

KEYBOARD PRESENTS
4th
ANNUAL

Reader Tape Contest Winner

CHUCK BUTLER

BY ROBERT L. DOERSCHUK

LAST DECEMBER, WITH THE HOLIDAYS breathing down our necks, with schedules strangled by hours of battling shopping mall mobs, with no break in the usual deadline pressure, the Keyboard staff found a marvelous way to cope with the festive chaos: We locked ourselves in our rooms and spent two days listening to tapes sent in for the fourth annual Reader Soundpage Contest.

And you know what? It was worth it. Sorry about not sending you this year's tie, Uncle Herb; I was too busy enjoying the music laid on us by the hundreds of talented readers who answered our call to compete for a place on our Soundpage.

Shortly after announcing this year's contest in our Oct. '88 issue, we began getting bags full of cassettes. The tapes came from hither and yore—from Norway, Australia, Rumania, Switzerland, Syria, and from the deck of the U.S.S. Oldendorf, docked in Yokosuka, Japan. They came bearing musical gifts: synthesized adaptations of a Brahms rhapsody and a Mozart concerto, a Scarlatti piano piece recorded on (surprise!) a piano, Christmas songs done in reggae style ("Angels We Have Heard On High") and as a sequence of push-button telephone beeps ("Carol Of The Ma Bells"), an electronic klezmer tune, and lots of original material that fits into no obvious category.

We also heard hours' worth of material that was too easily categorized. The trend among many entrants seemed to be toward modular pieces that begin with a drum beat or a simple

riff, upon which different accompaniments are piled, layer upon layer, in neat eight-bar increments. You could almost bet your Christmas bonus that one of these layers would consist of a sixteenth-note sequence, percolating in perfect sync with a drum machine upbeat. While much of this was neatly executed, we hope that some of the players behind these tapes probe a bit deeper into their creative and technical resources in future projects.

But as in years past, we also came across plenty of great stuff—too much, in fact, to discuss in detail. Let's just give a special thanks to Dan McCollim of Spokane, Washington, Dan Van Oss of Pella, Iowa, Larry Gerndt of Mountain View, California, and Kevin Kliesch of Parsippany, New Jersey (good luck at the Berklee College Of Music, Kevin!) for their outstanding contributions.

But in the end, our choice for this year's prizewinner was obvious: Chuck Butler of Somerdale, New Jersey, whose sizzling submission, titled "Quatro," proves that a talented player can work wonders with a relatively modest setup. Armed with a Korg Sigma, an Akai S900, a DX7, and a Roland Juno-106, Butler lays down a one-man groove that most fusion bands would envy. His solo line sears through a steamy rhythm accompaniment, with bass and drums interacting like Cobham and Clarke on a good night. Add that to the fact that Butler put it all together himself, with help from Performer and Southworth JamBox 4+ reading SMPTE time code, and you've got a Soundpage-quality *tour de force*.





ROBERT HAKALSKI

"Quatro" was recorded last September, October, and November at Baker Sound Studios in Philadelphia, where the 25-year-old keyboardist spends much of his time cutting his own music. Originally conceived as a demo to shop around to independent labels, "Quatro" seemed to fit the Competition requirements, so Butler sent it in. It immediately caught our attention as a standout solo effort, combining studio chops with the kind of excitement that Butler cultivated through live work with various Top 40 and jazz groups, pit bands, and a year on the casino circuit with an R&B outfit.

"Getting a band-like groove has been my bag for a long time," he reports. "The important thing is that in order for music to sound real and human and natural, you've got to hear interaction between musicians. So if you're going to use MIDI to be a one-man band, so to speak, you've got to think of ways that you can make that happen artificially."

Butler's method for capturing that feel is to make each part sound as if it were being played by musicians bouncing ideas off of one another onstage. "You have an advantage in a live context," he points out,

"in that you can play a solo, and the rest of the band will respond to it. In a MIDI situation, such as 'Quatro,' I don't have that advantage, so I tried to write it into the piece."

On "Quatro" and many of Butler's other pieces, the drums are the most important focus. "I'm especially big on doing drums," he admits. "I love to play with real drummers, but if I'm not doing that on a particular project, I'll do everything I can to make my drum parts sound as real as possible. That's where the challenge is. It's no challenge to put 'kick, snare, kick, snare' into a drum machine. It's much tougher to think like a drummer. I want to be the drummer! My goal is to have people ask, 'Who's the drummer on that cut?' and be able to say, 'I am!'"

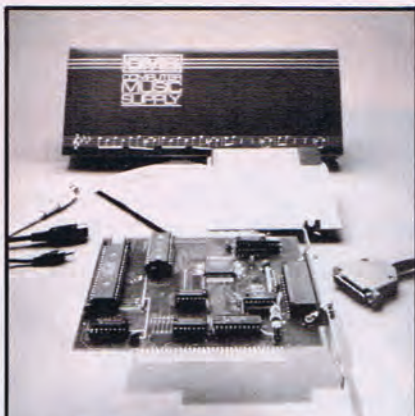
Though he hesitates to call himself an actual drummer in the sticks-and-skins sense, Butler banged on a few kits throughout his years in garage bands. "When I was in high school, I had a lot of different groups. My mother was the only parent who would let us practice in her home. So all my groups rehearsed in our basement. When the drummers left, I'd crank up the stereo, and go at it on their drums. I never

Chuck Butler with (clockwise from lower L): Neotek Series 1 console, Otari MX-5050 two-track above Aphex Aural Exciter, Urei LA4 stereo limiter, and Otari MTR-10 two-track mixdown deck, Korg Sigma above Yamaha REV7 reverb unit, Lexicon PCM-60, and another Otari MX-5050, Roland Juno-106 above Yamaha DX7, Apple Macintosh (running "Quatro" in Mark Of The Unicorn Performer) above Akai S900.

got very good, but I've been around so many drummers that I'm as inside of their playing as they are. I think I could be a good drummer if I worked at it. It's all I can do to be a good keyboard player," he laughs.

It's also important to Butler that he conceive each part within the limits of each actual instrument being evoked through synth or sampler. "A lot of people try to put things into a drum machine that a real drummer just couldn't play," he points out. "There are things in 'Quatro' that would be very difficult for a drummer to do. But as long as the best drummer in the world could play what I write, I feel justified in writing that part. I say to myself, 'If Dave Weckl can play this, then it's okay.'"

Butler feels that Mark Of The Unicorn's Performer was the tool he needed to



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unlock the mysteries of effective drum arrangement. "The great thing about Performer is that it lets you place your ideas wherever you want," he explains. "It lets you slide everything into the right place, so that you come up with something that feels like a real drummer would play it. I also like how you can slide the tempo of the entire track through Performer. When I set up a piece like 'Quatro,' I think about which parts of the piece the band might rush a little, and which parts they might slow down. Then I program that in. It might not even be a metronome marking; maybe I'll just slow it down by half a metronome marking. But you can hear it in the half-time B section of 'Quatro,' where I had the band slow down just a little. To me, this makes it more believable."

Even before moving the drum tracks into place, Butler prepares to build each part by outlining his ideas the old-fashioned way: with pencil and paper. "I write everything out," he says. "When I notate my drums and bass, I try to think about where the solos will be most intense, where the band is going to want to build or lay back. On this piece in particular, when I wrote the drum and bass parts, I tried to come up with things that make it sound as if the drummer and bass player are responding to each other. Then, once I got the rhythm tracks down, I put that on tape, took it over to my piano, and worked on my solo for a few days before actually laying it down. The idea was to build my solo so that it might anticipate the pre-recorded rhythm section responses, so it would sound as if the bassist and drummer were listening to the soloist. I'd try to think about where things could happen that would foreshadow the rhythm section parts that had already been laid down. This way, I learned where I could play certain licks that would do the trick. After a few passes at the solo, I had what I needed."

The synth solo line reflects Butler's ability to get maximum mileage from his gear. "For soloing in a swing style like this, I like to have a lot of velocity control," he explains. "So I cut this solo with a real velocity-sensitive DX7 sound. I didn't record it onto tape, though. I synced to tape, and cut the solo into Performer. After I had a pass that satisfied me, I kept the DX7 sound, but added in a Juno sound. It doesn't change the overall timbre much, except that when the pitch-bend opens up, the filter opens with it. I really like how you can open your VCF when you pitch-bend up on a Juno."

The buzzy quality in Butler's solo line comes mainly from his Korg Sigma. "I've had that keyboard for a long time," he says. "It's pretty beat up; it's been thrown out of the backs of vans a lot. But I still like some of its sounds. I've sampled it, which is really good because now I can play it polyphonically. For this piece, though, I plugged right into the Sigma, ran it

through a noise gate, and put it right onto tape. That screechy oboe-type sound in the right channel at the beginning of the solo is the Korg doing its thing with a bright sawtooth sound; the left channel is the more percussive DX texture. When it goes into half-time on the bridge, it's mainly Korg, partly played from the sampler."

On that bridge section, the Sigma is doubled by a DX texture, which was created by Chris Bertolotti, a friend from Berklee. "When you use a sound that somebody else makes, you ought to put his name down," Butler states. "He gave me this sound called Analog 2, a nice, rich sound that doesn't quite sound like brass, although it is really warm. He made it up, so he gets the credit."

A more subtle part of the solo sound was added as a finishing touch through the S900. "I wanted to use these samples I had taken of wine glasses being tapped," Butler recalls. "So I took the solo track in Performer, made a copy of it, and went into the copy, cutting out a few random notes and pasting them to another track. That gave me one track with the complete solo, and two other tracks that had bits and pieces of the solo. I assigned each of them to one of the wine glasses, and split them in the pan. You don't really notice it that much, but it really makes the solo jump."

The bass line was also pieced together. Parts of it were played in real time and subsequently combined, although on sections where Butler wanted to lock tightly to the kick drum, he entered the bass notes into Performer in step time, adjusting them in the line until they felt right.

Most of the bass sound consists of samples taken by Butler of a friend's fretless Fender Precision bass. For emphasis, he dropped in other samples of thumb hits played on a Steinberger bass guitar. Despite the roundness of the tone, there's no acoustic bass in Butler's timbre. "The Fender sounded really good, so I didn't have to mess with it too much," he says. "All I did was knock off a little of the attack, so that I could get a little variety in the velocity. That way, if the bass player on 'Quatro' is theoretically playing harder or softer, I could get a harder or softer attack."

It might not be obvious at first listen, but there's a bit of guitar in "Quatro" as well—not much, but enough to create the effect Butler needed. "It's kind of an interesting touch," he says. "I took some guitar samples, but the only ones I used here were a single slide and some harmonic squeals. Although they're only for effect, they're really important. I like guitar slides because they give you such a feeling of power."

Though Butler puts a lot of care into his timbral combinations, the piano solo and comp sounds on "Quatro" are a different story. "Sad to say, that's the Akai S900 piano, right off the disk," he laughs. "Although it's an awful piano sound, it's the best one I've got. I didn't have the

bucks for anything better. The guys at Baker Sound Studios may be buying me a Kurzweil soon, though. The music scene has been going so well for me that I think they're willing to spend some bucks on my behalf. They might be getting me a new console too. What a dream that would be!"

For many musicians, having the kind of relationship with a studio that Butler enjoys with Baker Sound is a dream in itself. Shortly after graduating from Berklee and moving to Philadelphia in search of session work, Butler hooked up with Baker Sound as their staff keyboardist. In exchange for playing jingle dates for their advertising agency clients from late morning to five in the afternoon, he was given free run of the facility for his own record-

ing projects after-hours. In some ways Baker was less than ideal; since the facility is designed mainly around voice-over booths, Butler has to do most of his work from the control room. Yet the staff is supportive, and as long as the young keyboardist can handle his nocturnal schedule, he's got free studio time to burn.

And, judging by the music he's accumulated, Butler is burnin'. When not making demos, he keeps busy freelancing lounge piano jobs around Philadelphia, or gigging with his heavy metal band, temporarily known as Adam Stranger. Lately the jingle work has been picking up too. On the day we spoke with Butler, he had just completed his second national assignment, for Campbell Soup. "They had another piece of music they were going to use for this

commercial, but their creative types decided that they didn't like it. So they called me this morning, I went in, and we knocked out a new arrangement," he shrugs.

When does this young dynamo sleep? "I'm crashed every day until 10:30 or so," he says.

So prospective clients should wait until the afternoon to call? Not a chance.

"Hey, man, they can call me in the morning," Butler quickly interjects. "I don't care. I'm available 24 hours a day."

With that kind of energy, and the sort of talent displayed on "Quatro," Butler has clearly got it together. We'll bet he even got his Christmas shopping done on time. (Sorry, Uncle Herb. You'll have the tie in time for Easter.)

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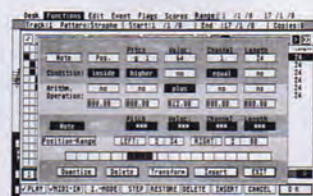
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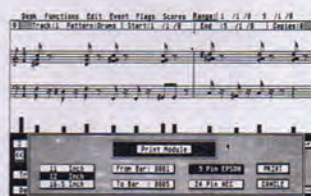
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