



HIDDEN TREASURE > This directory of audio, MIDI files and loops collapses when you don't need it to free up more space in Tracktion 3's one-window GUI.

POP-UP AUDIO > Built-in audio editing is just one of the many functions and tools that appear along the bottom when you click on elements in the main workspace above it.

MACKIE TRACKTION 3 ULTIMATE BUNDLE

UNDERDOG DAW CONTINUES ITS CINDERELLA STORY

BY PETER WETHERBEE

Although it may sport a distinctly unsexy and disarmingly simple interface, Mackie Tracktion 3 Ultimate Bundle is an elegant, powerful and comprehensive production suite for creating fresh beat-based recordings. Proudly remaining the most streamlined—yet increasingly feature-rich—digital audio workstation (DAW) software on the market, Tracktion 3 introduces a full set of tools for loop-based composition. Augmented with samplers, drum machines, a high-quality set of plug-in effects, a couple of monstrous synths, and extensive sample and loop collections, the Tracktion 3 Ultimate Bundle will appeal to DJs, composers and producers who have grown restless with the limitations of Reason, Live and Acid.

With unlimited track count and plug-in instantiations, the ability to connect as many audio interfaces (thereby setting no I/O limitations) as your system can handle and the ascetically streamlined interface, Tracktion 3 will get way more out of your dual-processor Mac or PC than most other full-featured apps. Still, Tracktion 3 happily works at a maximum of 192 kHz sampling rates and actually defaults to 32-bit files for its freezing function, which most apps couldn't do even if they wanted to.

Under the hood, Tracktion 3's high-definition, 64-bit mix engine sounds amazing, easily silencing critics of mixing "in the box." Mackie cites a minimum system requirement of a 1 GHz Mac G4 or G5, Pentium or Athlon processor with a half-gig of RAM, and it was ripping on a 1.6 GHz single-processor Pentium 4 laptop using a Digidesign MBox, M-Audio MobilePre and the built-in laptop I/O for a 6-in, 6-out configuration. The two DVDs—about 10 GB worth—of sample libraries, plug-ins and virtual synths/samplers/drum machines take a while to install, but once you're finished you have a ridiculous amount of stuff to play with.

ROLL WITH THE NEW

Remix reviewed Tracktion 2 in September 2005, so this review deals mostly with the new features. Tracktion 3's magic lies in its dedication to the flow of your creativity, and its engineering team stayed true to the original design and intent, providing clever and immediate access to the tools you need at all times. Tracktion 3 also quietly implements sophisticated behind-the-screen elements such as automatic latency control for all audio and MIDI processing, but at the same

MACKIE

TRACKTION 3 ULTIMATE BUNDLE >
\$319.99 (\$129.99 FOR THE PROJECT BUNDLE)

Pros: One-window interface puts a dazzling array of tools in front of you without disrupting the creative workflow. Impressive set of signal-processing plug-ins. 10 GB of loops and instrument samples. High-quality audio engine.

Cons: Basic visual design lacks appeal.

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SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

Mac: G4, G5 or Intel/1 GHz; 512 MB RAM; OS 10.4.8 or later; 10 GB free disk space

PC: Pentium or Athlon/1 GHz; 512 MB RAM; Windows XP; 10 GB free disk space

time, it refuses to make anything on the GUI look attractive in any way. You will not find a texture, graphic button or faux 3-D element anywhere in the application, and compared with nice third-party plug-ins, Tracktion looks stark and sparse.

However, there are nice touches everywhere, such as snap wave resolution that gets finer the more you zoom in; Fast-Forward and Rewind buttons that change to Abort and Abort and Restart buttons while recording; the ability to insert extra faders wherever and whenever you want within a channel; the ability to drop an insert effect onto a selected bit of a track without effecting the entire track (which means the effect uses CPU only while playing the selected bit); the freedom to import files of any bit or sampling rate without being sidetracked by converting and saving them elsewhere; and smooth insertion of loops, regardless of pitch or tempo. Tracktion 3 spoils you with those and many other clever, transparent and useful features.

Tracktion's most radical element is still the fact that everything occurs on a single session page; the other two tabbed pages are for settings and creating or opening another project. The main page has a collapsible menu in the upper-left corner from which to pull audio, MIDI files or loops into your project, and a key new Loops section wrangles in Acid, Apple Loops and REX (ReCycle) formats—on Mac or PC—with aplomb. Loops are listed as four overlapping types with subcategories: Instruments (bass, percussion, drums, etc.), Genres (jazz, hip-hop, reggae, etc.), Descriptors (dry, distorted, dark, etc.) and Key (major, minor, etc.). You can select any number of the subcategories to drill down on what you are looking for, and clicking on a file that appears in the resulting filtered list lets you audition the loop.

This is a great way to start a piece of music, with a sort of abstract approach to composing that gets the wheels turning and the juices flowing: Drag a loop onto a track, and it automatically conforms to your project's current tempo and root pitch—in the blink of an eye. The Ultimate Bundle comes stocked with 2 GB of loops from Sonic Reality. You can do that pull-it-in-and-see-if-it's-workin' thing really quick until you do find what you need, and then it's on to the next bit—start with drums, throw in the bass and lay on some pads, strings and a little *chukka chikka* to add some funk. You can also create loops from within a session and export them with a full set of data embedded for future searching.

Audio editing is also a breeze. Simply click on an audio clip, and all the tools that you need to trim, split, fade and even time-stretch are at your fingertips. Click on the various shapes that appear along the top edge of the audio file you're looking at, and you'll be slicin' and dicin' like a sushi chef. Like everything in Tracktion's one-page-does-it-all setup, you get a full selection of more tools, functions, information and possibilities laid out for you in the little window at the bottom of the page that appears whenever you select a clip of any kind. For example, a full array of fun drum 'n' bass snare smears and the like can be created using the adjustable transient finder and split functions.

ALL THAT AND A BAG O' TRICKS

A four-hour QuickTime tutorial movie guides you through Tracktion in such an incredibly straightforward and

easy-to-digest way that I rarely had to consult the extensive reference manual. The movie is split into 18 sections, the last six of which are devoted to the incredible dynamics, EQ and mastering plug-ins Mackie contributed from its digital mixers. Programmable hot keys—aka key commands—are another way that Tracktion gives the user the smoothest possible workflow, and if you don't like the presets or you want to add a key command for your favorite moves, you can program them yourself. A lazy old dog resistant to new tricks such as yours truly



WHAT'S THE HOLDUP? > A device test wizard under the Settings tab will measure an audio interface's latency.



RACK 'EM > Racks group plug-ins and complex routings as self-contained units that can appear on multiple tracks.



ILL EFFECTS > Following the DAW standard, Tracktion 3 includes a full suite of plug-ins, like this reverb and EQ.

was able to effectively program all of my favorite hot-key functions from Pro Tools to function virtually identically in Tracktion. User settings, which include hot-key mappings and your favorite plug-in and rack filter presets, can be exported and brought with you into a new installation of Tracktion on another machine.

The methods for working with MIDI and audio files are not only seamless, but remarkably similar throughout. I stopped really thinking of audio and MIDI as different pretty quickly, which is the idea: The less you're thinking about technical details, the more you're thinking about what you're trying to achieve and create musically. Whatever

you're doing on a piece of music, you never have to leave the piece of audio or MIDI data, plug-in, automation curve or anything else for even a second to change a setting or change tools. You stay right where the rubber hits the road—producing tracks instead of tweaking parameters in far-off parts of the program whose locations you can't quite remember. Tracktion makes it a lot harder to get distracted and lose track of what you're doing.

The more than 3 GB of bundled, ready-to-use sample collections include the very fine Garritan Personal Orchestra (powered by Native Instruments' Kontakt 2 player), a huge set of drum sounds and loops that come with Submersible Music's DrumCore TK software and a workman-like but always handy IK Multimedia Sampletank 2 SE set. In spite of its lingering status as "new kid on the block," Tracktion 3 is a completely mature application for MIDI tweakheads. MIDI editing tools are comprehensive and immediately available in a handy toolbar that can be set to appear when you click on a MIDI clip. (A piano roll can be set to appear when the user zooms in enough on the clip.)

Automation for audio and MIDI is similarly sophisticated, configurable and immediately accessible without leaving the audio clip at hand. The ability to switch between different automation streams on a given track is simply a right-click away, and tools for drawing, dragging and editing automation curves are right there when you need them. Tracktion 3 deals with learning and mapping to external hardware controllers particularly well—no doubt a fringe benefit of Mackie's experience in manufacturing and writing software for a variety of sophisticated controllers over the years.

Vaguely reminiscent of Reason, Tracktion 3's "racks" are also essential. A rack can be anything from a chain of effects or a simple "mult" to a "wrapper," which helps to tame a multi-output filter such as a virtual synth or drum machine into bite-size stereo chunks to make mixing easier. The rack idea allows for just about anything you can imagine to be routed, including combinations of MIDI and audio paths.

A set of rack presets, which allow you to pimp out your own customized racks, lays the foundation for possibilities limited only by CPU power and your imagination. How about stacking all of your synths into an infinitely textural stew or running one of every compressor, reverb and modulation effect in your arsenal in series or in parallel as an insert on an untamable vocal track?

DITHER DOWN FROM DAY ONE

Tracktion export can finish a mix in a variety of formats, ranging from MP3 to 32-bit files, which is much more forgiving than 16- or 24-bit files in terms of headroom. Tracktion's mastering dither features auto-black for a smooth transition from fade to silence. The master section can also analyze and calculate normalization settings to either peak or adjustable RMS scans, and it's possible to render each track individually, with time-stamped broadcast WAV files as an optional format. That would allow you to then take your files into Pro Tools, for example, with the time-stamping employed to make sure each track ends up in the right place on the new timeline. The funny thing, however, is that this die-hard Pro Tools fan of more than a decade is suddenly not as eager to go back to my old standard once I got to know Tracktion 3. 