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Hacker

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Attaining MIDI Guitar Nirvana with the EPS-16 Plus RC030821

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I've been playing guitar synthesizer for about a decade (starting with the Roland GR-300) and MIDI guitar for around five years. While satisfying, it hasn't been a particularly easy ride. Any MIDI guitarist knows the prob-

lems inherent in trying to trigger a synthesizer with strings: the need for clean picking, the critical tweakings of pickup and MIDI converter and, of course, trying to find a synthesizer/sampler with the right features.

Although I've used MIDI guitar a lot in the studio, live performance always seemed out of the question due to glitching and other problems. And even in the studio, it would often take much sequence editing to clean up the extraneous pitch bend messages, double triggers, hyperspace jumps, and other oddities associated with a technology that seems destined to forever fight the laws of physics.

Nonetheless, life just got a little easier: the EPS-16 Plus is one of the best synths/samplers for MIDI guitar on the market (other contenders: the Oberheim Xpander, Yamaha TX802, and Yamaha TX81Z — but curiously, not the original EPS).

A few words about the guitar... There are two "flavors" of MIDI guitar: dedicated controllers that produce only MIDI data and pitch-to-MIDI based systems that let you add a MIDI driver to a standard electric guitar. The latter approach is ideal for layering electronic and electric guitar sounds.

Although Roland has done a remarkable job in making pitch-to-MIDI viable, I generally prefer dedicated controllers for the speed and tracking advantages they provide. My current favorite is the Quantar, an ultrasonic-scanning based controller that is the best I've used to date — fast, accurate and logical. Initially hobbled by reliability problems as well as legal wranglings with Yamaha over who had the right to use ultrasonic scanning, Quantar has bounced back and is turning out their guitars at a slow but steady rate (for more information on the Quantar, see my review in Warren Sirota's *MIDI Guitarist* newsletter.)

The Achilles Heel of MIDI guitar. Surprisingly, it's often the synth, rather than the guitar, that makes life difficult for the MIDI guitarist. The kind of synth (or sampler) you use and the patches you program, are crucial. You can take the best-tracking MIDI guitar in the world and it will, unfortunately, sound like garbage through most synths. A quick rule of thumb: If a patch sounds good when you play it from a keyboard, it is probably not optimized for MIDI guitar.

I was pretty excited when Ensoniq introduced Mono Modes A and B specifically for MIDI guitar in the original EPS, but that elation rapidly turned to disappointment — plugging in either the Quantar or Yamaha G10 produced stuck notes and mean-spirited glitches. (I've been told these modes work with Casio MIDI guitars, but have not been able to verify that for myself.)

Thankfully, the EPS-16 Plus is a totally different story; here's how to set it up.

MIDI mode. Set the MIDI guitar so that each string transmits over its own channel. At the EPS, select either Mono Mode A or

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