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MAINZ Macs

Macs are used in about 50 per cent of Kiwi recording studios, widely in television and film production, and even live by musicians – and the people working in the industry require in-depth training. *MacGuide* went along to the Music and Audio Institute of New Zealand campus in Victoria St, Auckland, to see what goes on

Mainz is a town in Germany. When the Rhine there froze solid in the winter of 406-7AD, several German tribes, crossed on foot and horseback and sacked the Roman Empire. But that's just the Ed being pretentious – this is quite a different MAINZ, in time and space anyway: it's the music and audio division of Tai Poutini, the West Coast polytechnic with branches at Greymouth and Christchurch. Although I guess some may still choose to think of the modern MAINZ as a kind of barbarians at the gate scenario, with Rome being popular music and New Zealand making terrific attacks on it partly as a result of the professionalism and skill engendered by institutions such as this.

Tai Poutini is the Greymouth polytech that runs courses such as those offering certificates in the automotive trades, carpentry, business administration, outdoor recreation etc. With its music and audio courses becoming more and more popular with out-of-towners, it made sense to open, a dedicated campus in Auckland and then another, in early 2002, in Christchurch. These provide certificates in Audio Engineering and Live Sound and Event Production, and the Diploma of Audio Engineering.

The Central Auckland campus, on the corner of

Tutor Thom Cochrane loves the power and flexibility of Macs
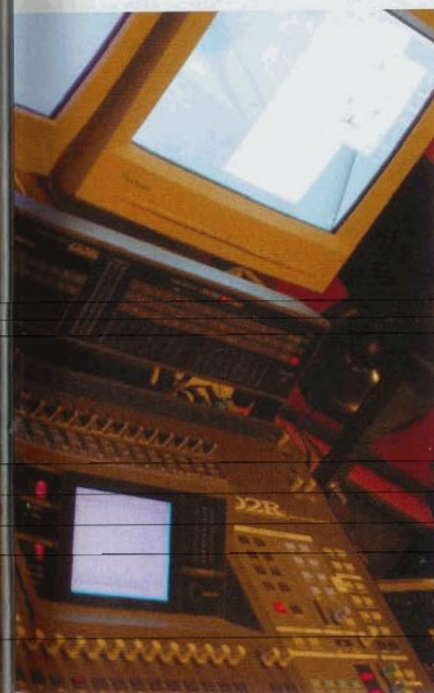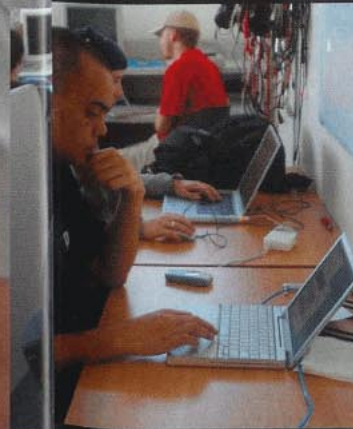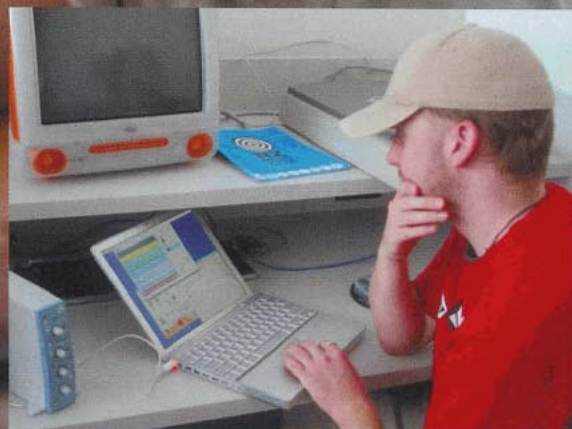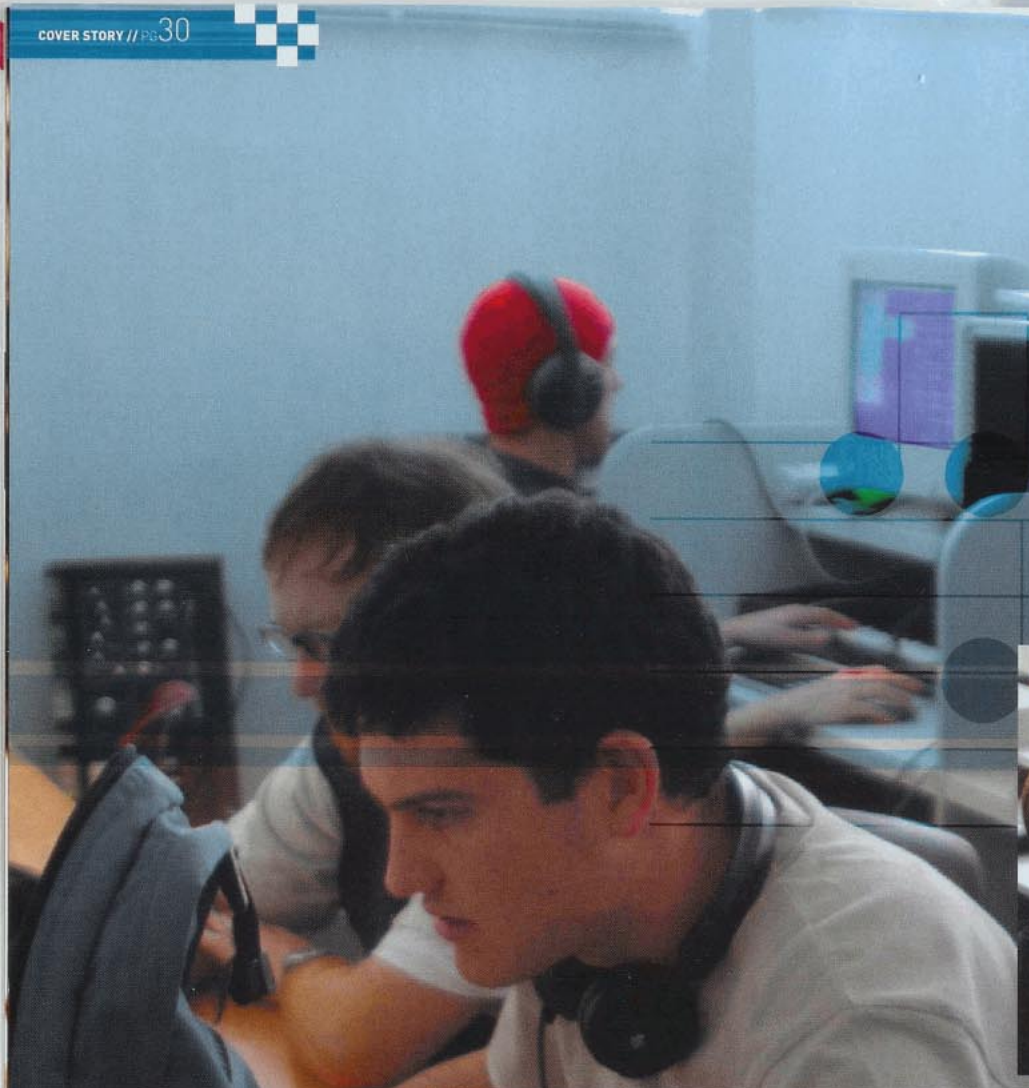
Victoria and Nelson streets, offers the most complete audio syllabus, with certificates in Foundation Sound and Music (levels 1/2/3), Contemporary Music Performance (levels 3/4), Live Sound and Event Management (levels 3/4), Audio Engineering and Music Production (levels 5/6), and diplomas in Contemporary Music Performance (levels 5/6) and Music Event Management (level 5).

We were shown around by Thom Cochrane, the Diploma of Audio Engineering and Music Production tutor. Thom was introduced to us by Campus IT's tertiary education manager, Karen Francis.

Campus IT is MAINZ's preferred supplier in Auckland and a key account – every student for 2003 got a current Apple iBook (G3) with a ProTools M-box hardware/software combination as part of the course fee ($8750: beefed-up laptops are available for extra money). Next year, the base model will be a G4 laptop. Several of the MAINZ studios and suites are fully fitted out with Macs and the whole building is on an AirPort network, which has been running for five years already (the students' laptops all come with AirPort cards installed). Three G5 1.8s have been ordered to further bolster computing power. Including student laptops, there are 50-60 Macs in the building, with a few lonely PCs for other tasks.

The institute runs courses in basic computer skills for PC in the first-year courses, and in Dip Audio runs several classes introducing the Macintosh platform and the laptops.

Software in constant use includes ProTools for audio editing, Logic Audio for sequencing, and Final Cut Pro for editing and mastering movies with sound. OS X's iApps are also in constant use, with iDVD, iMovie, iCal, Mail and Address Book particularly useful, and iChat used for communications both within the Auckland building and between the three campuses nationally. Students also communicate with MAINZ from off site by connecting to the Internet and using iChat via AIM.

Thom looks after the hardware and software issues, only going to Campus IT if they are – rarely – beyond him. The tutors also use Macs, of course. They plug their G4 laptops into projectors in the lecture theatres, and course notes, written in HTML and also available on the virtual MAINZ eCampus, are sent direct to students.

Wandering around the building is quite an experience. Bands

thump from soundproofed practice rooms, there are lecture theatres and a room with a suite of Macs fitted with a variety of ProTools systems, from the M-box USB audio input device to the Digi002 control surface and top-of-the-line ProTools TDM systems.

Macs were originally introduced in 1995 when the course started, getting the jump on other computer platforms for their MIDI capabilities and, as Mac use in the multimedia industry gained precedence, it was mirrored by Apple's role at MAINZ.

Other devices linked to Macs include Didgidesign ProTools 001s for sound recording, and a variety of MIDI synthesisers and sound modules controlled via Logic Audio sequencers.

One of the drawcards of the G5s, apart from their raw power and expandability, is the new optical audio connectors enabling distortion-free mixing of soundtracks through decoder units for 5:1 surround-sound speaker systems, increasingly used in film soundtracks and for DVD releases.

FireWire is rapidly superseding USB for multi-channel audio input devices, and may well become the audio networking format in future. Sound files can be pumped around the network via wireless Airport, but at the moment dedicated wire networks are in place for moving large files about inside the building at the highest speed.

Watching these students learning and playing music, mixing via Macs, creating websites and using multimedia – and almost as a by-product learning all the other myriad uses for Macs – is revelatory. The Macs at MAINZ empower the students and staff like nothing I've seen before on such a scale, with individual student Mac ownership creating a dedicated and experienced class of Mac professional. MAINZ graduates crop up in studios all over New Zealand, and internationally, as professional musicians, studio producers and engineers, mixing live sound and in the credits of many films and TV programmes.
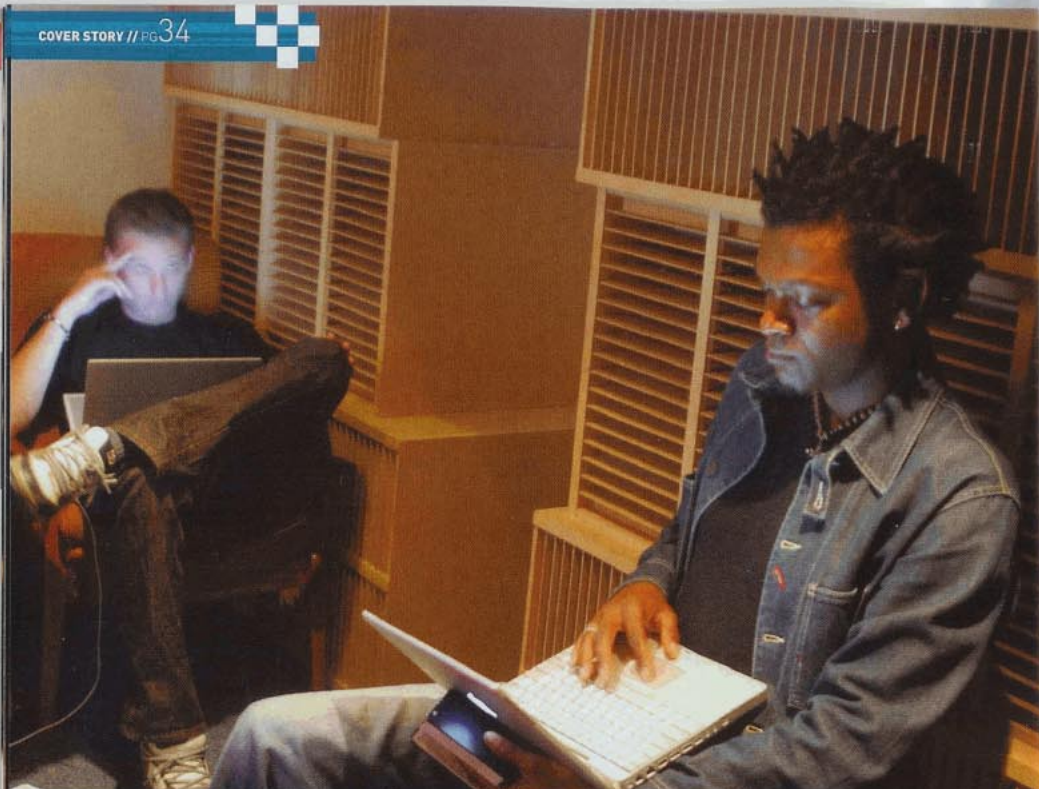
Macs are even used recreationally, with the Diploma Audio Engineering students and staff indulging in raging network games of Urban Terror, a Quake mod, after 4pm on Fridays. Even Thom appreciates this chance to unwind: "It's the only chance the students will ever have to shoot the tutors." He pauses, and a wicked grin flits across his face. "And for us to shoot them!"