

review: **XPlora 1 Peter Gabriel's Secret World**

by Ivan

Type: Interactive Music CD

Publisher: MacPlay (800/4MACPLAY)

Retail Price: \$84.95

Street Price: \$59.00

Requires: Any color Mac with 3 MB available RAM (4 MB recommended), System 7.0 or higher, 256 color or greater monitor, single speed CD-ROM drive.

Protection: None

f all the current crop of IMCDs (interactive music CD ROMs), Peter Gabriel's "XPlora" is far and away the most interesting, most entertaining, most innovative and has the greatest amount of material to explore. In fact, whether you like Peter Gabriel or not, it's just plain the best. "XPlora" is aptly named, because explore is what you'll do, as you dig through the virtual tons of information hidden away on this IMCD. And unlike other IMCDs such as "Prince Interactive" and "Jump," "XPlora" is more than just a mere vanity project. Among the rock industry, Peter Gabriel has a reputation for his interests in other artists, other cultures, other forms of music, other peoples, and all of those interests are reflected in "XPlora."

"XPlora" takes advantage of the vast amounts of space offered by CD-ROM, to pack in an amazing amount of information stored in a variety of forms, including full length songs and videos, shorter song and video clips, textual information, behind the scenes interviews, full song lyrics, alternate versions of popular Peter Gabriel songs, audio and video clips covering a wide range of less well known artists who have in the past been sponsored by Peter Gabriel, information about human rights causes such as Amnesty International and Witness, video footage from the Womad Festival. . . so much information that it's easy to get lost in it. (In fact, there's so much information on "XPlora" that they couldn't fit it all on the CD. The CD is accompanied by a printed companion volume — a book, for those of you who've forgotten about them — which is as interesting and attractively designed as the CD itself.) Your best bet, therefore, is to just take it slow, so as not to become overwhelmed by it all.

"XPlora" is also quite impressive visually — it has style as well as substance. Rather than going the 3D route, the creators, a very large team of talented graphic designers, created a large quantity of exquisite background screens against which they set the content. Every screen is different, individually crafted and all of them equally beautiful. The only elements

that are consistent across all screens are a series of small colored boxes at the bottom left of the screen, and a black bar setting aside a portion of the top of the screen. Both the colored boxes and the apportioned top piece let you navigate back up through whatever hierarchy of screens you've passed through, so at least you can always get back to where you came from. You can also usually find, in that topmost portion of the screen, a variety of buttons that allow for lateral movement, though these buttons also differ widely from place to place.

Moving on to content. . . I won't attempt to categorize the vast amount of it featured on this IMCD, but I will mention a few points of specific interest.

nyone who watches MTV knows that the music videos of Peter Gabriel are usually the freshest and most entertaining around, chock full of astonishingly cool images. And the makers of "XPlora," bless their little hearts, know that the most fun thing about Peter Gabriel is his videos, and have included a number of them in "XPlora." With all the computer-generated imagery in Peter Gabriel's videos, watching them on your personal computer is like seeing them coming home. With their computer-generated origins, it's as if they were meant to be viewed on a computer screen. Included are full length videos for "Steam," "Kiss That Frog" (as bizarrely surreal a fantasy as I've ever seen), "Digging In The Dirt," "Blood of Eden," and possibly even more that I haven't found yet. (Yeah, even after reviewing this thing, I don't claim to have found everything on it.) You can watch these videos with or without accompanying lyrics — something I enjoyed seeing, because personally, I can rarely understand the lyrics of any given song anyway.

Please pardon me while I digress for a moment, but I'd like to take a moment to point out how Peter Gabriel is a sort of cultural oddity within the music industry. Where so many musical artists take themselves oh-so-seriously, with their pouty lower lips and grimaces-of-inner-turmoil (hey, you try to pout and grimace at the same time), Peter Gabriel almost always looks like he's having a good time when he performs.

I think the reason for that is that he's followed his dream — he gets paid to do what he loves. That kind of success is rare in a world of 9 to 5 jobs, and he knows it. And he's having fun. In fact, he's having such a great time on this planet of ours that he wants everyone to be having an equally great time. I happen to think this makes him a better artist, because he's concerned with the entire world around him, and not just his own pouty ego.

ut more importantly, I think that's why he puts so much effort into programs such as Witness and Amnesty International, and participates in such events as the Womad Festival (a cross cultural musical gathering). I was very impressed that these topics were included in "XPlora," and handled with all taste and seriousness. After all, it is essentially an entertainment product. ("Oh wow, man. . . guys in prison. Bummer, dude.") But Gabriel, having these interests, also credits his audience with enough intelligence to share those interests, and maybe he hopes that we'll also want to participate in making the world a better place.

OK, sappy moment aside, another neat thing to be found in "XPlora" is the sound mixer. True, it's incredibly similar to the sound mixers in both "Prince Interactive" and "Jump," but the song you get to work with is better than those in either of the other two products, and

the interface is more attractive. The basic idea, in case you haven't heard it before, is that one of P.G.'s songs has been cleverly broken down into 4 separate tracks, each containing a different element of the song — drums, bass, guitars, vocals. A series of corresponding sliders lets you raise or lower the volume of individual tracks as you edit in real time, and the application remembers what you've changed and when. When you're done editing, you can play back the new song variation you've created, and also save and restore mixes for use in future sessions (if you're lucky enough to find your way back to the mixer in a future session — so far, I haven't).

Fans of Peter Gabriel are also aware of his interest in the music of all cultures. Yet another cool feature of "XPlora" is the inclusion of information about several exotic foreign musical instruments, such as the kalimba (African thumb piano), darabuka (a small Egyptian drum), and ko chung (a 21-stringed Chinese harp). Not only are you presented with a text piece explaining the use and history of each instrument, but also with a small video of the instrument in use by a native artist, and to cap that off, each instrument is presented in virtual form, for you to strike, plink, blow, etc. A series of notes from each instrument has been recorded, so as you fiddle with them, you get to hear what they actually sound like.

Though there's certainly far more to be said about "XPlora," I think I'll quit while I'm ahead. I could talk all day about the stuff you'll find on this CD, but if you're not interested by now, it's probably not going to be your cup of tea. On the other hand, if you definitely are interested, rather than listen to me blather on about it indefinitely, you should rush right out and buy a copy.

Pros

- Tons of material to explore
- Brilliantly designed graphics
- Very diverse range of subject matter
- Peter Gabriel's full length music videos
- Multifinder friendly! (See? It doesn't take much to please me.)
- Cool "XPlora" book that doesn't require a CD ROM drive!

Cons

- Interface tends to be a little confusing
- Often difficult to find one's way back to a particular spot