

# MIDI, The Commodore Amiga, and The Blue Ribbon SoundWorks

## Amiga's Paula and MIDI

By the time the Commodore Amiga went on sale in 1985, the Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) had been in use for over two years. To ensure compatibility with the protocol, Commodore asked Glenn Keller, creator of the Paula chip better known for its role in the genesis of “tracker music”, to ensure that Paula’s serial I/O functionality could connect at MIDI’s baud rate of 31,250 in addition to standard baud rates.

## Bars&Pipes

Much of the Amiga’s credibility as a MIDI platform relied on third-party applications like EA’s *Deluxe Music Construction Set*, *Music-X* and *Aegis Sonix*, among others. Founded by Melissa Jordan-Grey and Todor Fay as Blue Ribbon Bakery in 1988 to release a digital address book for the Amiga, the company that would become The Blue Ribbon SoundWorks soon made use of Fay’s prior experience writing a MIDI sequencer for the Amiga (Mimetics *SoundScape*) to develop their program *Bars&Pipes*.



Logo of The Blue Ribbon SoundWorks

*Bars&Pipes* soon proved very successful, with a number of musicians preferring its pipe-based metaphor over the musical-notation-based interfaces of other programs. Indeed, Sue Kasper, the Bay Area musician responsible for much of the soundtrack for the computer game *SimCity 2000* preferred to use *Bars&Pipes*.

The success of *Bars&Pipes* led The Blue Ribbon SoundWorks to branch out into other MIDI software, including *SuperJAM!*, a program to automate MIDI accompaniment in various styles, and *The Patchmeister*, a MIDI synthesizer patch librarian.

## Hard(ware) Problems

Unlike the Atari ST, the Amiga did not have a MIDI port. Paula could only sling MIDI (carefully, lacking a buffer) using a passive adaptor to connect its serial port to other MIDI devices.



An Amiga 1200 (center) in a typical studio setup. This Amiga was used by Mike Clarke at Psygnosis for sound effects generation and testing game audio using *Bars&Pipes*. (“Psygnosis Amiga 1200,” [Home Computer Museum](#))

Some expansion cards for the Amiga 2000’s Zorro II bus improved on Paula’s limited abilities with buffered UARTs and more. The Blue Ribbon SoundWorks even offered the One-Stop Music Shop, a card which not only included a quadruple-buffered MC68681 DUART but also a daughterboard based on the E-mu Proteus 1 wavetable synthesizer module for good measure.

## Amiga’s MIDI Legacy

Despite the fall of Commodore in the mid-1990s, some Amigas continued to see use as MIDI workstations well into the mid-2000s. Japanese musician Susumu Hirasawa used *Bars&Pipes* and an Amiga 4000 to compose the soundtrack for the award-winning anime movie *Paprika* as late as 2006, after which even he noted that “maintaining an Amiga now is, like maintaining a classic car, costly.”

As for The Blue Ribbon SoundWorks, with the writing on the wall following Commodore’s bankruptcy in 1994, it was acquired by Microsoft the following year. The technology in *SuperJAM!* ultimately was integrated into DirectMusic, a DirectX API used in *La-Mulana*, *Unreal II*, and the original PC release of *Final Fantasy VIII*. Following their departure from Microsoft, Jordan-Grey and Fay started and continue to run video graphics firm NewBlue, Inc.

Even so, *Bars&Pipes*, like the Amiga community itself, has trudged on, as devotees like Alfred Faust took Fay’s source code release of *Bars&Pipes Professional 2.5c* and maintained it as *Barsn Pipes* for the various Amiga operating systems that rose from Commodore’s ashes, including AROS, AmigaOS 4, and MorphOS.

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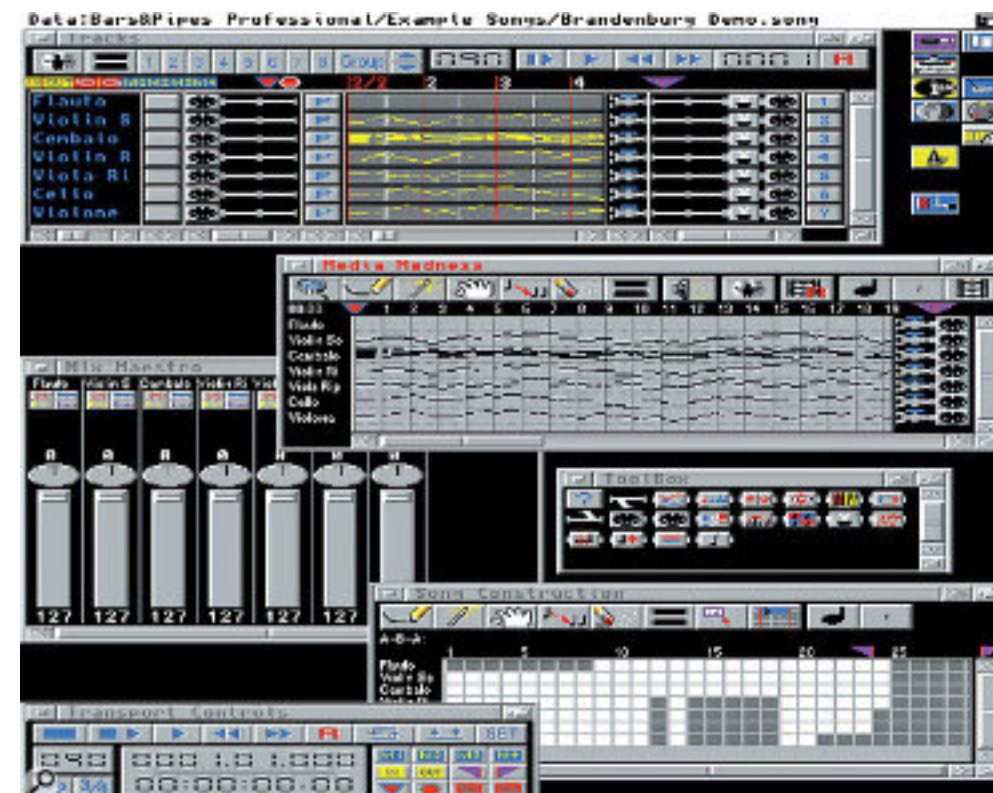
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*Bars&Pipes Professional 2.5* in action, featuring tracks, a mixer, playback controls, and more. (“Bars&Pipes; Professional 2.5,” *Sound on Sound*)