along the way, he's also picked up Emmy nominations, a No. 1 hit single, and a No. 1 album, all for *Miami Vice*—the first time a television sound track album has climbed to the top of the charts since Henry Mancini's 1959 record, *The Music from Peter Gunn*.

To accomplish all this, Hammer benefits from the startling power and versatility of the latest computer-controlled electronic instruments. Only in the last couple of years has technology offered a musician working alone the necessary tools to create extraordinary and complex music. With today's technology, a single musician has the freedom to be a one-man symphony. Hammer works his weekly magic with an array of synthesizers, drum machines, keyboards, guitars, and sound sampling units—plus a personal computer with hard drive—all connected through MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) devices. (See "Computers and MIDI" elsewhere in this issue.)

It's somewhat ironic that a quintessentially American cops-and-robbers program is being musically scored by a classically trained composer born and raised in Czechoslovakia. But Hammer, 38, is no stranger to American music. Arriving in the United States from Prague in 1968—just before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia—Hammer quickly established himself as a composer and performer of great versatility. He has performed with many jazz and rock superstars: Sarah Vaughan, Mick Jagger, Jeff Beck, John McLaughlin, Carlos Santana, Billy Cobham, Stanley Clarke, and Al DiMeola, among others. He was a founding member of the jazz-rock group, *The Mahavishnu*

*Orchestra, and more recently played on Mick Jagger's first solo album, She's The Boss.*

*As a one-man orchestra, Hammer provides about 20 minutes of music for each of the 60-minute episodes of Miami Vice. The heart of his home studio is the Fairlight CMI (Computer Musical Instrument) synthesizer, but he also uses a wide range of other instruments: a Memorymoog Plus synthesizer, a Probe/Oberheim portable keyboard, a Steinway acoustic piano, a Yamaha DX7 synthesizer, an American Modular Instruments (MDS-1) guitar system, a Roland Jupiter-8 keyboard, a 1978 Fender Stratocaster electric guitar, an IBM PC XT computer, and an array of modular support instruments. Hammer is doing work that in the past might have required a roomful of musicians.*

## Q&A

**Gazette:** You've seen firsthand the growing power and sophistication of electronic music. Do you think digital instruments and computers will one day replace human performance?

**Hammer:** I don't think that they'll ever take over. I think they'll expand the field of music tremendously. I don't think it's replacing musicians, I don't think it's replacing sounds. Some sounds may remind you of certain traditional instruments, but then again, there is a whole other world of the sounds that were not possible before the invention of these instruments. And I think that is the biggest promise. It's really coming up with something that we've never heard.

**Gazette:** Your experience and background allow you to approach things differently from other

musicians using the same equipment. I'm sure you've already seen a number of television shows that try to mimic your style.



**Hammer:** I think what really makes a difference in my case is what kind of music I write, regardless of the instrumentation or the mode in which I put the music together. It comes down to "You hear a melody that moves you. Do you hear a musical idea that makes you feel something?" And that will always be the bottom line. There is no substitute.

board at any pitch.

**Gazette:** And you use that extensively...

**Hammer:** Yes, very much. And also, there are quite a few programs as part of the software package for the Fairlight, where you can sequence, string together compositions, pieces of music. And in

thing, you just put a MIDI interface card into an IBM, then you can connect as many synthesizers—up to 16—and run them on separate MIDI channels. And basically playing performance in realtime, playing sections of pieces of music that you can then combine in the same manner that a word processor would help you with words.

**Gazette:** Several years ago, that would have been impossible with a microcomputer.

**Hammer:** Right. It makes it available to the masses, really.

**Gazette:** Do you use the Fairlight in conjunction with your IBM?

**Hammer:** Yes. They're both running all the time. The Fairlight is more of an incredible sound machine, where I pretty much store all my drums—all my drums that you hear—but different tunings. And they're all stored on the disks. I can put them together in different combination drum kits that I can recall. They're stored as instrument files where you have different types of drums combined into drum kits.

**Gazette:** How is memory storage handled on the Fairlight?

**Hammer:** Eight-inch floppies, double-density, double-sided. They have a new system coming out that's going to be hard-disk supported as well. I have a hard disk on the IBM, and it's incredible [laughs], the advance that I've made to that level of organization. You know, going through subdirectories, and really organizing my world here.

**Gazette:** How long have you been using a computer?

**Hammer:** The IBM I just got recently, a few months ago. I've been working with the Fairlight for about four years now.

**Gazette:** Have you been using the IBM directly in any of your *Miami Vice* compositional work?

**Hammer:** Absolutely. That's what's so wonderful with the program—it's called *Texture*—it's a compositional program. You can really do amazing things with that. I can sketch out things in advance, even before I see the final cut of the show, the final timing. And then I

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**Gazette:** From a technological standpoint, could you have accomplished several years ago what you're now doing every week for *Miami Vice*?

**Hammer:** From any standpoint, really, it would be impossible. It would take me twice as long.

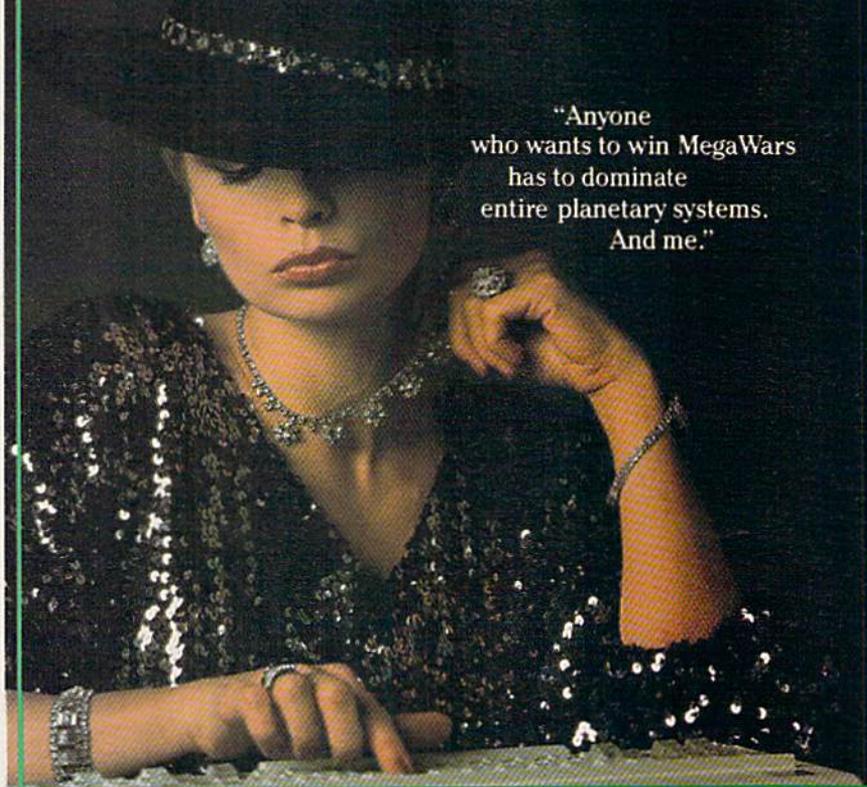
**Gazette:** What's been the biggest change over the past year or two?

**Hammer:** I would say the better software that became available; especially in the case of the Fairlight CMI, which is an upper-end digital synthesizer. But that's not really doing it justice. It's an incredible machine that not only creates sound from scratch, but also is a great sampling machine—little snippets of digital recordings that can then be replayed from a key-

different modes: one is directly playing it from the keyboard, another one is typing in the values, another is doing it with a light pen on the screen. You can edit musical compositions like that. Those things have grown.

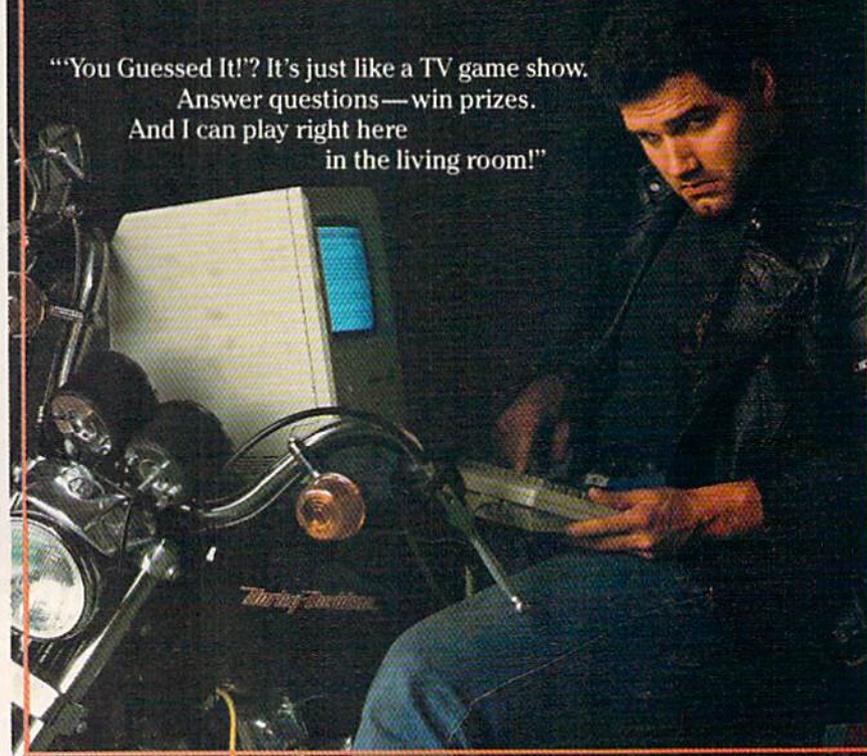
And also there is another wonderful thing that's just happened recently, especially now that MIDI has really taken off. People have been writing programs for microcomputers. For instance, I have a wonderful program [*Texture*, a modular sequencing program from Cherry Lane Technologies] that Roger Powell wrote. [Roger Powell is keyboardist for Todd Rundgren's band, Utopia, and director of product development at Cherry Lane.] It's available for many computers, but I have an IBM XT. And this

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can perform the piece of music and do last minute changes before I actually commit the music to tape, because it's all pliable. It's like building blocks.

**Gazette:** What was your first exposure to digital music?

**Hammer:** I just heard amazing sounds on a few people's records; I can't even remember who it was. Different people started using the Fairlights initially, and then other things like the Synclavier [another high-end synthesizer], started showing up. And it started sounding different. And the most intriguing thing about it was that it did sound different. It sounded unlike anything I'd ever heard.

**Gazette:** What was your first exposure to a computer, and how did you end up choosing the IBM PC XT?

**Hammer:** It was the one computer that could do all the things that I needed. And the programs were available for it. For instance, on the IBM, when I'm not composing using the *Texture* program, then when I'm doing the final mix-down on my console, the IBM is running the automation. And it's just writing the levels and mutes and everything on my console, so the whole mix is actually written onto the hard disk on the IBM.

That is one computer that can do all these things for me. It can also keep track of all my sounds on the Yamaha, for instance. I have a whole library of sounds that gets stored in another subdirectory on the hard disk as well. So, there are already three incredibly different applications that just one computer can do. And I don't know of another computer that has that much software written for it.

**Gazette:** This idea of a library of personal sounds opens up a new world for musicians. Will this raise any problems when sound sampling allows anyone to duplicate those things you've created?

**Hammer:** That depends. If it's a snippet of a sound, there's nothing I can do. But if it's a sixteen-second sample of a melody I wrote, then it's copyright infringement. That's not giving away the store. I don't see that I will be robbed of anything.

**Gazette:** You score the soundtrack to *Miami Vice* from your home studio. Do you ever work in Miami where the program is shot?

**Hammer:** I did a quick cameo guest shot last fall, and then we get together once in a while, like at the Emmy Awards.

**Gazette:** Does it help you to get together with the actors and production people?

**Hammer:** It's nice; we have some fun. They're quite an exciting bunch of people working on the show.

**Gazette:** How do you actually go about scoring an episode of *Miami Vice*?

**Hammer:** Most of the work really gets done after I see the show in its rough form. It's all pretty much a seat-of-the-pants kind of thing—gut feeling. I just go with my instincts. I don't have time to do anything else. I really have to go with my instincts, and it has to be the first time. So, there aren't many changes. The only changes that there are are done as far as the timing and the lengths of individual sections and stuff like that.

**Gazette:** Do you use the same group of instruments each time?

**Hammer:** Just the opposite. I try to give each show its own flavor, its own specific themes, in addition to the *Miami Vice* theme which was the hit single—that's on every show, but that just opens the show and that's it. Then when the story really starts, there are different themes for each week, which is quite unusual in television scoring. So, it's sort of like a mini-movie, and it's really quite a pressure.

**Gazette:** In a number of the episodes, you type music to certain individual characters or actors. Are you improvising that, or do you work from a plot line?

**Hammer:** I only work from the picture. There is no time to really read scripts, and get really involved like that. I'm like the first-time viewer; I just get caught up in the action, and if it's scary or exciting or depressing or whatever it is, I respond to it in that way. However it hits me, it's

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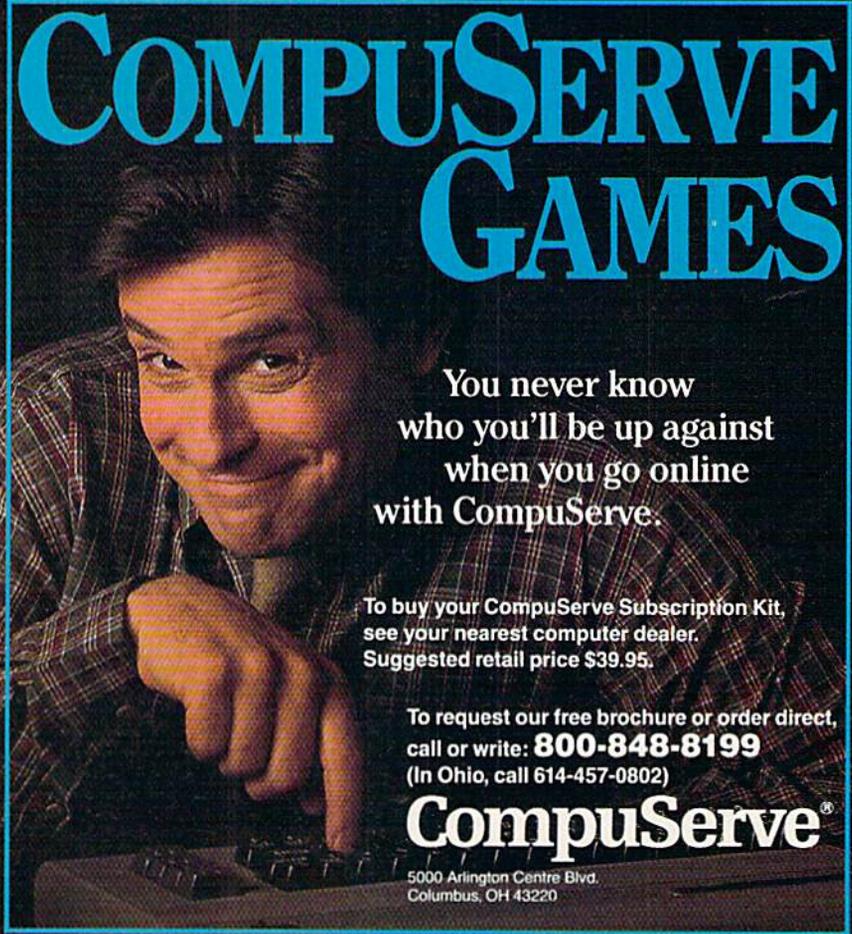
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my subjective response to it.

**Gazette:** What's your hardware set-up in your studio at home?

**Hammer:** There are two alphanumeric keyboards—one is the IBM and one is the Fairlight. And then I have my favorite piano instrument keyboard that I actually play a lot, the Yamaha DX-7, which is just about the most amazing thing. And that is connected through MIDI to just about everything else. I have a Memorymoog [synthesizer] that's the most beautiful sounding old-fashioned analog instrument. And then I have a Roland synthesizer. And I can directly play the Fairlight from the Yamaha keyboard—I just really like the feel of the Yamaha keyboard, it's my favorite.

**Gazette:** And then you add your own sounds to this, for instance with the Stratocaster guitar?

**Hammer:** When it's a real guitar, I actually play the part on a guitar. There are certain strumming techniques that just cannot be approximated.

**Gazette:** Will we reach a point when even a guitar can be replaced by a digital machine?

**Hammer:** I think we can evoke the feeling of a guitar, and that's been something I've been pursuing for years. And I've had all kinds of success with that. But there are some things I will never be able to do—or at least that I cannot even foresee being able to do—simply because I cannot imagine the controller that would allow me, a keyboard player, to produce an impression of strumming six strings rapidly across. That's where the problem is, the interface between the human being and the computer.

**Gazette:** There have been complaints from some that digital instruments, such as drum machines, produce a sterility of sound. Will we always see live drums being used?

**Hammer:** I'm sure you will. But the point is that the fine line is disappearing because drummers are starting to program these things. And when you say drum machines, you're probably talking about something old-fashioned, low-end.

The way it's going now is that there's velocity sensing on each drum, where the dynamics are infinitely variable. And if you have a drummer's mind connected to this—if a drummer programs a good computer like that—you cannot distinguish the results. It's really erasing that old stigma. Definitely the Fairlight is like that. With the shading of dynamics and all that, you can really do something much more real and involved than it used to be.

**Gazette:** To your knowledge, has anyone previously approached the scoring of a television show as you are—one-on-one, with just days between when you receive the videotape and when you have to finish a score?

**Hammer:** I don't think so. Because that really started out as a flash of inspiration from Michael Mann, the executive producer [of *Miami Vice*], where from the first episode after the pilot, he told me to go ahead and do it the way I wanted it. And I don't think anyone has ever been given this amount of freedom. And

that makes all the difference, because I do better work when I'm not interfered with [laughs].

**Gazette:** For more than a year now, you've gone through a series of very compressed periods of composition and performance for *Miami Vice*. Would you like to keep this up, or do you want a break to do some other things?

**Hammer:** Well, the season is 22 weeks, and last summer I was working on the album. But this summer I'm definitely going to take it easy. There are also a lot of films for which I'm getting offers, and I have to turn them down because it's just impossible in time.

**Gazette:** What's the next step in making your life easier as a composer and a musician?

**Hammer:** I would like to have a limitless supply of inspiration [laughs]. The technology is going along just fine. I'm not worried about technology anymore. I'm sometimes worried about being able to keep up with the ideas that feed the technology. ©

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