

MG: *Interactive Music CD's*

by Ivan

With the spread of CD ROM drives into homes across the land, it was inevitable that the music industry, where CDs began, would eventually start making the move toward CD ROM. And why not? CD ROM is the perfect vehicle for music driven multimedia, giving the end user traditional CD quality audio coupled with potentially unlimited computer interface options. Business-wise, it's not much of a leap from CD to CD ROM. After all, the production, distribution and marketing channels are in place already. So is the audience - millions of pop music aware, MTV watching, CD ROM owners. And heck, we CD ROM owners are champing at the bit to spend money on quality entertainment for our expensive drives, aren't we? There's also the attraction of seeing our favorite pop stars' faces on shelves in computer stores. The cross-over value of that whole "Rock Star" phenomenon into the computer entertainment market is largely what interactive music CD ROM producers are counting on.

New interactive music CD ROMs (IMCDs) have been popping up in the marketplace quite rapidly in recent months, and don't doubt that we'll see even more of them in the future, as more and more pop music stars jump onto the band wagon. Once begun, the trend is already unstoppable. Besides just the lure of easy money, I believe many pop musicians see IMCDs as an opportunity to stroke their own egos. Most of the current crop of IMCDs bear the obvious and indelible stamp of vanity projects. "Prince Interactive," the guiltiest party in this area (though also an excellent product), constantly bombards the user with visions of Prince's face and snappy new iconic name. In fact, there's hardly a screen in the whole presentation that doesn't include either or both. But then, you are buying it to see Prince - and you get what you pay for.

Vanity aside, however, some of these IMCDs are really quite good, and in one case, even truly revolutionary. It's actually quite an interesting development, this coming of personality driven projects to computer entertainment. Sure, we have some universally recognizable names in the gaming community - Chris Crawford, Sid Meier, Roberta Williams - but their followings can't begin to compare to the idolatry of a million screaming Prince fans. Think Sierra Online's offices will ever become enshrined, a la Graceland? Think again. (Ah, but if only Elvis were still with us today - just imagine the star quality The King could bring to multimedia - picture jewel cases with real jewels on them!)

For better or worse, these performers are slowly changing the computer entertainment

market - perhaps not radically - but by adding that new wrinkle, that star quality, they will change the way we shop for much of our computer entertainment in the future. Instead of looking for the latest title by a particular software company, CD ROM buyers will have the option of picking and choosing among their favorite performers.

Of course, the flip side to this entire story is that you will probably only enjoy any given IMCD if you happen to like the musician featured in it. And with most of these CDs still priced in the \$50 - \$60 range, you'd be justified in passing up any artist you weren't absolutely sure of. (Who knows, maybe Polygram will one day start putting out "sampler" IMCDs with multiple artists represented on them.) My belief is that eventually, the music industry will wise up, and realize that they can sell more CD ROMs if they distribute them and price them similarly to traditional audio CDs, selling them for \$10 - \$15 in music stores. This is another area where the music industry has great potential to alter the computer entertainment industry. In fact, there's no reason why EVERY audio CD shouldn't come with a couple of full length QuickTime videos on it, a development that would further merge the music and computer entertainment industries.

So, like 'em or lump 'em, IMCDs are here to stay. And if you don't like any of the current crop of performers...hey, don't worry! No doubt your favorite musical stars will be coming soon to a computer store.

Be sure to check out the two IMCD reviews later in this issue!