

Stateside

Tim Hartnell reports from the West Coast Computer Faire in San Francisco.

The eighth West Coast Computer Faire, held at the end of March in an unusually wet San Francisco, was a desert for owners of ZX or Timex-Sinclair computers. Neither Timex nor Sinclair bothered to put in an appearance, and the only support for the machines came from two independent companies.

The New York based software company, Softsync, had a stand at the show, selling a range of ZX81/Timex-Sinclair 1000 software, most of it produced in the UK. Reston Publishing Company, who have decided to concentrate at least part of their resources on the ZX market, had a range of books (nearly all of which were written in the UK) on display. Reston are also distributing a range of 16K ZX81 software written in Canada.

The bad news for Sinclair and Timex came from two areas. Texas unveiled their new computer, the TI 99/2. Selling for \$99.00, this computer is a 4K black and white machine, housed in a solid and impressive-looking silver case with large discrete keys somewhat like those provided on calculators. Although it is only black and white (28 characters by 24 lines), it appears to outclass the ZX81 by miles. It is not particularly fast, but has a flicker-free display, which appears much faster than the ZX81 in Slow mode.

The other bad news comes from a new company, Venture Micro Inc. of Cupertino, California, who unveiled a very impressive \$129.95 colour computer, the Humdinger. Smaller than a Spectrum, with the same sort of keys, the Humdinger has 13 (!) graphic modes with eight colours and a highest resolution of 256 x 192. This is the same as the Spectrum, but in contrast to the Spectrum's 32 by 22 colour mask, the Humdinger has pixel-addressed colour. This, of course, consumes memory, but as the machine can be expanded to 64K, is not too much of a problem.

The basic Humdinger is supplied with 4K on board and the sound is superb. Four voices, with a range of five octaves, provide almost 'arcade quality' sound. The sound comes through the TV speaker.

Too Good To Be True

These specifications pale beside the fact that the Humdinger comes with interfaces for the following, all built-in on the standard machine: Centronics parallel printer port, serial RS232 port with full handshake to connect to modem, terminal or network, joystick port and cartridge port for plug-in software. A standard disc operating system was said to be 'five weeks' away, along with a graphics tablet and an EPROM programmer.

Frankly, the Humdinger sounds too good to be true to me. But I bought one (not yet delivered, two weeks after the show) and so did Richard Turner, head of Artic Software. The company said they have no plans at present to launch the machine in the UK, but will be discussing doing so before the PCW show later in the year.

Presumably Richard Turner sees a potential software market for the machine. I'll report on the Humdinger, once I've put it through its paces, in a future issue of *ZX Computing*. Certainly it seems superb to me, an opinion shared by computer journalist Guy Kewney, who alerted me to the machine during a discussion in the Faire's press room.



The general feeling among computer dealers I spoke to in the US was that Timex have somehow missed the boat. Certainly, I saw only *one* TS 1000 on sale in the whole of San Francisco, and that was in a 'drug store', next to the watches and cheap transistor radios.

However, the ace up the Timex sleeve is the TS 1500, which is a ZX81, with 16K on board, furnished with a Spectrum-like keyboard. My spies indicate Timex will sell it for \$99.00, exactly matched up against the TI 99/2. I don't know what this means for the TS 1000, which is supposed to have a list price of \$99.00 (but which has been selling for as little as \$57.50, according to some reports). I guess the TS 1000 will go on sale for \$50.00, with the TS 1500 taking the higher level. The editor of one major US computer magazine told me that the difference between \$70 and \$130 (the current price of the Vic-20) was negligible to American consumers, so even at a low price, the TS 1000 may be battling uphill to get new buyers. We shall see!

Read All About It

A new American publication may be of interest to Timex/Sinclair 1000/ZX81 owners — priced at \$5.00, it is called the Timex-Sinclair 1983 Directory.

In just over 90 double columned pages, the book covers such subjects as: where to find disc drives, RAM extensions, printers, modems, keyboards, interfaces, books, periodicals, programming aids, etc. Including photographs to illustrate the items, it describes special applications like control circuitry, enhanced graphics, voice generation, music synthesis, video inversion, light pens, joysticks, etc. There is also a guide to software available including everything from spreadsheets, word processors, data banks,

engineering and design, to arcade and adventure games.

Those interested in this publication can find out more from the publishers, the E Arthur Brown Company, 1702 Oak Knoll Drive, Alexandria, MN 56308, USA.

