

Perfect one-take RECORDING

Just because you have the ability to endlessly edit and overdub your tracks, it doesn't always mean that you should. **Hollin Jones** explores the world of one-take recording.

Recording and editing music hasn't always been as easy as it is today. As recently as the middle of the last century, recording meant playing everything together as it was printed directly to shellac or vinyl disc. The concepts of overdubbing and editing were nonexistent in those days – you had to play everything at once and get it right first time or pay extra for another disc. As you might expect, this approach encouraged good preparation and musicianship, although it also limited the number of people who had access to recording music, which remained an expensive and highly specialised process at the time. Recording in one take also required the mixing engineer to be very skilled, balancing channels during recording without the luxury of knowing that any errors could be corrected afterwards.

In time, the advent of tape and multi-channel recording meant that recordings could feature separate tracks that could be played back afterwards and even overdubbed to add new parts or correct errors. Eventually, hard disk recording and DAWs with virtually infinite track counts effectively did away with any notion of 'limits' on how you record music. And although software and computers have opened up the world of music production to pretty much anyone nowadays, they have also diminished the element of conventional musicianship required to produce tracks to virtually zero. That's not a dig at producers who don't really play an instrument, it's just an observation. Some of the greatest albums of the last two decades have been made by producers whose instrumental skills can only be described as basic at best.

Keep it simple

On a more serious note, you can view the amazing, open-ended flexibility of modern DAWs as either a blessing or a curse. On the one hand, they do allow you to get everything exactly right: to create beats, melodies, structures and soundscapes that could never be achieved by people playing instruments in

a room. There are very few things that can't be fixed using the tools available and you can amass a collection of virtual instruments far more cheaply and easily than if you wanted to own physical versions of the same things.

But looked at another way, software can actually slow you down, providing so many options and possible avenues that you fiddle endlessly with ideas or structures, never settling on one. You can always wonder if a track will sound better if you change that synth sound or add a few extra beats here and there. There is no 'end point' with software because you will basically never run out of tracks, effect slots or CPU power if you employ track freezing. In a hardware studio, an older one at least, you might have only 24 mono channels, so you know broadly where the limits of the technology lie – but with software it's endless. We can probably all think of albums on which someone has tweaked and added until the end result is a bit of a complicated mess.

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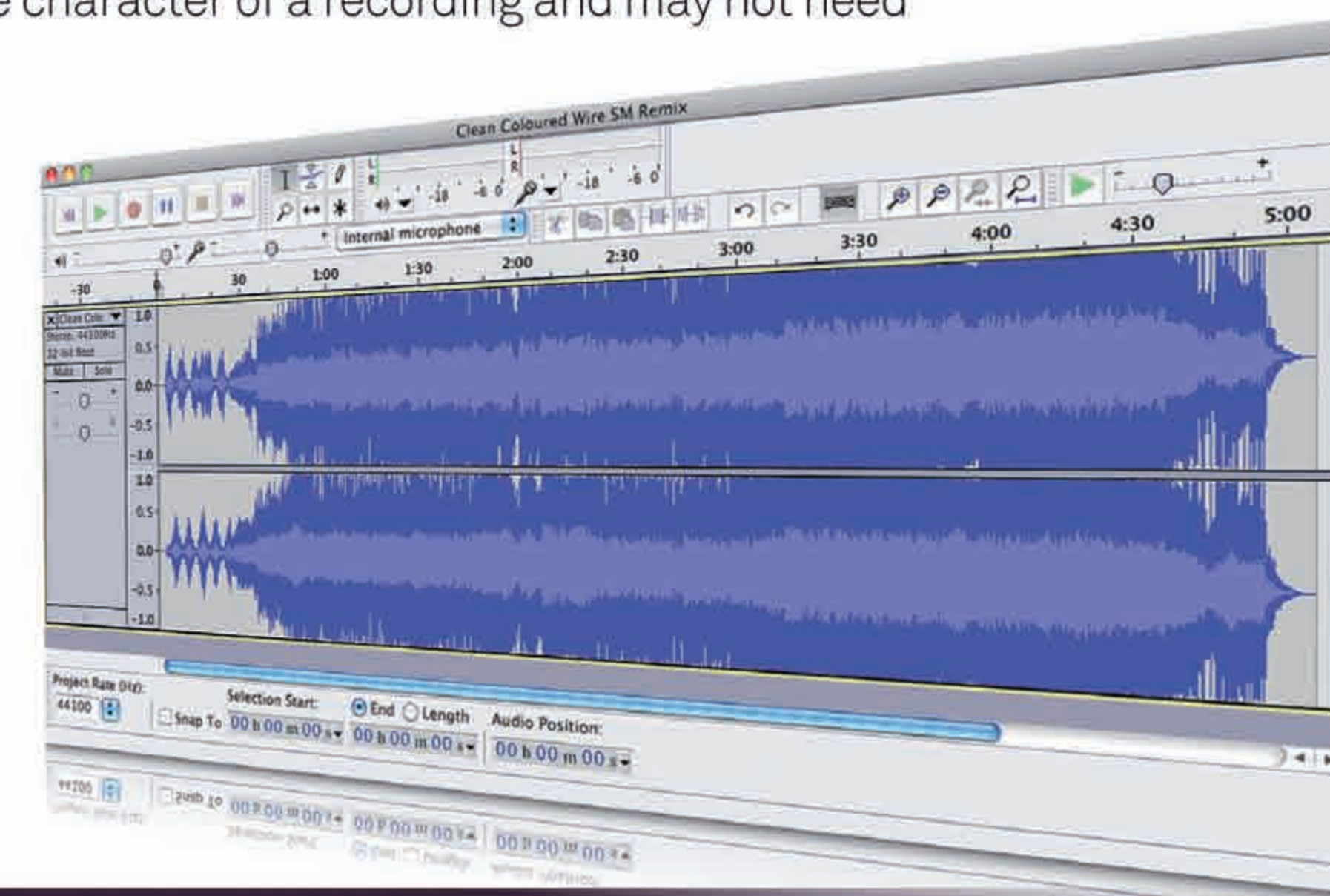
Multi mics

There is an argument to be made that one-take recording in its various forms can be liberating and fulfilling in a way that repeatedly overdubbing and looping material then endlessly rearranging it can not. There's no getting around the fact that if you go down this route, you or the person you are recording are going to have to be able to play an instrument, but then most people reading this probably can to some degree.

The most obvious reason to try out some one-take recording is to recapture some of the spontaneity that is lost with non-linear DAW recording. It's often by jamming through ideas that you come up with something unexpected, a gem that would never otherwise have appeared if you were recording short loops then sticking them together in software. And there's nothing to say that your one-shot recording necessarily has to be the finished product – it can serve as a musical sketchpad to be used to develop ideas. This concept will be more familiar to people who have played in bands, with jams often resulting in new material (although you have to record it in order to remember what you played).

Many people may also recognise the concept of the 'happy accident', when a great-sounding section of music suddenly comes together unexpectedly. Slight imperfections can actually add to the character of a recording and may not need

Simple one-take recording can mean capturing to a single audio track, in which case you don't need a paid-for DAW at all and can get away with a free app such as Audacity.



For in-the-room recording, a good studio condenser microphone such as Rode's NT-1A is ideal.



Recording in one take meant the mixing engineer had to be very skilled, balancing channels during recording in the knowledge that any errors couldn't be fixed afterwards.

to be digitally ironed out – though it should be acknowledged that this applies more to music played with real instruments than to electronic/dance music forms.

Speaking of which, although we are mainly talking about recording audio using microphones, MIDI fans are not left out entirely in the cold. Reason 5 and Record 1.5 feature Propellerhead's Remote system, which lets you connect multiple MIDI keyboards and controllers to a rack of equipment then record them all at the same time, which is a form of one-take recording. The difference is that the

MTM Pro Technique Live sound

With live music seemingly more popular every year, an ever-increasing number of bands want their shows recording. There are a few ways to do this and it is of course very much done in one take – the band isn't going to stop and do something again just because you ask them to. At almost any live show, every major part of the setup will be either mic'ed up or DI'ed into the front-of-house desk. This means that at its simplest, all you really have to do is connect a recording device to the monitor or tape outputs of the mixing desk and capture it. But then you are somewhat at the mercy of the mixing engineer, as you will record the mix that they give you.

For a more flexible setup, you will need a desk with individual track outputs (or at least group outputs) and a tape machine or laptop with an interface capable of accepting multiple inputs. You can route the individual channels (or the groups of channels such as drums, backing vocals and keyboards) to individual audio tracks in your DAW and record them separately. Another trick that live sound engineers use when recording is to place one or two ambient mics about halfway between the desk and the stage, either overhead or on the side walls. These can be used to capture some room ambience as well as the noise of the crowd and can be really useful for mixing into the recording later – even if you wouldn't actually play them through the PA on the night.

