

Loops move from the groove to the tube —
and beyond

Let's Get Looped, By Craig Anderton Then Make Some Bucks

Are you ignoring a possible income stream? Many people think of loop-based music as a DJ or groove thing that's not relevant to "real" recording. But a lot of savvy recordists are discovering that loops are the new "needledrop" music; for TV shows, movie soundtracks, commercials, industrial videos, kiosk presentations, and much more, loop-based music can be the key element that makes taking on a particular project cost-effective.

When I asked in my online forum

technique. As one forum member from Hollywood stated:

"Short deadlines plus no loops = no sleep. Short deadlines plus loops = getting sleep. Why reinvent the wheel to create something generic? [The clients] want something that's not canned needledrop, but they won't give me time to create something entirely original. No problem; slap a few loops to build basic structure, overdub a few original parts, sprinkle a few more loops for flavor, and presto — semi-original music that sounds fine."

tool in your repertoire of services.

HOSTING YOUR LOOPS

The program that put looping on the map, Sonic Foundry's Acid, has since grown into a sophisticated program with a list price to match (see my review in the November 2002 issue). Along the way, it spawned a new WAV file variant, the "acidized" WAV, which embeds information that allows loops cut at different tempos or pitches to be "stretched" so they're compatible with each other.

Cakewalk's Sonar is another "pro" program that can use acidized files, as is Ableton's Live; both have given further legitimacy to making music with loops. But these are fairly deep programs, so if you're already using other DAW software, you might be reluctant to invest the effort into learning something that you may use only rarely.

However, there is an alternative: Cakewalk's Plasma, which lists for \$49, extracts Sonar's looping functions. While a consumer-oriented program, Plasma has enough horsepower for a pro environment. It not only reads acidized files, but supports soft synths, plug-ins, and recording/editing for both MIDI and audio. This is crucial for when you need to add an overdub, narration, specialized sound effect, or whatever to

avoid a totally "canned" sound. (Also note that Sonic Foundry offers a "lite" version of Acid Pro called Acid Music, which lists for under \$100.)

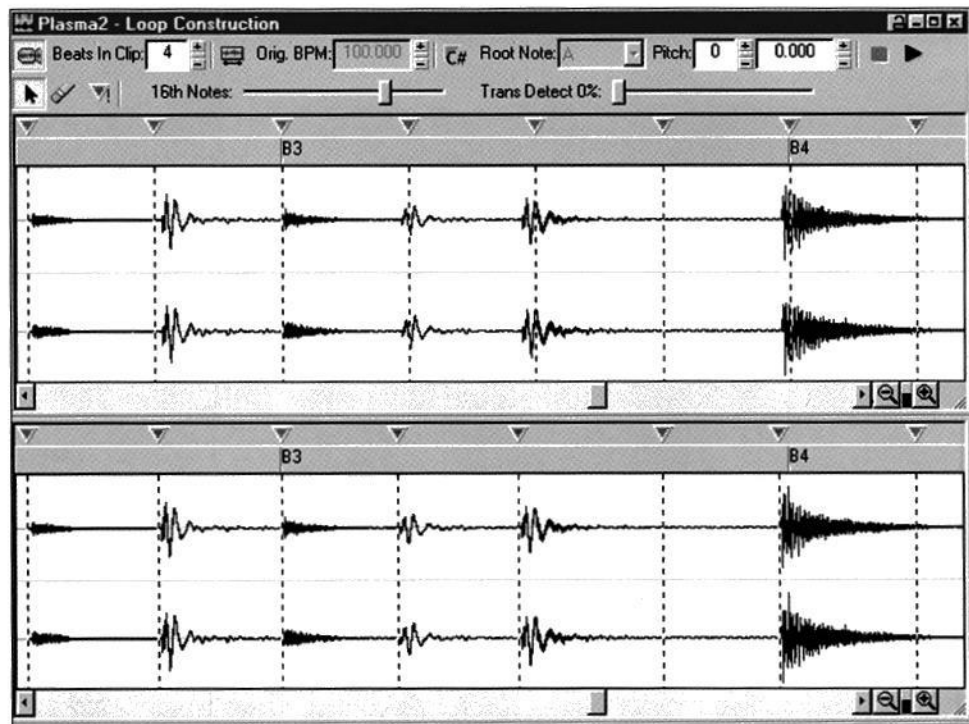


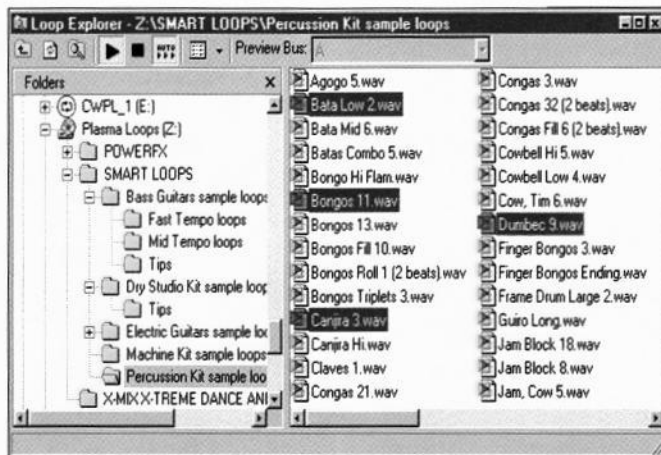
FIGURE 1: Proper marker placement is key for wide-range tempo stretching.

at www.musicplayer.com whether people use sample loop CDs in their work, I was surprised at the number of people who have embraced this

It's not hard to get into loop-based music; the minimal time/money investment means it doesn't take much for it to become another

Although Plasma is Windows-only, BitHeadz's Mac-compatible "Phrazer" loop-based software has a slimmed-down version, Phrazer LE, that lists for \$99 and can read acidized WAV files.

THE SOUNDS
Loop CDs with "acidized" WAV files are plentiful. The most prolific producer of such CDs is,



USING "CONSTRUCTION KITS" WITH PLASMA

Few people know that Plasma's Loop Explorer window (Fig. 2) can audition multiple loops *simultaneously*. This is particularly useful with "construction kit" sample CDs, as you can hear how well various

elements work together. Plasma's main tempo control sets the tempo at which the loops play.

Simultaneous auditioning works best with acidized loops. Otherwise, the loops need to be at the same tempo to play together coherently. (Also, all the loops have to reside in the same folder). Here's the procedure:

1. In the Loop Explorer, click on the first loop you want to hear.
2. Click on the Loop Explorer's Play button.
3. To add a loop, Ctrl-click on another loop in the Loop Explorer's list of files.
3. To de-select an already-selected loop, Ctrl-click on it again.

Enable the Loop Explorer's Auto-Preview button (the icon to the right of the stop button) so that selecting a loop automatically plays it with the others. If Auto-Preview is off, then you'll need to hit the Play button to hear a new selection.

After selecting the loops you want to use, you can drag them over as a group to the Clips pane.

FIGURE 2: Multiple files can play simultaneously, so you can hear how they sound together.

perhaps not surprisingly, Sonic Foundry. Sample CDs typically cost around \$30-\$100, so getting a big collection together can be pricey.

However, some sample CDs are "construction sets" for particular forms of music. These CDs "deconstruct" multiple tunes into component parts (bass, drums, pads, fills, etc.) that you can mix and match to create



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variations within a particular genre. Investing \$200 or so in sounds can be enough to do a project that will bring in far more than that. Incidentally, Plasma includes a library of loops to get you started; you can get a fair amount of mileage out of them.

There are other methods of time-stretching, such as the REX file format pioneered by Propellerhead Software, and Ilio's Groove Control technique, used in their sample CDs. This article, though, will keep things simple and concentrate on acidized file formats.

BEWARE THE BAD ACID!

With Plasma, you aren't restricted to using acidized files; a standard file can be used, and like Acid, Plasma will make an educated guess as to how to embed stretching information. It does this by inserting markers at prominent transients, and the digital audio between markers is sped

up or slowed down to maintain rhythmic integrity.

However, acidization is an art, not a science. Some sample CDs with "acidized" files merely bring the files into Acid, let Acid make its guesses, then save the file — and these guesses aren't always right. Files created on drum machines tend to acidize well, but if a file has some hits that are a little bit off (e.g., played by a human), the markers usually need to be hand-adjusted for best results. This is also the key to creating your own acidized files out of parts you've recorded, or from other sources.

To test a file, slow it down by 15-20%. If you hear obvious flammings (doubled hits), you'll likely need to move some markers in the Loop Construction window so that they land *exactly* on the beat instead of just near it.

Fig. 1 shows a before-and-after example of fixing a loop in Plasma's

Loop Construction window. Note how some of the markers in the upper view land just before or after a drum hit; these have been moved by hand in the lower view so that they fall exactly at the beginning of the drum hit attack (markers that have been moved turn blue).

ARE WE LOOPED YET?

Okay, you have the program and some loops. But you need to create an *artful* combination of loops, not just throw a bunch of loops together and hope they sound good. Experienced loop music makers cut pieces of loops and paste them elsewhere, create fills out of different loops, add modulation and tempo changes where appropriate, and apply other techniques to add expressiveness and variations.

If you haven't worked with loops, give it a shot. The bottom line is that it might help out *your* bottom line...and it's fun, too. ■

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