In the Band but Out of State. Or the Country.

By Mike Musgrove
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Jason Hannah says his Fender guitar had just been gathering dust in the closet until a few months ago.

But lately, the 32-year-old construction worker has been jamming for a few hours every day at his home in Alabama. The other day, he strummed along with didgeridoo player in Chile; more recently, he’s been collaborating with a guitar player who lives in Holland.

Hannah and his session mates are using the test version of a service called eJamming that aims to bring the musicians of the world together into online music rooms. Thanks to the Internet, you'll never have to be late to band practice again.

Users of the eJamming software can chat in the service's "lobby" via text messages, then start private chats or fire up a jam session. A session's creator has control over how many places or "seats" are available -- up to four musicians -- and can invite in or kick out people at will. The players can talk to and hear each other using microphones hooked up at their computers. Sometimes eJamming throws events, such as last week's karaoke night, in a community-building effort.

The International Music Products Association, a trade...
group, says keyboard lessons are a $2 billion-a-year business. And one of the best ways for music students to improve their skills is to perform with others, though many never get around to it because they lack the time, energy or social network to make that happen. This is the market eJamming is aiming at.

I'm in that market, as it happens, and tried the service last week with high hopes -- and no success. The moment I installed the software and logged on, I got a friendly instant message from Hannah, who happened to be logged on too: "Let's rock!"

Or . . . well, let's not rock, in my case. Hannah was spared my plodding C-jam blues because I couldn't get the service to connect, even though I tried a few computers (Mac, Windows Vista and Windows XP). eJamming says it has more than 6,000 users, so maybe it's just me.

The service is in development and available as a free download, though the company plans to charge a $9.95 monthly fee beginning in September. The company uses technology originally developed for online computer-game tournaments.

This isn't the only company trying to match musicians and keep them connected, though it may be the most ambitious. While eJamming tries to bring musicians together in a real-time environment, a few other new sites have been developed to let musicians trade music files and build on each other's creations one piece at a time: You post a bass line, for example, and your online bandmate adds, say, a guitar line and sends it back.

One site that takes this approach, Indaba Music, is hoping to establish itself as a social-networking site for musicians. Co-founder Dan Zaccagnino says the service grew out of his frustration from having a hard time linking up with other musicians. Matt Siegel, his business partner, says he hopes the site might unite musicians who would never meet in the real world -- and, who knows, maybe invent a new genre or two in the process.

Users of the eJamming service who made it through the technical hurdles that snagged me say it's pretty near the experience of playing together in a room, with one caveat.

There's a small delay between when you sing or play a note and when your audio signal is synced with your session mates' feed and played back to you; fans of the service like Hannah say you
get used to it.

"If I jam with someone in the States, the delay is so little you barely know its there," said Hannah, who likes to play jazz and classic rock and goes by the handle "Gilmour" online.

"There's a whole new market here," said Ben Bajarin, who plays guitar when he isn't working as a tech industry analyst. Eventually, some people will get tired of mashing up songs or playing Guitar Hero and want to play a real instrument.

It's not hard to find skeptics. My teacher, Bob Sykes, was a little dubious about the concept, especially when I told him about the lag, though he could see a few upsides. But he was too busy with real-world gigs, the paying kind, to mess around with eJamming last week.

My friend Andy Sullivan has already experienced the weird kicks of virtual music collaboration. He put out a few guitar licks online and watched them grow lives of their own. One guy added a vocal track; another used Andy's riff as the opening music for a cooking podcast.

And thanks to the wonders of a search engine called Google, his catchy pop song "The Internet Is Changing Everything" sometimes gets downloaded off his site and used when news outlets like NPR or CNBC do a story touching on themes in the song, such as how the Internet is changing everything. Who knows, Andy could become the next OK Go. (That band piggybacked off of YouTube to real-world success.)

Of course, you don't need the magical Web to collaborate with musicians from afar. Ben Gibbard of Death Cab for Cutie and producer Jimmy Tamborello of Dntel decided they wanted to work together a few years ago, but the two live in different states.

The pop group named itself after the communications medium that made their long-distance collaboration possible: The duo calls itself the Postal Service.
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