

**“Make music like a pro”: GarageBand and the
Computer as Aspirational Folk Instrument**
Jeannelle Ramírez (University of Texas at Austin)

A Steinway on your hard drive, controllable through musical typing. For the first time, in 2004, a semi-professional DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) came preloaded on computers, putting music production tools in the hands of unsuspecting users who could now create songs in their leisure time. Apple markets the software toward beginners, promising them that they are ready to make music “like pros.” This of course assumes that they are not pros. Although the software name references rock music, advertisements promise the consumer that they can make EDM and Hip-Hop with the program. At the start of the century, Renee Lysloff and Leslie Gay called for an ethnomusicology of technoculture, “concerned with how technology implicates cultural practices involving music.” (2) Meanwhile, Timothy Taylor called digital technology the most fundamental change in the history of western music and Attali hoped that computers would allow more people to make music for themselves. If computers have indeed enabled people to become more musical, what does this musicality look and sound like? In what web of meaning are these practices immersed?

In this paper, I observe the laptop as an aspirational folk instrument; an instrument that is readily available to nearly everyone and forms the basis of contemporary vernacular forms of music, but which is appealing because of its perceived capacity to enable the amateur to sound professional, thus transgressing their amateur status. I focus on the case of GarageBand as it is the most readily accessible DAW. Building on existing work in technology in musicology and ethnomusicology over the past twenty years, I consider how GarageBand is used by amateurs and semi-professionals. How does the use of a particular computer program inform or relate to a non-musician or musician’s view of their own skill and identity as amateurs or aspiring professionals? Using a combination of discourse analysis, historical research, and digital ethnography, I look at current discourses and narratives about GarageBand as they emerge from blogs, instructional videos, tutorials, and forums, and consider the degree to which these overlap or conflict with the marketing of the program. Through interviews with amateur laptop musicians, producers, and DJs who work primarily in GarageBand, I observe how participation in online and offline musical communities emerges from the use of the program.