

GarageBand from iLife 09 (Version 5): Upgrade Or Not To Upgrade?

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GarageBand has been a revolutionary tool for Mac users in the classroom, opening up wonderful opportunities for creativity with a tool that comes free with new Mac computers. Its attractiveness for creativity is due to a combination of features: a very simple, easy-to-use interface; easy of working with both digital audio and MIDI tracks; ability to record live performance; notation as well as piano-roll MIDI for editing; and, most importantly, a wealth of high quality loops, software instruments, and effects with more possible through Apple's Jam Packs.

The key with GarageBand is this wonderful, accessible interface that just invites you and your students to experiment with creating music. Underneath the surface, rewarding those who dig deeper into GB's features, is a host of very powerful sound features for editing, effects, and more. When GB was first introduced, many of the higher-end Apple Logic users were complaining that GB had effects plug-ins that Apple had yet to implement in Logic!

With the most recent release of iLife 09 let's take a look at what changes you will find in GarageBand (Version 5) to see whether Apple's improvements of a "good thing" merit the cost of upgrading this software for your classroom or lab use.

NEW FEATURES

Version 3 of GarageBand offered podcasting and track "ducking" for voice as a key new feature. Version 4 offered the Magic GarageBand with a virtual band simulating the performance of a GarageBand composition. So what do we find in GarageBand 5?

User Interface: Resources Moving Stage Left! Apple continues to enhance the user interface, visual "skin" to its design, and screen layout and navigation. With Version 5 GB migrates more resources (instruments, loops, effects, etc.) from the bottom of the layout window, to the right side of the display (stage left) along with adding tabs to improve accessibility, e.g., the Browse and Edit tabs. This provides more track editing space down the page, keeping resources always accessible. This change works well with wide screen displays but could be a limitation with smaller screens. The two screen shots shown (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate the new layout. A better contrast in the font color would make reading visibility better for tabs and buttons on the screen.

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here. Captions: Figure 1. A view of GB 5 showing the Real Instrument Edit tab on the right with various effects added. Figure 2. A view of GB 5 showing the loops library for a Software Instrument on the right.]

New Effects and Plug-ins: Stomp On That Live Guitar Sound! A major addition is a set of virtual guitar amp and stomp boxes. These pro-level simulators have been given high marks for enhancing live guitar performance and recordings. Visually the animations are impressive as well. When you add a new track in GB for live recording, your students now have options for a Real Instrument or an Electric Guitar. Choosing the Electric Guitar presents an animated display showing a picture of one of several amp and stomp box setups that can be chosen from several dozen presets or customized. Figure 3 shows the “Punk Rock” preset with the manually controllable knobs below. Pretty cool for any electric guitar players.

[Insert Figure 3 about here. Caption: Figure 3. GB 5 showing an electric guitar track with the new virtual amp and stomp box setup for Punk Rock.]

Magic GarageBand: Need Some Virtual Musicians for Your Gig? The GB project wizard offers expanded options (See Figure 4) including the Magic GarageBand introduced with Version 4 and Ringtones, Learn To Play, and the Lesson Store. The Magic GarageBand is worth exploring for possible instructional activities with its nine preset arrangements in various genres (Reggae, Blues, Latin, Country, and more). Your students can choose a live instrument to play along.

[Insert Figure 4 about here. Caption. Figure 4. The expanded projects menu in GB 5 showing Artist Lessons from the Lesson Store.]

With GB 5 students can now record live performances in Magic GB, take that performance back into GB for editing and saving, and they are offered more instrument options to experiment with. Check out the Customize instrument option: Polka Accordion anyone? As this feature continues to improve more educators are going to find creative ways to use this in the classroom for improvising over prerecorded materials, and then editing and sharing student performances.

Learn to Play and Lesson Store: Let Nora Jones or Sting Lend a Hand! Are your students attracted to the live recording features of GB? Do they want to record a few licks of their own with keyboard or guitar and need help playing the instrument? GB now adds music lessons with its “Learn to Play” mode and accompanying “Lesson Store” to provide a virtual tutor. And, if you want further inspiration, a student can sit down with Nora Jones, Sting, John Fogerty, and others for a one-on-one virtual lesson.

Free from the Lesson Store are eighteen guitar and keyboard lessons and, presently, 10 artist sessions for \$4.99 each to download. And, I know you are going to ask, but I can find no information on creating our own lessons for students.

Each lesson session has a Learn, Play, and, for the artist lessons, a Story component with beginning to advanced learning options. This is displayed along a timeline for the lesson moving from beginning skills to more advanced and then concluding with

a “play” section where you apply the skills learned. The Artist lessons add a personal “story” section where the artist talks about the song: for Sting, this is a background story on Roxanne, for example.

The learning strategy here is strictly show and tell with no feedback or reinforcement other than self-evaluation as you hear yourself playing along against the model provided. The record-performance feature has a number of options including changing tempo, looping a section, and taking the finished performance back into GB for editing or new material for a composition. During a lesson, you see the notation of what is being played, the correct performance on the keyboard or guitar frets (not yours but the model), and a video of the tutor talking through the lesson (See Figure 5). Here’s a list of the 18 free lessons; you can only access these lessons as well as the Artist Lessons through the Lesson Store in GB:

[Insert Figure 5 about here. Caption: Figure 5. A view of the Piano Lesson 8 scales lesson with its various features.]

[Note to Editor: Place list in two columns]

Piano Lesson 1: Intro to Piano
Piano Lesson 2: Right Hand
Piano Lesson 3: Left Hand
Piano Lesson 4: Rhythm
Piano Lesson 5: Sharps and Flats
Piano Lesson 6: Rhythmic Accents
Piano Lesson 7: Major and Minor Chords
Piano Lesson 8: Scales
Piano Lesson 9: Playing the Blues

Guitar Lesson 1: Intro to Guitar
Guitar Lesson 2: Chords G and C
Guitar Lesson 3: Chords A and D
Guitar Lesson 4: Minor Chords
Guitar Lesson 5: Single Note Melodies
Guitar Lesson 6: Power Chords
Guitar Lesson 7: Major Barre Chords
Guitar Lesson 8: Minor Barre Chords
Guitar Lesson 9: Blues Lead

These lessons are compressed, fast-track study; all you want to know about the topic in 10 minutes or less.

UPGRADE OR NOT TO UPGRADE, THAT IS THE QUESTION!

The cost of upgrading varies from free with the purchase of new Mac computers with the iLife Suite included (iPhoto, iMovie, iDVD, and iWeb along with

GarageBand) to various academic pricing options. Academic pricing through my university was \$55 for iLife 09 and \$71 from Apple's Education Store.

So should you upgrade? Before commenting, it's important to remember that the upgrade cost applies to the entire suite of software. Evaluate the new features of iPhoto, iWeb, and iMovie as well as GarageBand before deciding. The new "faces" and "places" feature in iPhoto is a pretty major innovation and iWeb now makes it easier to use with other web servers.

Having said that, let's just evaluate GarageBand features. Observing new features over the past two upgrades a music teacher could easily decide that Version 3 with podcasting was the last major breakthrough with no compelling reason to upgrade. Yes, I do find the interface improvements, for the most part, to be valuable. They make the advanced features more accessible. Apple, however, seems to be putting more emphasis on extra consumer features like the Magic GarageBand and the Learn to Play series. As these add-ons mature, the instructional potential for classroom music will be more appealing. A good case in point is adding the ability to record and edit Magic performances in GB 5.

So it ultimately comes down to your budget for software. With new upgrades available just about every year for most of your key music software, we know as educators, it's a matter of priorities. Evaluate the new features against the previous version and decide where best to invest your annual technology funds.

WISH LIST

If I were to wait for the next version of GarageBand, what would I like to see added in terms of features? Here's my wish list:

- Open more than one GB project at a time
- MIDI control of effects and the ability to export MIDI tracks
- Create Software Instrument content from scratch either in the piano roll or notation mode (you have to record a few notes or drag in a loop before you can manually make changes or add notes to a track)
- Better font contrast with the new "skin" and interface and a preference option to position the resources or information window left, right, below, or float the window
- Create new accompaniments and templates for Magic GarageBand
- Build and add your own lessons for the Learn to Play module
- Unbundle GB from iLife in lab packs for school purchase

SIDEBAR

Lost your loops? Not sure it happens to everyone, but when I upgrade to a new version of GarageBand it seems to have lost my loops and software instruments

from the Apple Jam Packs I've purchased. If this happens to you, here's a suggested fix. You need to get GB to re-index your loops. Open GB with any project. Then from the Finder, navigate through your folders from Macintosh HD: Library > Audio > Apple Loops > Apple. Then in my case, I click-and-drag Jam Pack World Music into the loop window of my GB application. This should cause GB to begin "re-indexing" the loops. I then repeat the same process for my Jam Pack Symphony Orchestra and you would do the same for any other set of loops in the Apple Loops folder. DBW