

## In Focus

# 'Scrapophony' musician writes guide to Atari sound

By John Markoff, IW Staff

PALO ALTO, CA—Herb Moore is sitting at the back of a bookstore, playing several musical instruments. It's like no concert you've ever heard before.

The members of the audience are facing Moore, with their backs to the noisy highway outside. Yet, instead of expecting his listeners to concentrate solely on his music, Moore asks the audience not to exclude the sounds outside.

A train whistles and Moore rings a bell in counterpoint. Kids laugh and somewhere rock music is playing; he adds two more instruments to his orchestra of the street.

He calls it "scrapophony." It's intended to be a meditation on sound, a new kind of music performed with "found" objects. The object(s) could be different-sized rocks used as instruments to accompany a mountain stream, or might be the tree that Moore discovered once on a visit to Mendocino. By hanging various objects he found in the local dump in branches of the tree—bottles, pieces of glass, metal—he has created a "scrapophone." When the wind blows, a new instrument is heard.

Scrapophony may appear a far cry from composing music on the Atari computer, but then there is definitely more than one side to Herb Moore. Although he considers himself to be first and foremost a composer and performer and is a self-described "starving artist," Moore, with Judy Lower and Bob Albrecht, has recently authored *Atari Sound and Graphics: A Self-Teaching Guide*, published by John Wiley & Sons.

### Musical micros

Having spent more than a decade and a half in a strictly traditional musical environment as a guitarist and a pianist, Moore decided that he wanted to explore the musical uses of microcomputers. Several years ago he met Bob Albrecht, whom he affectionately calls "the Menlo Park dragon." Albrecht, one of the founders of the People's Computer Company and Computertown USA, encouraged Moore to teach himself BASIC and to begin thinking about writing a book that would offer a compelling way to learn a computer language. Sound and graphics give immediate and impressive feedback to those who are struggling with programming concepts.

"My goal was to make it possible for the reader to make sounds based on reading the first three pages of the book," Moore says. "I succeeded."

The book that emerged from the project is not an encyclopedic text. "I went and discussed the book with technical people at Atari," he says, "and I constantly found myself explaining that I wasn't writing the book for somebody who works at Atari eight hours a day."

Instead the book is written for the novice programmer who wants to approach learning BASIC in a nonmathematical and an exploratory fashion.

"The book is written for those who are 12 years old up through adults. It is intended to give the novice the ability to decide how far he wants to go with

the computer. By the time you finish the book, you should be able to decide whether you are interested in purchasing software or that you are in love with programming and want to deal much deeper," he says.

Another one of Moore's goals in writing *Atari Sound and Graphics* was to create a context for using sound and graphics in a nonviolent framework. Although Moore stresses that he is not opposed to video games, he worries about the cultural consequences of games that involve symbolic killing and mass destruction.

"We were trying to offer alternatives.

For example, one of the programs in our book takes sounds that might be associated with weapons explosions and places them against a graphics background of volcanoes," he says.

Now that the book project is completed, Moore is working on a diskette that is designed to complement the text by giving readers easy examples and the ability to play with the concepts the book teaches.

He has also caught the live-performing bug and plans on exploring the possibility of blending computer-generated music with acoustic music in the future. He is also

interested in composing music that expands or even breaks the rules of the traditional seven-tone auditory scale. For Moore, computer music is part of a trend in twentieth-century music that is transforming those rules.

Moore acknowledges that there are many limitations on computers as musical instruments. "Why in the world would you want to try to simulate a violin when you already have an incredible acoustical instrument?" he asks.

"There are a lot of sounds from the Atari that I'll never get from the guitar," he says. ■