

## Report from the Field

# The Sights and Sounds of COMDEX '98

*The exhibits showcased digital cameras, audio technologies, and more*

by Péter Jacsó

While COMDEX '98, held last November, had fewer visitors than the previous year's show, the approximately 220,000 who came still made it the largest trade show around! The new sights and sounds of Las Vegas, plus

the flavors—and the bargain prices—of the Lucullian buffets attract visitors any day of the year, but the week before Thanksgiving is always the busiest. Accommodating the COMDEX crowd is no small feat, but Vegas keeps opening mega-deluxe hotels. This year it was the Bellagio, which is the town's only hotel with a gallery featuring

a knockout, rather than knock-off, collection of fine art. Its atrium is awesome. It is one of the very few tastefully designed and decorated hotels in Vegas—if you ignore its casino area.

For some, of course, that area is hard to ignore. Sukanto Sia, the chairman of the Bank of Honolulu, lost a few million dol-

lars during the Bellagio's opening days. True, he was flown in on a Learjet, and his suite and buffet were also on the house, I assume. But it seemed quite a safe investment for the hotel, as the chairman had left \$2 million on the tables at Caesar's Palace and \$6 million at the Rio Casino just a few weeks before. Unfortunately, that money was in the form of bad checks, so when he returned for the opening of the Bellagio he was delayed—arrested and lodged in the county jail for the opening night! So he was only able to lose the additional millions after posting bail. But lose he did.

No wonder that I refrained from gambling and headed for the sure win, the COMDEX exhibit floors, to check out the sights and sounds of the computer industry.

I was impressed by the bargain prices for high-quality products. Some of the biggest names (such as Intel or IBM) were missing from the floor, but not necessarily missed by the visitors. After all, there is not much to watch on a microchip, and you can see PC boxes at computer dealerships and in the perfumed magazine spreads that big players can afford. You must come to COMDEX to see small companies with great products like ArcSoft, Vorton Technologies, Benwin, or the rapidly expanding IMSI. Meeting developers, seeing pictures shot by digital cameras and printed on photo printers or displayed on flat display panels, playing with the image management programs, listening to the high-

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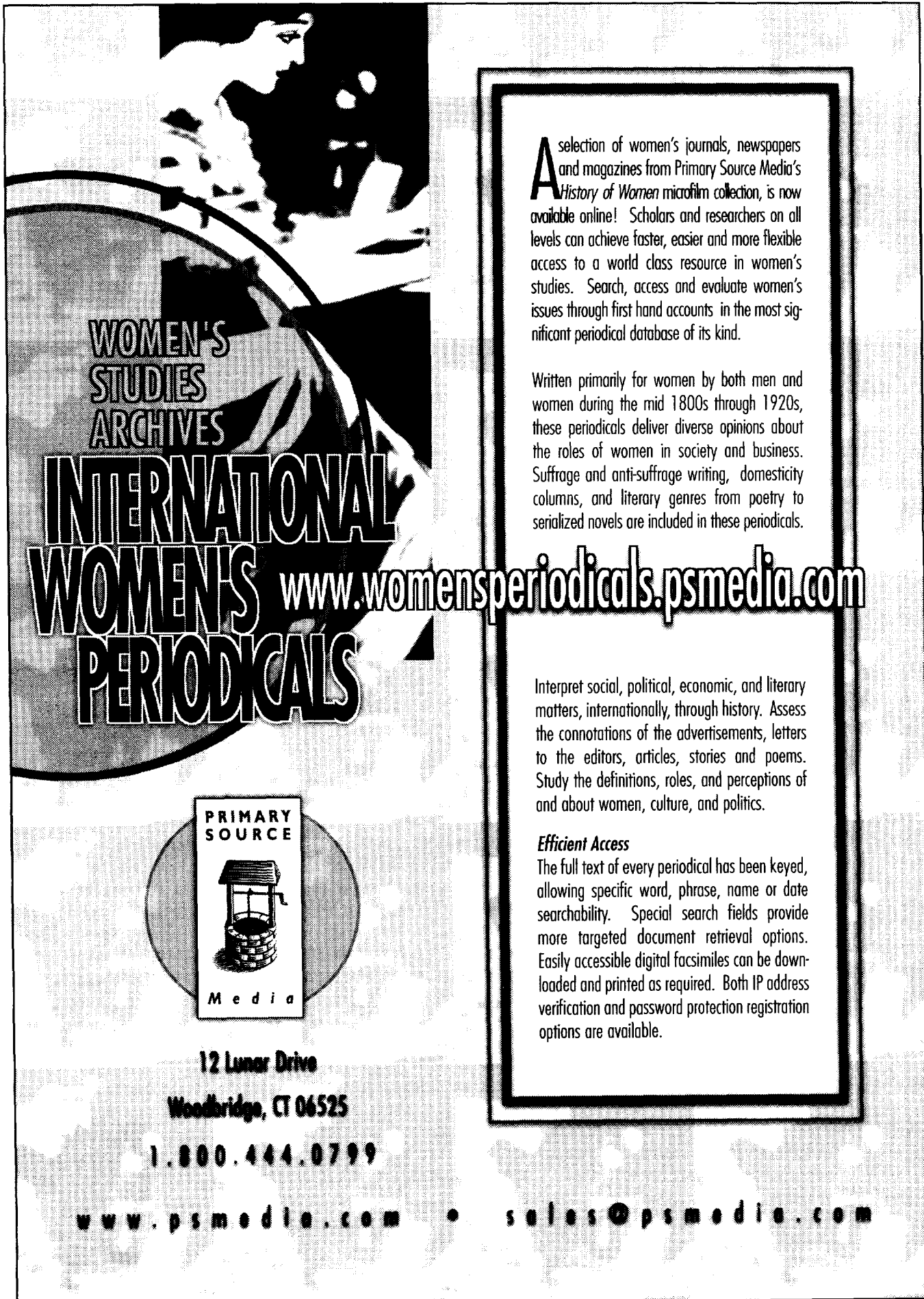
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quality audio coming from the wafer-thin Benwin BW2000 speakers—these are the things that make COMDEX so attractive.

### Taking Pictures. Further.

This is Kodak's tag line, but many other manufacturers are also doing exactly that. The avalanche of hardware and software for capturing, recording, processing, storing, forwarding, displaying, and publishing images and documents was overwhelming. Digital cameras were visible left and right, ranging from \$400 to \$1,000 and beyond.

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## COMDEX '98

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They deliver instant gratification and digital pictures. Shooting with traditional cameras, getting the film developed, and scanning the pictures into digital format for editing, displaying, etc. is quite cumbersome. Within a few years traditional cameras will be as anachronistic as mechanical typewriters in the developed countries. If you don't want to mess around with 4-MB or 8-MB flash memory cards and uploading images through a serial port, Sony spoils you with the Mavica. It uses a standard floppy disk for storage, has a built-in speaker and microphone for audio annotation, and sells for less than \$800.

XGA-resolution cameras with 1,024-by-768 pixels represent the sweet spot now, with image quality that is perfect for both display and print purposes. The mega-pixel cameras like the Kodak DC260 are too pricey for most potential customers. The Agfa ePhoto 780 was among the least expensive at \$399, and Olympus America D-500L had the best quality images and control features in the sub-\$700 category.

For many, capturing images does not require a camera but rather a scanner for digitizing printed pages. Fast and high-quality scanners featuring 24-bit color start at below \$100. The fast 30-bit color and higher resolution scanners can set you back several hundred dollars, but they can also accommodate odd-size papers and legal-size papers (which are legally not odd, but are the worst American invention next to the leaf-blower). There were a few USB scanners, but to me the convenience and reliability of parallel port versions are unbeatable. The Agfa SanpScan EZ seemed to deliver the most bang for the buck in terms of speed, image quality, and convenience. The software programs bundled with most scanners may be light editions (marked with the LE moniker) but would cost nearly as much without the hardware, and offer the most-needed image editing features.

Storing images permanently is not a big problem anymore. Even entry-level PCs come with hard drives of several gigabytes. Iomega announced its new 250-MB Zip Pro drives, and Castlewood finally shipped its ORB drive (my favorite at COMDEX '97) featuring 2.2-GB cartridges at rock bottom prices. Sony showed its 220-MB HiFD 3.5-inch floppy drive that can read the old floppies as well (at a significantly faster transfer rate). Nevertheless, I am skeptical because the drive offers too little (capacity), too late, at too high a price (nearly \$200) by 1999 norms.

Flat display screens sported lower prices and better quality than last year. They will soon become common peripherals. But I can't say that about photo printers. I admired the quality of the HP PhotoSmart (about \$300), and the smarts of the Olympus P-300 photo printer (about \$400), which can be connected to the Olympus digital camera directly, i.e., without using a PC. But I am skeptical about their viability. It is not just the price of the printers but the cost of the expensive special papers and ink cartridges and the extra desktop or deskside space that make me wonder how many users will buy them. Except for the real shutterbug, few would seem to be in-

clined to invest in a printer dedicated to printing photos when they can be shown on splendid displays and e-mailed to friends and relatives anywhere. Magazine publishers, insurance companies, and real-estate agencies can be a big market, though.

### Image Management Software

The explosion in digital cameras and scanners spurred the development of a large number of inexpensive, powerful, and intuitive image management software packages. The images downloadable from the Web also begged for consumer-oriented image asset management and editing software. Photodex's CompuPic impressed me with its speed in creating multiple-view thumbnail catalogs (which can be also printed as contact sheets) and its comprehensive capabilities for slide show creation, font viewing, image adjustment, text layover, and format conversion (including support for Photoshop files). Vorton's PhotoZone also offers powerful photo studio capabilities at a low price. PhotoBase is one of ArcSoft's many specialized image management programs. It is an excellent tool for organizing and presenting your digital image assets enhanced by sound and text, and it can create albums not only of image, audio, and video files but also of HTML and other document files such as spreadsheets. Its PhotoMontage program allows you to create eye-catching montages from the combination of your own photo collections and bundled images. These may not be as perfect as the poster of *The Truman Show* or the famous Monroe mosaic, but for less than \$50 you get an amazingly powerful program. IMSI made a name for itself with its excellent clip art and Web art collections. It then bought the classic HiJaak software, plus Art Today, with the best graphics collection on the Web, and Corel's Click and Create, an impressive multimedia authoring software package that it sells for less than \$100. Kai's Photo Soap and Power Show produce images and slide shows that are distinguishable from a mile for their unique features.

I raved about Live Picture, Inc.'s FlashPix format in the July/August 1998 issue of *IT*, considering it the graphic format of the future. A few months later I was delighted to see a series of application and server software programs from the company that developed the almost infinitely zoomable image format, plus Intelligent Template technology that blends your photos smoothly into templates. The company is expanding intelligently, covering the spectrum from family-oriented programs to the SOHO market to the professional imaging business.

The add-on software market is also booming. Muddy Shoes' Virtual Thunder adds 400 templates and hundreds of graphics files to the ones that come bundled with PowerPoint. Three D Graphics' Amigo 2000 will be your friend. It is already dazzling in its pre-beta version with the beautiful enhancements to the charts and graphs of the upcoming Office 2000 suite. Microsoft's own PhotoDraw is a powerhouse image management software package at a fraction of the price of CorelDraw and Photoshop, and without those programs' steep learning curve.

I found InterQuest's Faces program to be a real show stopper. This masterpiece of software engineering allows the creation of

composite pictures through the combination of over 5,000 facial features with just a few clicks of the mouse. The power of this utterly professional program is incredible for the price of \$49. InterQuest donated a copy to every police station in the U.S. and Canada to help crime witnesses across the continent draw composite portraits of suspects in only a few minutes.

### Sounds That Sound Good

Sounds in Las Vegas can be a pain when Elvis and Madonna look-alikes want to be sound-alikes. Sound can be a pain on the COMDEX floor, too. While I appreciated the power and quality of sound produced by Creative Labs' Sound Blaster Live soundboard (at a rather steep \$200), I often could not hear my own question let

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alone the answer when sounds were blasted at me from four directions.

The always-soothing press retreat of Pat Meier was host to the best audio product of the show, a product that could not have been enjoyed on the exhibit hall floor. The wafer-thin satellite Benwin speakers made Twiggy (for my generation) or Kate Moss (for my children's generation) look Rubenesque. Still, the quality of sound that they generate is on par with that of Maria Callas. The beauty of these speakers is that you need not be an Onassis to afford them. At \$130 (including a subwoofer), they deliver music to your ears from any direction and at the same time—to borrow the Benwin tag line—offer a new way to look at sound. This will be a very popular peripheral with home users and business users alike. I also listened to some good USB speakers running off a dedicated Universal Serial Bus Board. But I am afraid that if you connect your USB scanners and USB printer to the same port (which is the underlying reason for USB), sound would suffer.

Lawyers of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) provided enormous free publicity to Diamond Multimedia by filing a lawsuit to prevent the company from selling its Rio PMP-300, a pager-size audio gadget that can play back 1 hour of MP3 sound files that I discussed in detail in the Multimedia Medley column of the January 1998 issue of *IT*. The court—cor-

rectly—denied the petition for permanent injunction after granting a temporary restraining order while hearing the parties. To me it sounded like suing the Xerox Corporation because its machines are used for illegal copying of documents. RIAA and the Big Five record labels had better face the music and start selling songs in MP3 format for a song rather than sticking to full albums.

Audio content was also prevalent on the floor. Vorton Technologies' Soft Karaoke always attracted a large crowd. The excellent music-appreciation databases of Voyetra (Multimedia History of Music, Multimedia Musical Instruments), and the authentic language instruction packages such as The Learning Company's Berlitz Series and Transparent Language, Inc.'s 31 Languages of the World also deserve quality sound devices.

I remain numb about the other aspect of sound technology: voice recognition. While I saw quite a number of new hardware and other solutions touting the technology of voice-driven computing, I am not convinced yet. It still sounds to me like low-budget sci-fi movies when users give commands like this: Computer. Start. Program. MS Word. File. Open. Drive D colon. Slash. To David. Slash. Comdex98 dot W P 5. For most *IT* readers it would be much more efficient to click and pick the drive, the directory, and the file name. I wonder what cacophony would ensue if office workers in their cubicles started using voice commands. Of course all this may just be envy. With my heavy accent, I would have as much success teaching software to recognize my voice commands as Kareem Abdul Jabbar would have getting a part in a movie playing one of the seven dwarfs.

But I am game for text-to-speech conversion technology, which has improved significantly. Karta Technologies, Inc.'s KartaNarrator can recite any script in the speaker's notes of a PowerPoint presentation via animated characters. Text-to-speech conversion programs show up in more and more mainstream applications such as encyclopedias, and they certainly have a bright future.

There were many other innovative and smart products at COMDEX, some of which I will cover later in my columns. Doomsayers claim that COMDEX, as we know it now, will disappear. I don't believe so. It is still an extraordinary forum to get a glimpse of the trends, to get to know the talented small companies, and to keep in touch with the biggies. Visitors will be back, and accommodation options will be better than ever as the Venetian, the Paris, and the Mandalay Bay compete for customers (preferably ones who lose their shirts in the casinos). I probably will touch base with the dealers on the exhibit floor rather than in the casinos. That's a better deal.

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