

# The Fat Man Sings



The Fat Man might not be familiar to those of you who follow the pop charts, but this Dallas-based band has been heard by millions if not billions of game players. From writing three-minute jingles for commercials to nominee for best soundtrack at the March Game Developers conference for Origin's *Wing Commander*, George Sanger and his team provide music for the game players of the world. The Fat Man is (from left to right) K. Weston Phelan, George Sanger, Dave Govett, and Joe McDermott.

in the game business. They are the Fat Man. "We're huge," says Sanger.

Fat Man central is Sanger's small, tree-shaded red brick house in North Austin. The entire front room is taken up with computers, sound equipment, and Sanger's collection of guitars. Swiveling around in a high-backed blue-padded chair behind a giant desk, Sanger barks into the phone, fiddles with equipment, and, in general, lives large. Sanger's family reigns in the rest of the house, where Linda Sanger manages the household, the couple's two kids, and the Fat Man's books.

Family is important to Sanger. He got his start in the game business when his brother's roommate Dave Warhol, who was writing games for Intellivision, commissioned him to write a 10-second tune for \$1,000. The tune was called "Carnival of the Penguins," and it was used in a game called *Thin Ice*. Since then, games boomed and busted, and they're booming again.

George's brother David Sanger became the drummer for Grammy Award winning *Asleep at the Wheel*, and George Sanger's career in the game business took a hiatus. As he puts it, "I wasn't writing 12 seconds of music for a thousand dollars anymore, I was writing something like up to three minutes for commercials for \$79.95." At that time, Sanger was also running a recording studio for Austin musicians, which is how he met the musicians he now collaborates with. At his brother's wedding, he ran into Dave Warhol again, and, once again, he got a break. Warhol put him in contact with Brian Moriarty, who asked Sanger to create music based on Swan



**N**estled in Texas hill country, Austin is a city jam-packed with musicians, but it's not necessarily an easy town for a musician to make a living in. In fact, for the amount of money they make, some musicians might as well be playing music as a hobby. George Sanger has gone about the whole business of making music and making money in a completely different way. Now, he's making money playing music, and he's making money at his favorite hobby: playing games. In fact, he and the three other musicians who work with him carry a lot of weight

Lake for the LucasArts game Loom.

The next big break and a big evolutionary step for the Fat Man came when Sanger was asked to write music for Origin's Wing Commander. He didn't have time to work on it, so he subcontracted it to Dave Govett who, conveniently, had the kind of grand World War II meets Star Wars theme Origin wanted already floating around in his head. It was something Govett had worked out in high school. Then, Origin producer Chris Roberts made several decisions that made Wing Commander a significant milestone in gaming history and also helped propel the Fat Man into the big time.

Roberts decided to make Wing Commander more interactive with the addition of characters and a storyline. Also, Origin refused to compromise game quality for the lowest common denominator market. Wing Commander required a Sound Blaster, the best commercial sound board available at the time, and it required at least a 386 computer, plenty of room on the hard disk, and a reasonable amount of RAM. It was a huge success. That year, two titles Sanger worked on, Loom and Wing Commander (nominees for best sound track at the Game Developers Conference in San Jose, Calif.; Origin won the category), were Sanger clients, and the Fat Man became "the biggest name in music for multimedia."

#### The Style is No Style

Sanger says there is no such thing as a patented Fat Man sound. For one thing, he says, he doesn't have the chops (a musical bag of tricks to fill in any blank), but also because the Fat Man is really

four people: Joe McDermott, K. Weston Phelan, Dave Govett, and Sanger. Joe McDermott has produced several albums of children's music. He was also a member of Grains of Faith, one of Austin's best undiscovered bands and, says Sanger, "he's created some of the most ear-bleeding music for Nintendo games."

Kevin Phelan used to run sound for Austin musicians including Asleep at the Wheel, was a member of the punk/funk band One Bad Pig, and he still specializes in the eclectic, weaving world of music with jazz and pop. (McDermott and Phelan are now members of a new band called Caterpillar.) Dave Govett specializes in grand epic themes à la John Williams or Danny Elfman. As for George Sanger, the original Fat Man, he says his job is to bring it all together. "I specialize in music salad. I don't ever just play what's under my fingers because there's nothing there."

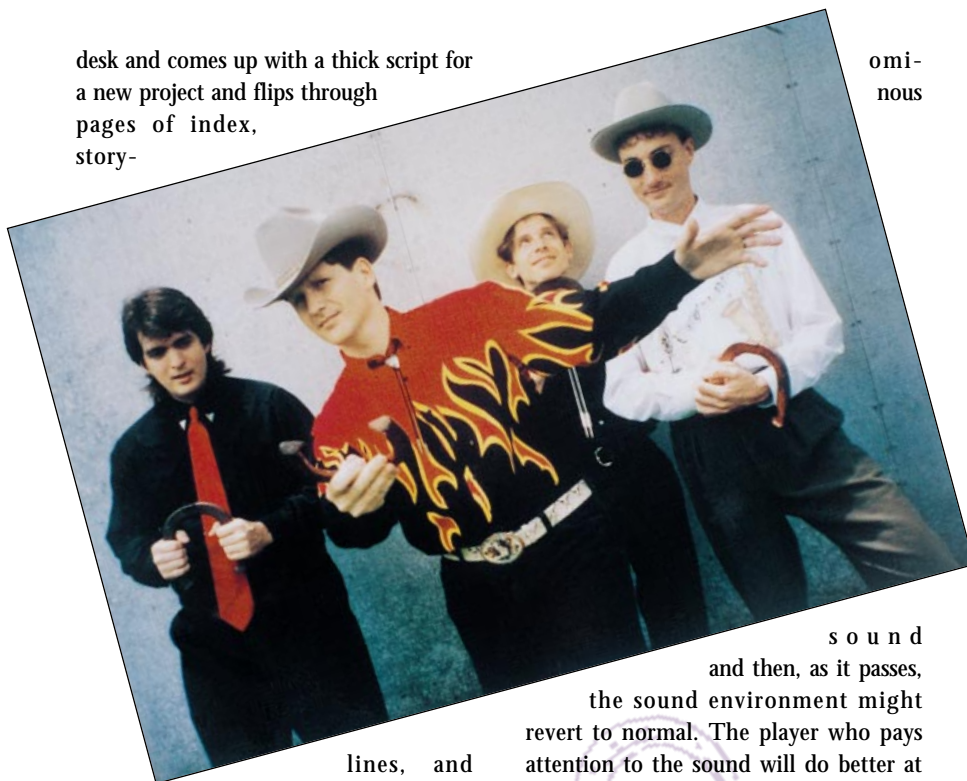
Sanger says he does not play keyboard well, and he deprecates his guitar playing talents. "What I have," he says, "is the ability to drink a beer and lead a jam so that everyone has fun. On the keyboard side, I have the ability to feel an emotion and slowly and painstakingly sculpt it out on the keyboard and the computer. Also, I have the ability to coach other folks through the process of performing it."

Depending on the developers, the Fat Man can enter a project at any stage. In the case of IndyCar Racing, the game was already completed, and the Fat Man was hired by the developers at Papyrus to come up with a theme. To illustrate how early he can come into a project, Sanger reaches across that broad expanse of a

by Kathleen  
Maher

Ever wonder who  
writes those nifty  
soundtracks, heart-  
pounding scores, and  
catchy tunes for your  
favorite game?  
Read how one man  
and his band are  
shaping the future of  
music in gaming.

desk and comes up with a thick script for a new project and flips through pages of index, story-



lines, and storyboards. "This is a little more than we need, but it gives us the fall and lay of the land." Obviously, Sanger and the Fat Man would rather come into the project as early as possible.

In the case of *Putt Putt goes to the Moon*, the Fat Man worked with the developers at Humongous Entertainment every step of the way. "They would send us a new update of the game with the music integrated. That was a wonderful way to work because I didn't have to work with any fancy technology at all. I didn't have to use any screwy tools and kill my computer by loading up prototype software. All I had to do is put the game on and see how it was playing so far and send them feedback."

The sound environment for Electronic Arts' *SSN-21 Sea Wolf* created in collaboration with John Ratcliff is one Sanger and his team are most proud of because it uses sound in such an innovative way. "I wish I had been even more involved in creating sound for that one," says Sanger wistfully. All the sound associated with a real submarine has been recreated and helps create a three-dimensional sound environment. Sound is also used to lead and misdirect the player. For instance, if some threat passes by the submarine, the music might change to an

ominous

are going for a Disney model that relies on in-house talent. At the South by Southwest music conference in Austin this year, Richard Garriot chronicled the progression of sound in his titles and described a system called NIM (Neno's Intelligent Music) developed at Origin by Nenad Vutrinic that incorporates a transition theme to move the user, the action, and the sound to a new course.

As Garriot describes it, when a user makes a decision or chooses a new course of action, the music plays to the next bar, picks up the transition theme, and moves to the theme appropriate to the user choice without any jarring shift in mood. The difficulty of working this way, according to Randy Buck, a programmer at Origin, is that instead of working in a linear fashion, music is composed in a matrix.

For his part, Sanger believes fast changes emphasize the player's control over the game, and therefore he prefers it, though he's also investigating other approaches. "Transitions are cool," he says, "if the composer writes them. But if they get into the hands of the programmers, they can lose some of their musical impact." The Fat Man can write transitions, and the members are discussing the development of tools to make it easier to write music in a matrix as Buck describes it. "We want to make sure we're not getting lazy and fat. Just fat."

Sanger believes his success in the computer game business is directly related to his liking for games. He can identify with the player of a game he's working on. "Some poor schmuck is stuck in a room with my music, and I want it to be good music so they don't hate me." Many musicians, he feels, hold games in contempt, and they're not interested in writing music for games because of the limitations of the hardware and software.

Sanger seems to welcome limitations as a challenge. Perhaps that's why he's such a game player. No doubt learning from Origin's experience with *Wing Commander*, Sanger encouraged the developers of *7th Guest* to write to General Midi standards, giving the game an extension on life as sound boards adopted the new standard and actually

sound

and then, as it passes, the sound environment might revert to normal. The player who pays attention to the sound will do better at the game.

Sanger is also pleased with the effect of the music for *7th Guest*, since the music throughout most of the game is not stereotypical "scary" music but rather cool jazz. In this way, Sanger hoped to heighten the effect of the game by working in a counterpoint to the game's ostensible horror aspects.

## Methodology in the Madness

An interesting element of writing music for games is the structure of the game. In general, says Sanger, the team is asked to write a few themes: you win, you lose, you wander around. Consideration has to be given to what happens when the player changes course. In *Wing Commander*, the style of the music allows changes to occur without too much distraction. It draws on the conventions of early filmmaking that also had the same problem in terms of cutting film together. Therefore the music is a pastiche of bombastic warlike themes and lyrical transition passages. Likewise, *7th Guest*'s jazzy style lends itself well to changes in tone that, while sometimes abrupt, are not unduly distracting.

In contrast, game developers at Origin are taking a different approach. They

improved the sound of 7th Guest.

Nevertheless, given present levels of development, a sound board in a computer can only sound so good, and not all sound boards, even those that conform to General Midi standards, sound alike. Sanger says that in his early work with companies such as Trilobyte, LucasArts, and Origin, the developers would take his music and optimize it for all sound boards. "I thought I was really good," says Sanger. But then, on another project, Sanger was horrified to start up the brand new game and "the music literally sounded like farts, squeaks, and beeps, and there was my name—music produced by the Fat Man—and all of a sudden I realized I have got to get into the sound business."

Sanger and The Fat Man are entering the sound business in a couple of ways. Not content to simply supply musical themes for game players, the Fat Man and primarily Kevin Phelan are developing a library of tones to ensure

that games players, developers, and musicians are working with the same basic elements. Yamaha has licensed the Fat Man's General Midi patch set for the opl2 and opl3 FM synthesizers, which are the heart of Sound Blasters. The Fat Man is working with Yamaha on the development of drivers to be included with boards using the opl4.

#### The Sound Business

Also, the Fat Man has become a consultant. Board manufacturers can hire the Fat Man and win a seal of approval that promises users the boards will produce the proper tones for specific instruments and make no demands on the CPU. For, as far as Sanger is concerned, if the sound board slows down the CPU, it can stop a game dead without one explosion, dead Nazi, or passage explored.

In addition to ensuring that computers play the game and music correctly, the Fat Man's entrance into the realm of standards and hardware has another

"Some poor schmuck is stuck in a room with my music, and I want it to be good, so they don't hate me."

advantage. "We get our name plastered all over everything. If there's not something in it that feeds my ego, I just can't get out of bed in the morning." In other words, says Sanger, "I'm doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, and that's what I like to do."

Sanger now composes on the Roland Sound Canvas, and he encourages other composers to use it. Not only does he believe that it is the best wave table synthesizer ("so far"), it is now the de facto standard that gives manufacturers a common ground to work on. If manufacturers develop products with the expectation that most composers will be composing on the Sound Canvas, the sound balance will work as they intend it. "I'm trying to turn the tide on this [the proliferation of sound boards and varying standards]. Instead of having software developers burdened with having to support lots of different cards, I want the hardware companies to support the way developers are writing music."

### Turning the Tide?

Sometimes when The Fat Man players get together, they play surf music. When George Sanger was asked to perform at the Interactive Conference in San Jose, Calif., this year, he wasn't able to bring the rest of the team with him. So, he brought his guitar and got together with keyboard player Dave Javelosa of Sega, bass player Michael Land of LucasArts, drummer Neil Grandstaff of Sierra On-Line, guitar player Dave Albert of Sega, saxophonist Albert Lowe (who is not only Sierra On-Line's first composer, but also the man who created Leisure Suit Larry), and independent composers Jim Donofrio on guitar, and Don Griffin on trumpet. And yes, they played surf music.

It's appropriate. George Sanger is one of many trying to stay on top of a very quickly changing market. He's doing it by branching out rather than protecting his turf. "Every time I give something away I get more back." Enthusiastically describing the jam in

San Jose, Sanger confesses to being initially nervous about meeting and working with competitors but, as it worked out, "I made some very nice friends and cemented some very good relationships."

Likewise, Sanger admits, "I was nervous when I started giving jobs to the guys on the team, but that's what turned it into a team instead of just one composer." Staying on top, staying ahead of the trend, that's surfing. It's that ability, over and above songwriting, that has allowed George Sanger to make money at something he loves. ■

*Kathleen Maher is a freelance writer in San Francisco, Calif., specializing in media and culture. She is also the executive editor of Cadence Magazine. But, Kathleen's true talent may be her ability to find the best barbeque in Texas and Lucinda Williams on the jukebox. She can be reached via Internet at [kmaher@mfi.com](mailto:kmaher@mfi.com) or 71154.76@compuserve.com.*