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PowerBook G3 (Bronze Keyboard)

Company: Apple Computers, Inc.

Estimated Price: \$3499 (highend)

<<http://www.apple.com>>

Living with Lombard:

The Great, the not so Great, and the Ugly.

(With apologies to the Spaghetti Westerns.)

I wanted to write up a review of Lombard. After living with Lombard for about a month now, I thought I'd go ahead and share my experiences with it. When I first decided to write a hardware review, I thought it would be this glowing, radiant love fest. But the longer I used my black beauty, the more I realized that it wasn't going to be quite the love fest I thought it would be.

If you need a rundown of the specs, check out Apple's web page on the matter.

<<http://www.apple.com/powerbook/specifications.html>>

The Great:

Speed:

Plain and simple, this thing is fast. (Well most of the time, see The Ugly: later in this review.) Opening applications, opening files, transferring files, downloading, copying, sending emails, you name it—this Mac is fast. With 400MHz under the hood sporting a 1MB backside cache running at 2.5 to 1, it just rocks.

Sometimes the speed is actually a hindrance. If you accidentally double-click on the wrong file it might open before you have the presence of mind to hit Command-".(period). Or if you accidentally drop a file on the wrong folder/partition, you find you have copied or moved it before you can click 'Cancel.' And at times you are sitting mouth agape as tasks that used to take forever on your old system now complete in no time at all.

I've been caught off guard a couple of times. I just stare at my desktop realizing that my life is now simpler, and less complex than I thought it would be with this machine.

This speed allows you to think much less of the computer itself and concentrate on the task at hand. Overall this makes for a much more transparent symbiosis between man and machine. It does what you want it to do, without much thought. Some may think this would lead to a "disconnection" with our Macs. I would say that it leads to a much stronger connection with them.

LCD Screen:

Another thing that is wonderful to watch are the splash screens of applications as they truly "splash" open, or spin a QTVR so fast that you feel ill. I'm wondering, has anyone combined a QTVR with Video for a ride on a roller coaster? I'd love to see that.

What would make that possible is the incredibly rich screen of the Lombard. 14.1 inches of 1024x786 resolution, 3D accelerated 24 bit color is just wonderful. It is expansive and nearly as big as my 17" monitor. I recently pulled up my PowerBook 150 for some quick thoughts in MS Word 5.1a. I was just shocked at how clunky, how out of date it felt in comparison. The itty bitty screen was just too hard to take at 640x480, yikes! I'm telling you, once you get your hands on a G3 series PowerBook and gaze upon its screen, you'll be hard pressed to go back to anything less. Even a 15 inch monitor would seem smallish in comparison. This screen is lush, rich and expansive.

Video Output:

Monitor spanning capabilities will spoil you. I've got an indestructible 1705 monitor. It has served me well and with the Monitor spanning capabilities built right into Lombard I'm afraid that I want to lug my 1705 with me everywhere. Seriously, it brings about a whole new way of working with your PowerBook. What I have found most useful is to place my Monitor behind and above my PowerBook. With the simple "arrange" controls built into the Monitors and Sound

control panel I find myself arranging the desktop in 1024x1536 set up. I suppose I could rearrange my monitor so that it would sit next to my PowerBook but that simply would take up too much real desktop area. By placing my PowerBook display below the level of my Monitor I can place tool windows on it and work with the main window of my application on the CRT very easily. This allows me to get a much less cluttered view of what I'm creating. I think that desktop publishers, video editors, and web surfers will find this quite helpful. And in the long run, more productive. I don't have to hide my tool windows to get an unobstructed view of my work nor do I have to hide my web applications behind other open windows. I like this feature tremendously.

Keyboard:

Some have complained about the Lombard keyboard. That it is too mushy. Not me. I was definitely unaccustomed to it when I first started using it. However, I'm finding that I prefer it to all the other keyboards I also use. Certainly compared to a clunky, crunchy, PowerBook 150 this thing is a dream. My standard Apple keyboard, although much more ingrained in my hands' "memory," now feels somewhat stilted in comparison.

When I'm at my "day job" with an "ergonomic" keyboard, I find myself lusting for the ease and comfort that Lombard's keyboard offers me. Just wishing that I could begin a particular big project on the smooth and forgiving keyboard of my PowerBook. Hmmm, just wish I had Virtual PC running NT on my Lombard, maybe I could start and finish those projects on my Lombard after all. (I do have a few complaints about the keyboard; look in "The Not so Great" and "The Ugly" section of this review.)

In fact, the Lombard's keyboard has spoiled me enough that I won't even consider buying an external keyboard to hook up until I can get some real time with a unit that I feel would be the equal or better of Lombard's built in keyboard.

Mass:

Weight is a big factor in a PowerBook, and I notice with the introduction of the iBook that it is not only second in speed to Lombard, but also in weight and size. Weight by nearly a pound! and size by a nearly a 1/3rd of an inch. Not that Lombard is exactly a petite gymnast, but this thing is pretty darn portable. I simply slip it in a sharp leather portfolio I have. Since I'm already carrying a sports bag, I can place the power brick right in there. Not a bad deal for ease of travel. I'm well pleased. Naturally, when you need additional accessories a standard PowerBook carrying case comes in handy. This is when Lombard shows that it still could

lighten its load. But considering the combination of weight and power, I dare you to find another computer from any manufacturer that offers all that Lombard does at this weight. Right now, I don't think it can be done. (Only desktops come close to the performance, but certainly not the portability 5.9 pounds offers.)

DVD:

Never having had "DVD" player before I was pleased that the 400MHz unit comes with it standard. I have rented some DVDs. It is amazing the quality of the play. Both on the PowerBook's screen as well as on my monitor. I haven't bothered to hook it up to my television as the quality of DVD is lost on such low resolution (though it does come with an adapter to do so, I just wish it came with the appropriate audio adapters to connect to your television, but those are much more common and inexpensively obtained). It ran virtually flawlessly. Only once in awhile did I notice a stutter or a mechanical feel to the playback; even with other applications running this was rare (though I did notice it even when other applications weren't running). I was most impressed overall.

Battery:

Oh yes, I'm a big fan of the battery. Does it last 5 hours? I don't think so. Does it last longer than any other PowerBook battery that has come before it? It does. This is a great advancement. And with the very self explanatory Energy Saver control panel, it's easy to customize your settings to get the best compromise of energy savings and performance that suits you. It is all just a matter of working with the control panel to suit your needs and your desires.

I have turned on virtually all of the energy saving options and have just gained about 40 minutes of estimated battery time according my control strip. Not bad. In fact, great. In all fairness, you could probably get the battery to come close to its advertised 5 hour rate. However, you would have to be a master of energy saving techniques that would, I believe, become a hindrance to your productivity. Why not work more efficiently than fuss with energy savings tricks that could distract from your work?

Connectivity:

Lombard is probably the last Mac to be made with SCSI standard. That combined with 10/100MB Ethernet and two USB ports, this is for me the best combination of legacy and future connectivity for computers. I only lament that it can't have at least one ADB port for those of use who cannot replace all of our legacy hardware at once time. No worries. There are a plethora of adapters out on the market that can extend the life of your old hardware.

Access:

This is a truly nifty feature. Just pull back on a couple of built in tabs between the function keys and Ta-da! Instant access for RAM and hard drive upgrades. It is wonderful. Plus you have the ability to “lock” the keyboard in place to keep prying eyes from sneaking a peek inside. Apple outdid themselves with this.

The Not So Great:

The name:

First and foremost this is one great computer. Certainly a fine evolution of the WallStreet. Why did it get such a yawner of a name? Personally I call mine, Copperhead (in honor of the copper G3 under the hood). It certainly is lethal to all the Wintel laptops.

Keyboard Layout:

The keyboard layout is odd, inasmuch as the new “Function” shift key that has been added in the traditional location of the left control key, bumping it, the Option key, and the Command key to the right. I think that it could have been placed somewhere else. Above the other keys would have been nice, or even integrated with the function keys would have been better. Who knows. But that is about my only complaint about the keyboard layout other than the itty bitty arrow keys and the worthless Enter key (that should have been a Command key, without doubt) to the right of the Spacebar.

Speakers:

I’m sitting here listening to a CD. It's not an unpleasant experience but it just isn't up to par with the rest of Lombard. The speakers are tinny and not very responsive. Much of the rich sound of the Elliott Smith XO CD is just not coming through. If you use your PowerBook for any extended periods at a desk and want sound, consider external speakers. They will be a must with Lombard.

The Ugly:

CD Drive:

The CD function is loud, obnoxious and buzzy as a data CD spins up. I found this annoying as well as at odds with the overall smooth and refined nature of Lombard. It seemed just a bit out of place. Why would something so sophisticated have such a glaring rough edge? I have to say, “Apple, fix it!” This is not in keeping with the refined tool that is Lombard. It is kind of like buying a Ferarri and

when you turn on the heater you have to turn up the stereo to drown it out.

The Pause. The Stall. Argh!!!

Speaking of the CD player, I've experienced the dreaded "pause" under 8.6 with Lombard. If you haven't heard about it, it is quite annoying. So much so it made it into my "Ugly" section. What happens is this, you will be working along in or between applications and suddenly the system just stops. Mimicking a system freeze, so much so that at one time or another I've hit Ctrl/Cmnd/Power and rebooted. If you simply hold on, the system will come back to you. If you have not experienced this, words cannot describe how completely infuriating it is until you experience it. Apple's cure is two fold. One of which is to disable the CD/DVD extension. HA! Oh yeah that makes sense. The other cure is to keep a data CD in the drive <<http://til.info.apple.com/techinfo.nsf/artnum/n31023>>. Like that doesn't contradict the other TIL that tells you to remove CDs to prevent the computer from accessing the CD <<http://til.info.apple.com/techinfo.nsf/artnum/n30376>> as it will periodically spin up to check data. DOH!

I've got a better idea:

I've got a much better solution. The only cure that seems to work for me is keeping an Audio CD in the drive. A data CD—unless you are constantly copying data—won't work. It spins down sooner or later and will be accessed by the system again causing a significant delay. The best workaround I've discovered is keeping a music CD in the tray. I've done so this whole time and haven't had a single pause. Obviously, the system recognizes that it doesn't need to access the music CD. Maybe that is my cure until Apple updates the software. I'm telling you, that 10 second pause was truly annoying!!!! Apple, get on the ball and fix that problem.

The Trackpad Button:

The other completely frustrating situation with Lombard is the problem with the trackpad button. This is a you write for and suddenly the cursor will jump to another place in the review you are writing and boom! You're seemingly fluid flow of thoughts jump right into the middle of another paragraph.

serious flaw in the current PowerBook. You can be working along and unwittingly put enough pressure on the wrist rest to accidentally click the button (Without actually touching the trackpad button). This rates right up there with the 8.6 "delay." You could be writing, let's say a review for the magazine

(See what I mean?)

Made worse with The Pause:

Or to compound the situation, you might click on an open window of another application and not only do you have the inconvenience of having to switch back to the application you were working in, but you may also incur the 10 second delay without realizing you have done so until the other window jumps to the front and you realize you have to click back. ARGH!

The Bronze keyboard never should have made it to market with this flaw. It should have been caught long before it came to market. This definitely is one for the Ugly category.

Heat:

Heat is that last of the uglies I have to review. Despite a new copper chip, the 400MHz unit is darned hot. “Dang hot, I think I’m going to do a little crotch pot cooking!” Seriously, my Copperhead has melted its rubber feet. Leaving nice little remnants on my desk. I’m sure glad this was an old desk and not some really nice mahogany desk. But there are bound to be a few execs that find that their Lombard has left little remnants behind. For the price of the thing, you think Apple could have put on feet that could stand the heat. (I couldn’t resist that little rhyme.)

Conclusion:

Overall Lombard is one of the finest computers available from Apple. I think it has a few growing pains to sort out. I broke my own rule of never being an early adopter and will remember that when it is time for my next computer.

But do I love it? I sure do. It is fast, beautiful and more than I’ll need for a long long time? Oh yeah. I think about if I had gotten a WallStreet, or a Blue and White but nothing can compare to this Lombard and its extensive list of features. Overall it is one sweet machine even it it isn’t all great.

Despite its flaws, what it does is incredible and will satisfy all but the most power hungry users. Without a doubt it is the fastest laptop available out there. Working at a major PC manufacturer I get to see some great equipment from the Wintel side of the curtain. But nothing compares to this Lombard.

If you aren’t in a hurry for a Lombard, I’d wait. Let it evolve a little and smooth out some of its rough edges. If you just have to have some portable raw power and none of the uglies listed above scare you, dive right in. I definitely give Lombard a **strong recommendation**.

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Websites mentioned:

<<http://www.apple.com>>

<<http://www.apple.com/powerbook/specifications.html>>

<<http://til.info.apple.com/techinfo.nsf/artnum/n31023>>

<<http://til.info.apple.com/techinfo.nsf/artnum/n30376>>

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