



Judy Hyman in the composition room of her studio, which features a Mac Pro running Digital Performer.

# The Performer Inside the DAW

Judy Hyman's career mixes composing and fiddling

“I grew up under a piano,” Judy Hyman says, explaining how she got interested in music composition. “My father’s a pianist/composer/arranger, and I remember as a child playing and drawing under the piano while he worked.” This fascination drew her to studying piano and violin in grade school. By high school, Hyman was playing in orchestras and quartets, and absorbing the work of the classical greats, as well as The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, and Joni Mitchell—anything with rhythm and drumming. Today, she plays fiddle with her band, the Horse Flies, and finds other outlets for her musical creativity by scoring for films and creating string arrangements for musicians—sometimes co-composing with her husband, Jeff Hyman.

## How did you get started doing composition work?

I began creating original music in the mid-'80s with our band, the Horse Flies. The band has always been an outlet for expressing all of those influences—rhythm, melody lines, harmonies, weaving textures, beauty, angularity, groove. I didn't yet use any

technology for this and didn't write anything down.

Then in the early '90s, the band was asked to score the film *Where the Rivers Flow North*, starring Rip Torn and Tantoo Cardinal, and directed by Jay Craven. As we didn't have a clue about how to score to picture, we hired our friend, Ben Wittman, a great drummer and percussionist, who also knows tech, and he brought his Mac Classic and an Akai sampler to the party. We tracked on ADATs, and his sequencing software was [MOTU] Performer. This was a huge turning point for me. The MIDI technology made perfect sense to me, and it provided me with a way to realize a lifelong but unarticulated ambition to write music. I also found that combining live/organic sounds with sampled and synthesized sounds was really exciting, and I was almost as interested in the technology as the music.

Next came an 11-minute video commissioned by the National Park Service for an exhibit at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. They wanted someone with a background in both classical and fiddle music—Jefferson did both—and who had a feel for contemporary sounds.

**Is that how you got the next gig, writing the music for a documentary about Thomas Jefferson and his interest in wine, *The Cultivate Life: Thomas Jefferson and Wine*?**

Yes, for this one I ended up getting an Emmy, and I began to wonder if my whole career would become scoring films about Thomas Jefferson! Since then I have made music for a number of documentaries on a variety of topics. And, my husband and I have now made music for more feature films as well, another one being *The Year That Trembled*.

## Tell me about your studio.

We have two rooms dedicated to audio production in our home, which is in the country just outside of Ithaca, N.Y. One is where I compose and track for demo purposes; the other is where Jeff and I track, edit, and pre-mix/mix.

My composition studio is about 14'x16'. A Mac Pro 8-core runs Digital Performer; virtual instruments such as [Spectrasonics] Omnisphere [and] Stylus RMX, [IK Multimedia] Miroslav Philharmonik, [Synthogy] Ivory, MOTU Ethno [Instrument], [Applied Acoustics] Lounge Lizard,

[IK Multimedia] Sonik Synth, MOTU MX4, [Native Instruments] Absynth, Moog Modular V, [NI] Massive, [NI] Reaktor, TimewARP, [NI] B4, [NI] Kontakt 4, Korg Legacy, and GForce M-Tron; sound libraries such as Vienna Opus 1 and 2, Glass & Stones, Balinese Gamelan, Pan Drum; and plug-ins such as Waves, PSP 608 delay, and [IK Multimedia] Classik Studio Reverb. My main controller's a Kurzweil K2500 and I monitor with ProAc 100s, which Jeff bought me for my birthday one year—nice guy!

Our larger studio is a Pro Tools HD2 room that's about 16'x25'. We also use it as a rehearsal space. Generally, people play in the room next to it (which is also sometimes known as our living room), but we've also had success with people tracking right in the studio. For converters, we have a Pro Tools HD192 and an Apogee Rosetta. We have a bunch of good preamps—a Phoenix DRS-2, a Chandler TG2, a couple of Avedis MA5s, a LaChapell 583, and a couple of API 521s—and we have a Purple Audio MC77 compressor.

### **Apparently, the gear bug has hit! What makes Digital Performer your go-to DAW?**

I've been composing with Digital Performer since it was just a sequencer back in the '80s. I find it logical and really flexible. The notation view [QuickScribe] is particularly important to me; I bounce back and forth between it and the graphic view constantly.

### **How do gigging and composing mesh for you?**

I love the mix and variety of composing (very solitary and somewhat technical) and performing (very social and immediate). We often play at festivals where we meet lots of musicians and hear lots of different kinds of music, and I love that. Those experiences really feed the imagination. And then it feels good to get home and hole up in the studio.

### **How do you split the composing responsibilities with Jeff?**

Jeff and I have been musical partners since we first met playing fiddle music in the late '70s. We have really different music skills and backgrounds, which I think complement each other pretty well. In terms of composition, he starts the cues that are rock-based or built on acoustic guitar, or that are purely sonic. I start the cues that are classical, electronic, or fiddle-ish. And then we work together to complete each other's "nuggets."

In terms of production, while he's gotten pretty solid on Pro Tools, I'm still the house tech, MIDI queen, and chief editor.

### **You also create string arrangements for recording artists. How does this fit in?**

Ithaca is full of musicians who make albums and it has a couple of really nice studios, and I often get called if an artist wants strings or solo violin on an album. And now, through the Internet, I've been able to do some arrangements for people at a distance, too.

Usually I get an MP3 of a rough mix, import it into DP, make a tempo map if it wasn't recorded to click, and then create MIDI string parts. I rely heavily on the notation view for this kind of work. Once the parts are created, I track myself multiple times on each violin and viola part and, if necessary, fold in MIDI strings till it's full enough. For the cello, sometimes I'll hire a cellist; other times, a MIDI cello or section sound is good enough. Sometimes we'll be able to hire a string quartet, and we track them multiple times either at home or one of the local studios.

### **Let's focus on a recent project, the John James Audubon: Drawn From Nature documentary. Take me through your process.**

We spotted the film with the director and editor, another husband-and-wife team, Larry Hott and Diane Garey of Florentine Films/Hott Productions. They had clear and pretty specific ideas about where

the music should begin and end, and where there should be changes within each cue. We also talked about instrumentation, sounds, and moods of each cue, and they had temp music in some places. We left their studio with several 20-minute QuickTime files (with temp music on the left so I can mute or play it and the rest of the audio on the right), a very complete cue sheet and MP3s of all the temp tracks.

Once I have those tools, I make a DP file for each cue, import the associated QuickTime file, set the start time, and enter markers for each hit-point and the end. Then I'll start playing around with instruments and sounds. My approach is one of first going into a mild trance state, trying things while watching that section of the film, recording, coming back to reality, selecting what works, building it, refining it, and fitting it to the film.

At the end of each day, I ftp MP3s to the director. The next morning he calls with comments or requests.

On this project, I used a combination of electronic sounds and real instruments. For the demos, I used MIDI sounds for French horn, cello, piano, trumpet, and percussion. After the film was locked, I printed parts, dumped the MIDI to audio in DP and moved the audio into Pro Tools for tracking and mixing. I hired live players for each of those parts, which is easy here because we have some really great musicians in town.

### **What's next for you?**

I've just begun writing music for a two-hour documentary about the War of 1812 for Hott Productions that is funded by WDET in Buffalo and will air in 2011 on PBS, CBC, and BBC. And in anticipation, I upgraded my computer and every piece of software in my studio, and I sure hope the dust settles soon. I'll also be touring with Natalie Merchant this summer, playing violin/fiddle in her band—and I'll be carrying a fully loaded MacBook Pro so I can compose and keep working on the road.