



hear during the year from my clients, NAMM Show attendees, professional development seminar attendees, the software developers themselves and, of course, the Gemini Girls (who are always an excellent source of business information and industry dirt).

"What accounting software package should I use to run my music store?" This mantra is, by far, the single-most asked and unanswered question that haunts the music retailer. I foolishly keep hoping to be asked some other, more meaningful question like "Who's your favorite guitarist?" "What gauge strings do you use?" or even "When will fusion music make its comeback?" I'd even settle for the highly controversial and sensitive subject of "Who's better: Clapton, Beck or Page?" (Answers: Steve Lukather, .10s, next week and Beck, of course).

But no! You bums keep putting me in that increasingly uncomfortable position of being forced to render an opinion on "the best" accounting software just so that you can dispute the very answer I give and walk away in disgust! UGGGGGHHHH!! I can't take it anymore!!! (Wow, I feel much better now that I've vented.)

The Continuing Saga of Music Accounting Software

Oh boy, here we go again. It's time to revisit the ever-popular, time-tested, No. 1 sore subject that music store owners love to complain about—their accounting software.

Of all the music product retailers in this country, I estimate that 40 percent outright hate their accounting software, 30 percent favor some of their software's functionality and dislike the rest, 15 percent like their software for all the wrong reasons

and 10 percent couldn't care less, leaving 5 percent who truly embrace their accounting software package.

My scientific study and detailed market analysis—forming the basis for these estimates—is based on the usual bitching and moaning that I

What's Wrong with Us?

We all know how important good accounting software is to the survival of a music store. That's why everyone keeps asking the same question [see "The Hard Decision About Software," May '98].

On the surface, it looks like the music products industry has barely progressed in accounting automation. There are fewer software

packages to choose from, a continued lack of a "standardized solution," slow movement by manufacturers to become bar-code compliant and an equally slow integration of bar-coding technology in music store operations. It's no wonder the music retailing industry continues to be plagued with poor cash flow, horrible inventory turns and untimely financial data. How can we even think about Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), e-commerce or other web-based technologies if we can't get our back-office accounting in order?

What's Right with Us?

All is not lost. We may be moving slowly, but make no mistake about it, we are moving forward. When you look beyond the surface, you'll find there's a handful of manufacturers and software developers who are creating and offering useful accounting technologies to help retailers prosper in a fiercely competitive marketplace. Let's take a look at these industry leaders and their offerings.

Our Suppliers, Our Partners

Although this article focuses mostly on accounting software solutions, I want to take a moment to recognize the recent activities of two manufacturers who are using accounting-based technologies to affect a positive change on how we conduct business.

In January, Kaman Music Corp. launched a business-to-business e-commerce website. This site offers its music dealers real-time access to inventory availability, pricing, order status and integration with their Order Management System. They have also achieved full bar-code compliance on every product they manufacture, sell and distribute.

Alfred Publishing recently announced a new EDI-style inventory replenishment plan. In exchange for the store owner transmitting—via modem—inventory

sales data at the end of each day, Alfred will not require payment for the inventory until it's sold.

Kaman and Alfred should be applauded for pioneering innovative uses of commonplace technology to better their accounting and retailing support—with little or no added burden or cost to their retailing customers. This industry's other vendors can learn a lot from these two excellent product suppliers.

Your Choice of Software

Given the size of a typical music retailer, the number of products they sell and services they offer, there has always been a need to automate accounting, inventory management and point-of-sale functions. Most full-line music retailers not only sell more than 100,000 different products, they also derive revenue from sources beyond sales, such as music lessons, equipment rentals, repair services, piano delivery and tuning, sound system installation and other unique customer services. Clearly, there are few, if any, other retail industries that are as varied as the typical music dealer. And this creates an insatiable need for quality, comprehensive and easy-

to-use accounting software that you don't have to float a bond issue to pay for.

Alright, we all understand the need for and benefits of accounting software. Let's dispense with the political correctness, throw down the gloves and get to the nitty gritty. At this very minute, there are four dedicated music retail accounting software contenders slugging it out for your business. In alphabetical order, they are: Maestro Business Management System by RSSS; Treble Clef by Lefkowitz Systems; SoftMusic by Tri-Technical Systems; Tyler System/Tyler.Net by Tyler Retail Systems.

I can already hear the complaints. So let me offer my heartfelt apologies by issuing the following disclaimers:

DISCLAIMER #1: I am keenly aware that there are no Mac-based software solutions included in my comparison. I'm not aware of any, which probably makes me a complete idiot.

DISCLAIMER #2: These are my opinions and mine alone. They are not the opinions of Music Inc., NAMM, AMC, MENC, the NBA, FBI or the NAAAP (National Association of Accountants Absent of Personality).

 [continued on page 26]



MUSIC RETAILING ACCOUNTING SOFTWARE

COMPARISON TABLE

	MAESTRO	TREBLE CLEF	TRI-TECH	TYLER
Latest version	Maestro v.9.1	Treble Clef v.5.0	SoftMusic v.3.8 (Dos) SoftMusic v.4.0 (Win)	Tyler.Net v.17.103
Programming Language	System Z	Microsoft Visual FoxPro 5.0 / 6.0	PowerFlex (Dos) MS Visual FoxPro (Win)	QuickBasic and C
Developer Name	Rental & Sales Software Systems, Inc.	Lefkowitz Systems, Inc.	Tri-Technical Systems, Inc.	Tyler Retail Systems, Inc.
Developer Address	457 Robert Drive, Corpus Christi, TX 78412	1485 Bayshore Boulevard, San Francisco, CA 94124	585 Huff Street, Dubuque, IA 52003	4625 East Bay Dr, Suite 201, Clearwater, FL 33764
Developer Phone / Fax	Phone (800) 334-5224 Fax (361) 993-1731	Phone (415) 657-9900 Fax (415) 657-9902	Phone (319) 556-3556 Fax (319) 556-0405	Phone (800) 237-5913 Fax (727) 532-6179
Contact Name	Troy Mitchell, Director	Mathew Lefkowitz, President	Dave Cox, President	Rick Albert, Sr. Account Mgr
Contact E-mail	troy@rsss.com	mlefkowitz@sprintmail.com	dc Cox@ttsinc.com	sales@tylernet.com
Developer Web Site	www.rsss.com	www.lefkowitz-sys.com	www.ttsinc.com	www.tylernet.com
Total Employees	25	4	17	75
Operating System	UNIX and LINUX (also runs under Windows)	Windows 95/98/NT / Novell	Windows 95/98/NT / Novell	UNIX
Number of users	700	12	1,000+	600+
Number of music store users	11	12	1,000+	100+
General applications supported:				
AR-Accounts Receivable	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
AP-Accounts Payable	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
INV-Inventory	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
GL-General Ledger	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PO-Purchase Order	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SA-Sales Analysis	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PR-Payroll	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
FA-Fixed Assets	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Retailing applications supported:				
POS-Point-of-Sale	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
RTR-Rentals (rent-to-rent)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
RTO-Rentals (rent-to-own)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
MLS-Music Lesson Scheduling	(Beta Testing)	No	Yes	Yes
RPR-Repair and Service Tracking	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
BAR-Barcoding	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CM-Contact management	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
OTH-Other retailing software	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Transaction posting	Real Time	Real Time	Real Time	Real Time
Cost:				
Base software price	\$4,000	\$10,000	\$1,595	Tyler.Net - \$9,995 Tyler System - \$30,000
Modules included	POS / INV / CM / BAR / OTH	AR / INV / POS / OTH	INV / POS / SA / CM / RTR	ALL MODULES
Additional module price	\$995 - \$1,995 per module	\$2,000 per module	\$595 RTO, \$395 all other modules	N/A
User license cost	Dependent on operating system only	5 users included, \$2,000 for each additional 5-user block	2 users included, \$50 for each add'l user	2 users included, \$200 for each add'l user
Additional store license cost	\$4,000	N/A	\$400	Tyler.Net \$1,675, Tyler System \$2,000
Required hardware cost	N/A	N/A	N/A	Included above
Support cost	\$175/mo per location for 24-7 tel support, \$325/day on-site	\$1,000 for 6 months of telephone support	\$168 for 6 mos. of telephone and FTP-site support	On-site/classroom training included, \$300/day on-site

DISCLAIMER #3: If you are a music retail software developer, and are not listed above, because you either live in outer Slabovia or you're still on the seventh release of your beta version with no known users, I'm sorry. Please forgive me for my inadvertent oversight of your existence.

DISCLAIMER #4: I am offering this information free of charge. And we all know that you generally get what you pay for.

DISCLAIMER #5: I hereby disclaim all of the above disclaimers.

An Unbiased, Non-Influenced, Unabashed Comparison

The above "Music Retailing Accounting Software Comparison" [see chart, page 24] offers an illustration of some essential highlights and differences between the four previously mentioned accounting software packages. Following is a brief descriptions of each company and the software they support:

- **Maestro.** Maestro is a division of Rental & Sales Software Systems, Inc. (RSSS), an international company that has provided software solutions for the rent-to-own and retail industries since 1979. Their package is UNIX based, and it has been installed in approximately 700 sites internationally.

In light of its commitment to the rental industry, RSSS started its Maestro music retailing division in 1997. The 5-user version of the Maestro software package costs approximately \$12,000 to \$15,000 for all the accounting and retailing modules, including hardware.

- **Treble Clef.** A new-comer to the music industry, Lefkowitz Systems' Treble Clef is a software package designed to integrate with third-party SBT Accounting Software. Accordingly, its music retailing package plays an integral part of a fully-integrated, Windows-based accounting solution. The package is written in Visual FoxPro, thereby allowing third-party modifications and enhancements.

Although Treble Clef reports

only 12 active users, those users are large, well-established music retailers. Its base package costs \$10,000 for the music retailing modules and certain key accounting modules.

- **SoftMusic.** Tri-Tech's SoftMusic is a fully-integrated package with all of the essential music retailing modules (rentals, music lesson scheduling, repair tracking), and the company has been providing software solutions since 1984.

As evidenced by its willingness to customize software to meet changing retailer needs, the music retailing industry is the only industry Tri-Tech supports. Although its package is DOS-based, Tri-Tech is finishing a three-year endeavor to convert all their software modules to the now-standard Windows format. SoftMusic has approximately 1,000 music store users and costs approximately \$4,000 for all the accounting and music retailing modules.

- **Tyler System and Tyler.Net.** Another long-time provider of fully-integrated software solutions, Tyler offers two system choices. Retailers may choose either the freestanding Tyler System (designed for large retailers and chains) or the new internet-based Tyler.Net (for the smaller retailer).

Tyler.Net retailers use PC-based workstations to access their accounting data via the internet, which resides at an off-site server. This reduces the need for on-site hardware, data backup routines and other related staffing costs. The Tyler.Net solution is installed in approximately 20 music stores, and costs between \$5,000 to 10,000 for hardware, software and telephone training. Tyler's traditional system is UNIX-based, installed in approximately 80 music stores and costs approximately \$30,000 for all the accounting and music retailing modules as well as hardware.

So, Which Is Best?

Each package has its own unique method of processing data

and interacting with its user. They all have many and different strengths and are worthy of your consideration. Yet each package has its limitations, whether it be functionality, user-friendliness, depth of technical support, architecture open to modification or integration with other software, adherence to rental laws, hands-on experience with music retailers or cost.

A Few Final Thoughts

When considering whether to implement or switch to a particular accounting software package, you can't do enough due diligence in your search for the best solution. First, make sure you gather lots of documentation, software demos, operating manuals and sample reports to help insure the package meets your needs.

Second, talk to as many knowledgeable and independent sources as possible (like users of the software). Don't forget to take advantage of the wealth of information that NAMM has to offer, both at trade shows and within its organization. Although NAMM does not endorse or support any particular software package, there are two very knowledgeable, friendly individuals who can help direct you in your software search: NAMM's director of information services Larry Hermann and Marybeth Connor, NAMM's technology coordinator. They can be reached at 800-767-6266.

I know you're all saying, "Well, once again he's avoided giving us an answer to 'the best' accounting software for music retailers." Okay, you want an answer? Here's my answer: It depends. Is that my final answer? Yes, Regis, that's my final answer.



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