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Taking the Cake

Greg Hendershott, Founder/President/CEO, Cakewalk

by Steve Harvey

How a software company came to be named after a turn-of-the-century Southern plantation dance craze is a story that, well, might just take the cake. As Greg Hendershott relates, with a deadline looming and a music dictionary at hand, chance intervened.

Hendershott, with \$4,000 from family and friends, was poised to launch his new software with a small ad in a music magazine when, 24 hours before the deadline, he realized that the name he had chosen was already being used. "So I was flipping through a dictionary of musical terms and came across 'cakewalk,'" he reveals. "Everyone knows how to spell it, and it has the connotation of ease of use, even if you don't know the ragtime music meaning of it, so I decided to go with that."

In fact, back then, Cakewalk was the name of the software, not the company, which was—and still is, officially—Twelve Tone Systems. "But after a certain point, with people calling up and asking if this was Cakewalk, we decided to change the name of the company."

The official company name provides a clue to why Hendershott had a music dictionary close by. "In high school, I started playing keyboards and played in a few bands. I ended up at Oberlin College where I wasn't good enough to get into the Conservatory of Music but it was easy to take classes at the college then sneak over to the conservatory and take courses there.

"I started taking some electronic music classes. Being able to make music with computers and create software that could help you make music made computers fun for me. I was officially a philosophy major; the main benefit was that I found I could write philosophy papers quickly then go back and spend time on electronic music."

Once out of school, Hendershott decided to see if there was a market for his software. "We sold many versions for the DOS platform. In the early '90s the Windows platform became viable for MIDI and audio, and we released our first Windows version. Then we added digital audio. Until 1994, it had been a MIDI sequencer product."

studio, not the least due to the addition of key features such as multichannel surround bussing and architecture. Totally agnostic when it comes to Windows-compatible audio hardware (ASIO or WDM) and MIDI controllers, it surely has few rivals to its power.

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According to Hendershott, and as inferred by the company name, "A guiding principle here is to make products that are easy to learn and use, and that are powerful. I think creating complicated products is not very hard; anyone can do that. It's harder to create simpler products, because you need to decide what people will need to do frequently and to understand the customer better."

The choice of platform has made Cakewalk the Avis of software companies: "In part, because we've always focused on the Windows platform, we have to work a little harder than some other companies getting mindshare among professionals. Historically, many more professional audio and music people are using Macintoshes. But in the *Wall Street Journal* a couple of months ago I read that Apple's market share is less than 2 or 3 percent, which surprised even me."

SONAR 4, the latest iteration of Cakewalk's audio production software, appears, on the face of it, to have arrived from nowhere, catapulting the company from the project to the professional

'overnight success,' and find out there were many years behind that, but then it clicked at a certain point. That's a little bit like what is happening with SONAR 4."

In fact, Cakewalk has the number one product in the U.S. for Windows, Hendershott points out. But the newfound attention doesn't hurt.

"We're looking at ways to take a greater level of awareness of the product and use that in the marketing campaign," he admits. "In certain parts of Europe, such as the U.K., we're seeing results closer to the U.S. In other parts of Europe, such as Germany, which is home to Steinberg and Emagic, we're not number one, and we have more work to do."

Advertising is important, he considers, but "I think word of mouth is more important than it ever was, now that people have new ways to exchange that type of information. It's winning people over one person at a time."

But it isn't just about competing with \$20,000-plus DAW systems. "We do make



great products for people who are just getting started, a category of products that are under \$100 that we sell in Comp USA and Best Buy. And Project 5 is more of a right-brain product, for composing music and doing interesting electronic music creation."

And, while some future products are still hush-hush, it's no secret that Cakewalk also has aspirations as a hardware manufacturer. "That's absolutely something that is interesting to us," Hendershott concludes. "We have a relationship with Roland that we initiated a year ago last July. We now have the SP-606, one of the first joint products, and there are more in the pipeline. That's very exciting."

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