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AUTOBUZZ
THIS WEEK'S REVIEW



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Laptop Liberaces

Trax in Space adds another dimension to the music galaxy

BY ANTHONY MARIANI

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Rows upon rows of binary code scroll up Kim Kraft's computer screen. Like a player piano, his CPU reads these hieroglyphs and generates music. Though the song sounds like just another progressive house tune, it isn't. It's an example of an under-recognized genre called tracking -- music made by non-musicians on computers. Move over, MP3.

Digital Rhythms Inc. is tracking's nexus. The company, led by founder Saurin Shah, for whom Kraft works, is a brick-and-mortar manifestation of an Internet community, that fifth-dimension place with no geographical boundaries and no physical relationships but with a strong sense of belonging among its members. The particular community to which Digital Rhythms has laid claim is made up of trackers, song programmers. These "artists" use snazzy software to turn their laptop keyboards into virtual pianos or drums or any other instrument. Playing the "Moonlight Sonata" is as easy as knowing how to type. Finished products are archived and made available for free on Web sites like Digital Rhythms' Trax in Space. Unlike nearly every other Web-based community, the tracking scene does not have a real-world component. Everything about it is virtual. The ethnomusicologist René T.A. Lysloff calls this place Softcity.

"It's exceptional," says Mitchell Vervoort, Digital Rhythms' vice president and legal counsel. "We have golden nugget hits here."

Digital Rhythms is trying to boldly go where no tracking crew has ever gone before: into the marketplace. The blueprint for world domination is written in erasable blue ink on a white message board in Digital Rhythms' Richmond Strip headquarters. Digital Rhythms will be the umbrella company. Beneath it will be, among other businesses, a tracker Webzine (*DMR*, Digital Music Revolution), a company specializing in tracking software (Modplug, which was previously owned by Kraft, independent of Digital Rhythms), a record label (Infinity) and Trax in Space, the epicenter of Digital Rhythms' business plan and of most of the tracking community.

Trackers have always drawn strength from freedom and one-upmanship. The enterprise began in the mid-1980s with hackers who cracked early Atari and Commodore video

Anthony Mariani



Though hardly as engaging as a KISS concert, software performers (like Saurin Shah, of Digital Rhythms Inc.) are coming.

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Cialis

games, inserted their own music, then boasted of their accomplishments or passed around copies of their handiwork like Glamour Shots. The I'm-better-than-you mentality, which is so pervasive among today's trackers, took root with these computer jocks. Hackers soon moved on to PCs and began "composing" music as a distinct endeavor. The "demo scene," in which hackers competed with each other on BBSs (bulletin-board systems) to see who could compose the most accomplished music on a 3.5-inch floppy, resulted from this trend. By the early 1990s, when the Internet rose to prominence, the demo scene had been taken over by trackers, otherwise collectively known as the mod (as in "module") scene. Sharing software and files cost nothing. Everything was relatively free.

The days of free entrée and braggadocio may be drawing to a close. Digital Rhythms wants to act like a tollbooth to the tracking scene, charging small fees for a variety of services, including access to music software. The man to thank, for better or worse, is Shah. Growing up in Houston, the native Torontonian of Indian descent spent countless hours on his parents' IBM clone visiting billboards. "[My parents] didn't like that too much," says Shah, a slight, well-dressed twentysomething. "[The computer] was right in their bedroom, and I'd be up until three or four in the morning, *listening to music*." Shah loved it. After composing and posting his first tune, he realized the relationship wasn't mutual. He was told his song sucked and was kicked off the "Pool of Disbelief," the BBS on which he had done his posting. "They said, 'We don't want your kind around here,' " recalls Shah, noting that naysayers weren't attacking his heritage, but his naïveté. "That inspired me. I decided there needed to be a place to learn or help new musicians."

With a friend, Romi Nayef, Shah began C.L.A.N. (Cyber Legion Artist Network). After one posting, Shah's BBS obtained more than 100 members, making it the largest collection of trackers in the digital world. Shah, on his way to graduating second in his 1995 class from Alief Hastings High School, couldn't handle the workload. Holding on to some better participants and ideas from C.L.A.N., he destroyed the BBS, then, in 1996 on a new powerful computer, rebuilt it as a Web site under the name Nebula. "I knew we were gonna do something cool," he says. "I just didn't know what." Part of Nebula was Trax in Space, a small archive of aspiring and talented trackers. Quality wasn't a criterion for admission. Enthusiasm was. In the face of pooh-poohing elitists, Trax in Space prospered.

With various additions and the devotions of Shah and a band of Houston-based friends and on-line volunteers, the Trax in Space archive outgrew those of United Trackers, Mod Archive and other competitors. In early 1997 Shah removed Trax in Space from Nebula and gave it its own domain, www.traxinspace.com. Shah says he spent about 40 hours per week working on the site and about \$500 per month maintaining it. "I felt it was my job to change the tracking world," Shah recalls. "There was a lot of potential. I just wanted to do my best." Now close to graduation from Houston Baptist University, Shah lived off whatever little money he made through part-time programming work. Even with a \$10,000 graduation gift from his father in the bank, Shah thought his career in tracking was going to take at least a decade to get going. He began working full-time as a programmer for A.G. Morgan during the day and, with some friends, as Trax in Space developer at night.

Shah's wake-up call came in 1998 when MP3.com announced it was going public. Shah remembered meeting a financial planner during Nebula's nascence, and wanted to call him with a new business proposition: making money off tracking. Irfan Abji liked what he heard and put Shah in contact with Vervoort. Investors were easy to find. Everybody apparently liked the idea of providing Internet-based music without any legal hassle. Only a few trackers are affiliated with labels. For now, Digital Rhythms will release its first album under the Infinity label this fall. Says Shah, without a trace of arrogance: "We're our own supply-and-demand chain."

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FEATURED PERSONAL



chasinamy

The five items I can't live without: "My car, hairbrush, lipstick, lover, and an apple."

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