

# Mackie

## Tracktion 3.03 (Mac/Win)

A major upgrade for an upstart sequencer.

By Mike Levine

### PRODUCT SUMMARY

<b>digital audio sequencer</b>	
<b>Ultimate Bundle</b>	<b>\$249.99</b>
<b>Ultimate Upgrade Bundle</b>	<b>\$199.99</b>
<b>Project Bundle</b>	<b>\$99.99</b>

**PROS:** Good value. Excellent pitch-shifting and time-stretching. Imports Acid, Apple, and REX loops. Filter Racks offer customized routing. Thorough manual and video tutorials.

**CONS:** No MIDI event lists. MIDI editing a bit cumbersome. Occasional crashes while scanning loops. Audio hesitates during manual punching.

FEATURES	1	2	3	4	5
EASE OF USE	1	2	3	4	5
DOCUMENTATION	1	2	3	4	5
VALUE	1	2	3	4	5

Mackie  
www.mackie.com



**D**ue to a slew of significant improvements and upgrades in version 3, Mackie Tracktion has become one of the better bargains in the digital audio sequencer market. Although it doesn't have the overall depth of features of its more expensive competitors—for instance, there is no notation support, no surround mixing, and limited video support—it is more than capable for bread-and-butter recording, editing, and mixing tasks, and it's very reasonably priced.

This review will focus mainly on the new features in Tracktion 3 (T3), but for those unfamiliar with the program, I'll begin with a brief overview. (For more on Tracktion's legacy features, see the review of version 2 in the November 2005 issue, available at [www.emusician.com](http://www.emusician.com).) I tested Tracktion 3 on several computers, including a Dell laptop running Windows XP, a Mac dual 2 GHz G5 running Tiger, and a 3 GHz Mac Pro running Leopard.

### T3 101

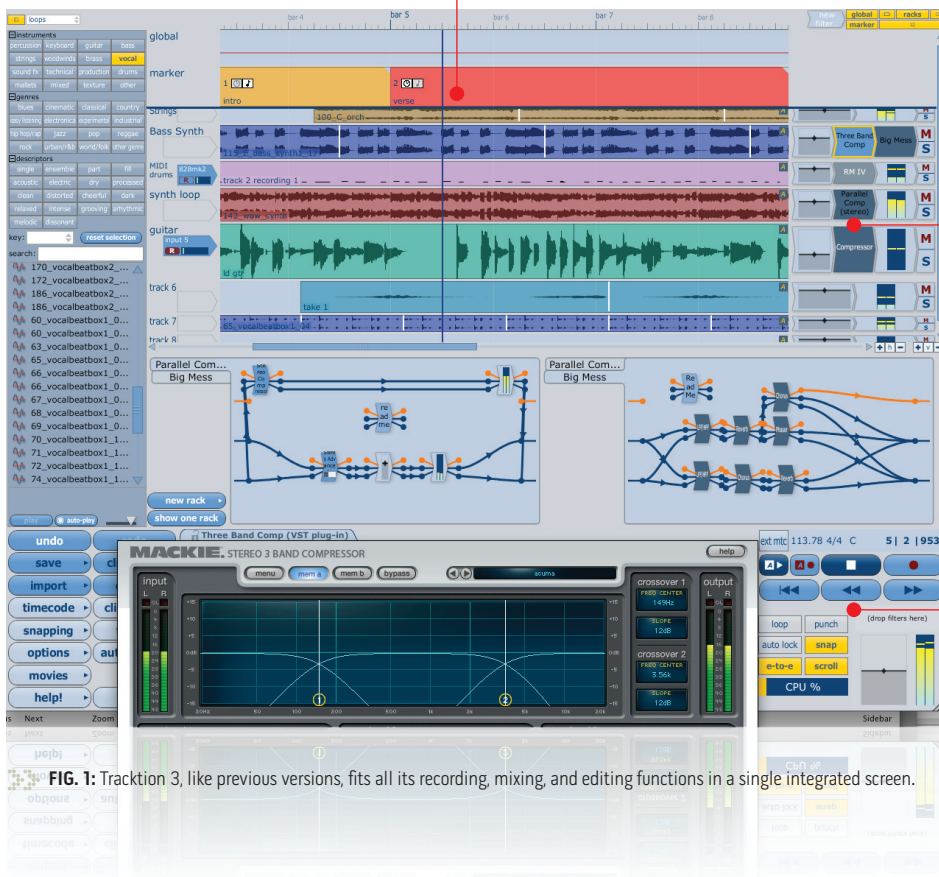
From its inception, Tracktion was designed with the idea of putting all its functions (save pref-

erence setting and file management) in a single integrated screen, with pop-up subwindows that open as necessary. A couple of brief forays into previous versions left me with the impression that its interface was a bit claustrophobic, with too many functions crammed into a small space. However, after spending a couple of months working with Tracktion 3, I've changed my mind. I've realized that its interface is actually quite logical and easy to navigate—that is, once you get used to its unique way of doing things.

One of the smartest features of T3's interface is that its main window lets you visualize the signal flow of your project in a linear fashion. You enable inputs and arm tracks on the left; record and edit audio and MIDI files in track lanes in the center; adjust volume and pan to the right (T3 has no dedicated mixer window); and add effects and routing and solo and mute tracks a bit farther to the right.

This left-to-right scheme, along with Tracktion's ample help and detailed manual, makes it easy to grasp the program's work flow, which is a good thing because Mackie has targeted this program at musicians who are recording novices.

Markers can be named, given a color, and prominently displayed in the Marker Track.



Mixing functions reside in the Filter Section.

The transport controls and master bus are located here.

FIG. 1: Traktion 3, like previous versions, fits all its recording, mixing, and editing functions in a single integrated screen.

That said, you could definitely do a serious project in T3 without having to resort to another program until it was time to burn your CD.

## The Edit Story

The Edit Screen (see Fig. 1 and Web Clip 1), which is the T3 name for the main screen where all the recording, editing, and mixing is accomplished, is laid out as follows: On the left is the Quick Find Panel, new in T3, in which you can display loops; a browser for importing loops; markers; or the contents of the clipboard. The center section is where the tracks and their Clips—both MIDI and audio—are displayed and edited. (“Clips” is Traktion parlance for regions.) The Timeline, Global Track (which shows tempo and time-signature changes), and Marker Track are at the top. Below the tracks is the Properties Panel, which displays information about, and allows you to change parameters for, whatever you’ve selected above, whether it’s an audio or MIDI Clip or an effect (referred to in Traktion as a Filter).

Each Clip can be individually edited. Traktion has a somewhat unusual scheme for this, which uses controls on the Clip’s container, rather than external tools, for editing tasks.

Like so much with Traktion, the paradigm is a bit different, but the capabilities are strong.

I did find T3 to be a bit lacking in the MIDI-editing department. Only piano-roll-style editing is available, and it’s a little clunky to use. There are no event lists (you can edit parameters for individual notes in the Properties Panel), and selecting groups of notes can be tedious. That said, once you get used to its interface, you can accomplish most MIDI tasks, including deleting and moving notes, quantizing, step entry, and editing controller information.

Back to the tour of T3’s Edit Screen: The far right contains the Filter Section, Traktion’s equivalent of a mixer. From here you can add Filters, change volume and pan, mute and solo tracks, and more. The order in which you place the Filters (left to right)

reflects their order in the signal chain. Filters encompass everything from effects to soft instruments to aux sends and aux returns, and more.

One of Traktion’s most powerful features is the ability to set up Filter Racks (see Fig. 2), which contain a chain of Filters. You can save custom Racks—for instance, your favorite effects for your vocals or your often used instrument-effect combinations—and edit the routing

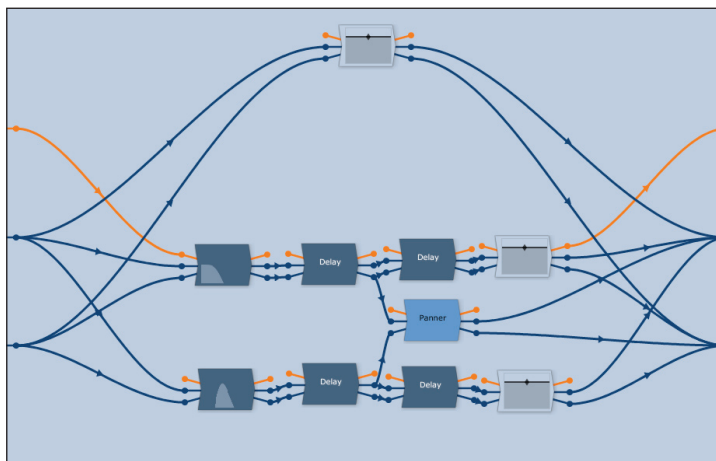


FIG. 2: The Filter Racks feature allows you to create custom-routed effects chains that you can save and recall at will.

through them of both audio and MIDI.

Racks have been souped up considerably in T3. You can now turn a chain of Filters on a track into a Rack with a single command. You can also do the opposite and “Unwrap” a Rack onto a track with each Filter showing up separately. And you can export and import Racks so you can share them between projects and between different users. Overall, the Filter section is different in approach from the standard software mixer, but it gives you plenty of functionality.

At the bottom right of the Edit Screen is a master section. There you can drop in master-bus Filters and access the transport controls.

Concerning the latter, I did notice that when doing a manual punch-in—as opposed to using the autopunch feature—there was a slight and potentially distracting hesitation in the playback of the audio just after I hit the record button. The autopunch feature works fine, but you must be sure to turn off the count-in in the Click Track pop-up, or playback before the punch-in point will be muted.

## Looper-Duper

Perhaps the most significant change from previous versions is that Tracktion now supports multiple loop formats; it can import Acid, Apple, and REX loops. Most sequencers can import one or two formats but not all three.

Importing loops is easy: you go to the Loop Settings page, browse to your loop directory, and tell Tracktion to scan the loops. Once it's finished scanning, the loops are categorized according to their metadata and are available through the various category buttons in the Quick Find Panel (in Loops mode; see Fig. 3). Most of the time, the loop scan feature worked flawlessly, but on a couple of occasions, Tracktion crashed while scanning (both on the Mac and the PC). However, the program remembered my unsaved changes and restored my file back to its precrash state.

Tracktion 3 also features impressive new algorithms for time-stretching and pitch-shifting. By clicking-and-dragging the arrow at the end of a Clip while holding down the Alt key (Option on the Mac), you can time-stretch an audio Clip. You can also enter numerical values or adjust a slider to pitch-shift or time-stretch audio from the Properties Panel. Even fairly substantial time-stretches and pitch-shifts sounded natural and unprocessed.



**FIG. 3:** A new addition in version 3 is the Quick Find Panel, which provides a loop browser (shown here), a file browser, or a marker list.

## On Your Mark

Tracktion's handling of markers has been significantly upgraded. Previous versions allowed for only a handful of markers, but T3 can handle up to 999.

Markers, which can be relative or absolute from a time standpoint, are displayed near the top of the Edit Screen and, like most of the features in T3's interface, can be shown or hidden with the click of a button. You can also open the Marker List in the Quick Find Panel, which displays the markers vertically in order. When you double-click on a particular marker, the playhead jumps to that location, which is very handy.

## More and More

Also new in T3 is the Folder Tracks feature. As in other sequencers, Folder Tracks let you consolidate any number of individual tracks in a single container, making track organization a lot easier. Unlike in some sequencers, T3's Folder Tracks can be cut, copied, and pasted, just like regular tracks. That means you can use Folder Tracks to rearrange song sections. Here's how: select all the tracks, put them in a folder, then cut, copy, paste, or drag verses, choruses, bridges, or other song sections to move them around. Somewhat of a guerrilla method, for

sure, but it works. Tracktion's Folder Tracks also have a master volume filter, so you can adjust the cumulative volume of the tracks inside.

Space doesn't allow me to list all of T3's other enhancements, but here are a few more: improved automation curves, increased control surface support—including the Novation Remote SL—support for Intel Macs, and the ability to mute individual Clips.

## All Bundled Up

Although the Tracktion 3 application is identical in the Ultimate and Project Bundles, you get a lot more loop content with the former, and a better set of plug-in instruments. The Ultimate Bundle (and the Ultimate Upgrade Bundle for Tracktion 2 owners) comes with four times as many Apple Loops, REX loops, and multitrack loops (from Sonic Reality) as the Project Bundle.

The Ultimate Bundle also comes with better versions of the included third-party plug-ins, such as Garritan Personal Orchestra T3 Lite Edition (with an 820 MB sound library), LinPlug Alpha Classic Synth (Alpha 3 version), a full version of LinPlug CronoX Sample Synth, a version of LinPlug's RM IV drum machine with 250 kits, IK Multimedia's SampleTank 2 SE (with 100 sounds) and AmpliTube LE, and Submersible Music's DrumCore TK (with 2 GB of samples)—a pretty impressive collection. Although you get video tutorials with both bundles, the Ultimate Bundle offers a whopping 4-plus hours of such content, enough to really get you going.

## Getting Tracktion

Tracktion 3 really surprised me. It did almost anything I asked of it, and I found it to be quite capable as a recording, sequencing, and mixing environment for music-production situations. I'd like to see a beefed-up MIDI-editing section, a smoother manual punch-in feature, and the ability to save video and audio to movie files added to the next version. Using Tracktion requires some adjustment if you're accustomed to the typical multiwindow sequencer, but under its somewhat unconventional hood purrs a powerful program that offers a great deal of functionality at a very reasonable price.

*EM executive editor and senior media producer Mike Levine hosts the twice-monthly Podcast "EM Cast" (www.emusician.com/podcasts).*