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Mackie Traktion—A Walking Tour

Take a spin around this unusual and powerful DAW

By Brent Randall

Traktion is a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW), an audio/MIDI sequencer and production program that runs on PC and Mac computers. Created by Raw Material Software, it first came out in 2002. Since 2004, it has been developed and distributed by Mackie and is currently at version 3.

Traktion doesn't follow all the conventions set by most other DAWs. This can leave people with questions, especially when it comes to the exact meaning of some terms the program uses in a specific way. We hope to give some answer with this overview—come join us for a basic tour around Traktion.

Working with Projects in Traktion

When opening Traktion, you will be brought to the Project Management screen. This is where you can manage your Traktion **Projects**. But before you get started with Traktion, you need to understand what a Project is and how Traktion handles them.

When you hear the term "project", you probably think of a file that can be opened for recording and editing. But with Traktion, a Project is only a container. Inside this container, you will find the actual files you can open to work on your song. These files are called **Edits**. An Edit represents a version of your work, and you can have multiple Edits inside your Project.

Figure 1 is the Projects Screen, where you select the material to work with. On the left side of the screen is a list of **Active Projects**. This is *not* a list of all Projects on your system. When Projects are considered "open" or "active"—in Traktion terms that means they're easily accessible from this list, it does not mean that any actual song data has been loaded for you to work on. Similarly, "closing" a Project *only* means that it is removed from the Active list.

To the right, you will find a list of all the Edits, audio, and MIDI files associated with your Project. To get started with working on an Edit, just double click on it. You will then find yourself at the **Edit Screen**, as seen in Figure 2.

This is where all of the action takes place on your Edit. Traktion uses this single-screen interface for everything. Traktion is built this way to allow musicians and producers to get things done with a minimum of fuss, and without getting in the way. But this screen may still induce a bit of confusion for people who are used to more traditional DAWs.

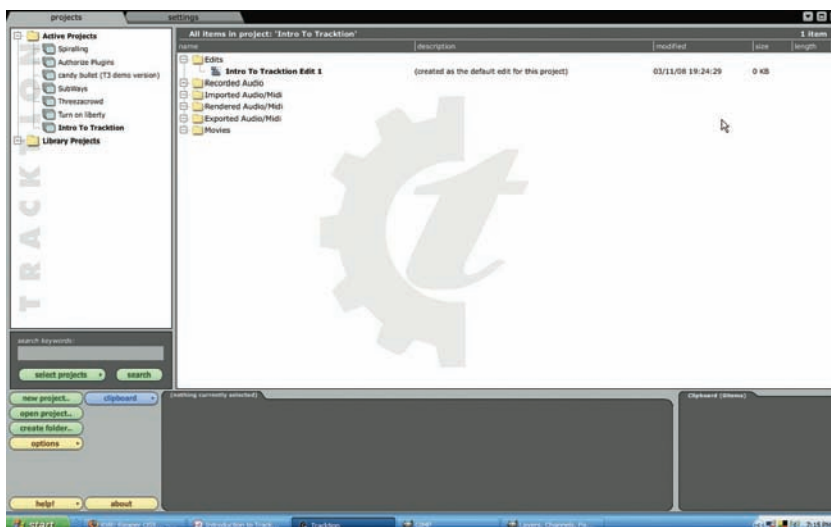


Figure 1: The Projects screen

One reason for this confusion is that Traktion doesn't use a traditional menu system as most hosts do. Instead, Traktion uses **Buttons**, found in section #1 on the Figure. These buttons either perform a certain task such as undo and redo, or they bring up menus. These menus give you access to various program options and functions such as audio export, timecode options, and more. Most of these options are Edit-specific, and will be saved with your Edit. We will discuss some of these functions later on.

So let's get started working on our Edit, shall we?

Getting sound into Traktion

As with all audio hosts, Traktion allows you to work with audio and MIDI files you already have, or record them from scratch. Let's assume you already have the audio or MIDI files you wish to use. For this we will use section #2 in our screenshot, the **Browser Pane**.

The Browser Pane contains various browsers used for finding files and information. There are four views that can be interchanged using the dropdown list at the top (shown in Figure 3 - changebrowser.jpg), but in this tutorial, we'll only mention two of the views. First, the **File Browser** lets you navigate through your computer to audition and insert audio and MIDI files into your Edit. Second, the **Loops Browser** lets you find and organize your loops collection by category and song style. Let's focus in particular on the File Browser for now.

Double-clicking on a folder in the File Browser opens that folder to reveal its contents. Hitting the Up arrow at the top of the browser goes up one level in the file structure. Once you find the file(s) you want, you can audition them using the Play command at the bottom of the browser, or if you want to add them to your Edit, you can drag them straight into the track you want them on.

To record into Traktion, move to section #3 in our screenshot, the **Input Section**. This is where you can handle the inputs from your audio or MIDI interface, arm tracks for recording, and more.

Notice the arrow-like boxes, some empty, some containing information. These arrows are called **Input Arrows** and are used to assign which audio or MIDI input you want to feed that particular track. Clicking on the arrow gives you several options. You can assign or un-assign inputs, assign all inputs to consecutive tracks, or you can tell Traktion to arm every input for recording.

To arm a single track for recording, click the little red "R" button on the Input Arrow, and then hit the Record button in the **Master Section**, which is section #4 in our screenshot. This works the same for MIDI tracks.

Finally, once you have assigned an input to a track, you can drag that track's Input Arrow to another track and it will then be assigned to the new track instantly.

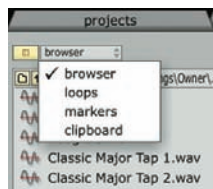
Editing and mixing inside Tracktion

Once you've recorded your audio or MIDI, you should have any number of items visible in the **Track Section**, which is section #5 in our screenshot. The Track Section holds all of your audio and MIDI information that has been imported or recorded, represented as **Clips**. A Clip in Tracktion is a self-contained audio or MIDI file that can be independently moved around in your Project to anywhere on any track. You can drag both audio and MIDI Clips to the same track, and even overlap any Clip with another Clip.



Figure 2 (above): The Edit screen

Figure 3 (right): Changing Browsers



To move a Clip, you must select and drag using the bar on top of the Clip. Your cursor turns into a hand icon and you can then drag the Clip around.

All of your editing tasks also happen right here in the Track Section, including renaming, splitting, reversing, stretching, MIDI editing, and more. However, due to space we will leave these functions for another day. Instead, we're going to move on to one of the most important sections in Tracktion, the **Filters Section**, referred to as section #6 in our screenshot.

(Here's another word that has a different meaning in Tracktion. Here, a **Filter** is any item that audio or MIDI passes *through* in the signal path. This definition includes effects such as reverb, compression, gates, and more...but it also includes VSTi instruments, ReWire devices, and even a simple volume level meter. If it can be inserted into the signal path somewhere and audio or MIDI passes through it, Tracktion considers it a Filter.)

By default, every track already has a volume/pan slider Filter and a level meter Filter. But if you're looking for something a bit more exciting, look above the Filters Section to the **Hide/Show Section**, which is section #7 in our screenshot. Disregard most of its contents for now, and focus on the arrow-shaped box with the words "new filter.." on it.

This is not a button you can press, but rather an item you can drag. If you drag the New Filter icon to the Filters Section of a track and let it go, you will be presented with a menu showing all of your currently available plug-ins, as well as other utilities such as additional volume meters, volume/pan sliders, and more. Simply select one from the list and it will appear in the position where you placed it.

When working in the Filters Section, you can drag and drop any Filter from any position to any other position. This makes it easy to reorder effects. Remember that Tracktion will always process the sound from left to right. This makes it very easy to keep track of your signal flow.

If you are using a MIDI file or live MIDI playing on your keyboard, and you want to play a synth plug-in or other virtual instrument, these instruments can also be found using the same method as any other Filter. Just drag the "new filter.." icon to the track you want and select an instrument; it will then be triggered by the MIDI in the track.

When your work is done in the Tracks Section and the Filters Section, it's time to mix down your work and share it with the world!

Getting sound out of Tracktion

A little bit earlier, we referred to the Master Section, which is section #4 in our screenshot. Let's go back there for a second and look at the **Master Effects** box. This is the box in the Master Section with the words "(drop filters here)" on it. And that is exactly what you can do with this box: drag Filters onto it.

This is the last stage in the signal chain before your audio leaves Tracktion and goes to your speakers. So this is where you would want to place effects through which you want your entire mix processed, including limiters and compressors. In reality, any Filter can be placed here. It's up to you. This works the same as the Filters Section. You can drag and drop the order of effects, and the signal still passes from left to right.

The functions you will need to get your sound out of Tracktion are located back in section #1, the Buttons Section.

First of all, using the **Save** button will let you save your Edit. But you can also "save edit as...", which lets you create a new version of your Edit. Remember that you can have multiple Edits in a Tracktion Project. But we are going to use the **Export** button, which gives you several options when you click on it.

You can choose to "create a MIDI file", which will create a single MIDI file of all the MIDI data in your project. This will not export any audio or non-MIDI data.

You can also "create an **Archive** of this edit" if you wish. An Archive is a single file that contains every audio file, every MIDI file, plug-in placements and settings, volume settings, etc. in a compact format that can be transported easily between computers without any fuss.

But most importantly for our purpose, we want to "create an audio file". This allows us to create a WAV file, AIFF file, or another audio file format of your Edit. No MIDI, effects, or plug-ins are saved here, just a simple audio file.

When you select this option, you are given a popup box with more options. You can select the location of your saved file, bit depth, sample rate, stereo or mono, and whether you want to leave silence at the beginning or end of your audio file. Several other options are available here that may come in handy as well. When you have everything set properly, hit the **Render** button and you're done!

You should now have a basic grasp on the unique aspects of Tracktion and how to create a basic arrangement. I hope to cover more specific functions and details in upcoming articles, starting with this month's Drum Column (page 34). Have fun, and happy Tracktioning! ☺