

TEST

SONY MEDIA SOFTWARE ACID PRO 5

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Acid Pro 5

Can Sony's latest version of Acid Pro cut the mustard, or will it cause acid indigestion? **Alistair Lindsay** dives in.

ACID PRO 5

Manufacturer **Sony**

Price **£299**

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Shipping with 1,000 ready-made loops, a cut-down version of Sound Forge and the Native Instruments Express Keyboards bundle, version 5 of this classic loop-based audio sequencer also sports a host of new features. You can now use VST instruments and plug-ins, there is support for Asio, ReWire and 5.1 surround mixing, a piano roll MIDI editor and 24-bit/192kHz maximum sample rate.

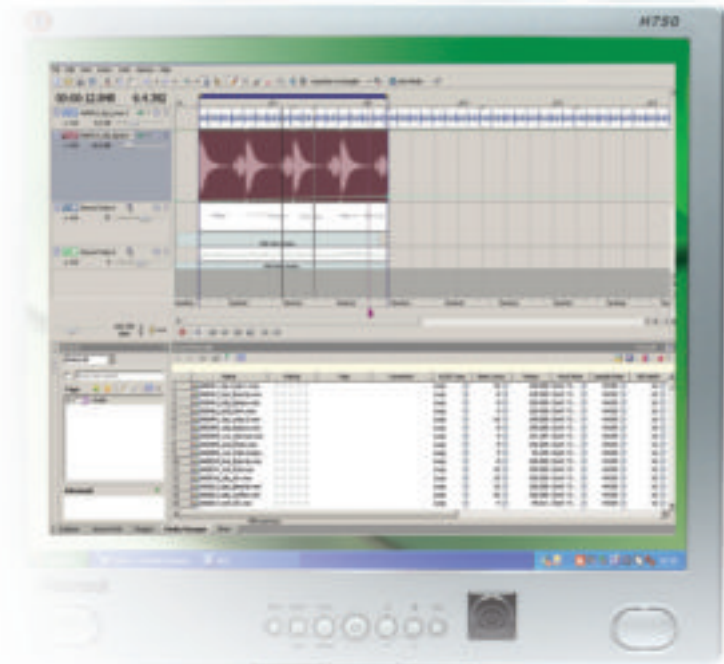
On top of this, you also get a customisable user interface, MIDI keyboard mapping, Media Manager (a great new way to locate your audio files), unlimited audio and MIDI track count, unlimited undo, tempo and time signature mapping, live audio recording and – last but not least – a metronome.

First impressions are good: the user interface is coherently laid out and uncluttered, with the main screen largely given over to the Arrangement section, the new Media Manager and Acid's virtual mixer. Media Manager is a database tool that can search for and import Acid-compatible media, and is augmented by an Explorer-style browser. More sequencers and plug-ins are adopting 'intelligent' database tools as a way of easing workflow, and it is good to see that Acid is no exception.

Stretch and bend

The first thing we wanted to do was play the demo track and fiddle with the tempo slider to test the quality of Acid's updated pitch and time stretching. We tweaked the tempo from its starting point of 120BPM up to 200BPM, and then down to 80BPM and were amazed at how well Acid handles sonic elastication. We could hear no reduction in sound quality and only faint timbral glitches with extreme tempo changes.

Having checked out the demo, we wanted to start our own project – a simple case of selecting New from the File menu. The new Media



Acid Pro 5's interface can be customised to help improve your workflow and productivity. There's also a new Media Manager database tool.

Manager database tool, which displayed all the Acid-ised loops on our hard disk, helped us import some piano and bass loops, plus a few cymbal crashes and percussion loops with a minimum of fuss.

Dragging and dropping selected files from the Media Manager onto the Arrange screen causes Acid to automatically create new sequencer tracks for each one. Next we used

Caught live

Recording your own live audio is no problem due to the way Acid simplifies the whole procedure. Clicking the Record icon on the transport bar brings up a small splash screen. This offers an editable name for the file you're about to record, as well as a suggested destination. The same window shows which inputs on your

Acid Pro 5 takes this platform a big step closer to attaining fully fledged audio sequencer status.

the Pencil tool to draw each of our loops so that they automatically concatenated end to end, always snapping perfectly to the relevant bar divisions.

At bar eight we added a key change. As with the previous operation, this was a doddle: all you have to do is tell Acid to play everything in A instead of the previous four bars of G. We then hit Play and smiled as Acid automatically time-stretched our loops so that they played perfectly at our chosen tempo, and pitch-shifted them in line with our sequenced key changes. At this point the creative juices really started to flow as we realised how easy this software makes demo creation.

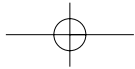
audio hardware have been selected for recording. If you don't see your card listed, go to Options>Preferences and select it via the Audio tab. Acid also displays an input meter in the Record window, which stays visible until recording has ceased. We liked this way of working because you always know where your levels are without having to trawl through various mixer screens.

Once your inputs are set up, all you have to do is click the Record button and away you go. We made multiple takes of electric guitar tracks and then added some vocals, finding the whole process to be very smooth indeed. You can also make multiple takes by using Loop Record and then comp-edit the

METHOD SPOT

Forging ahead

Acid Pro 5 comes with a cut-down version of Sony Media's SoundForge sample-editing software and is packed with features that will help you to edit, tweak and even create your own loops and samples. The supplied version (SoundForge Studio) has all the cut, copy, trim and mix features of its bigger brother, not to mention easy insertion of markers and regions. While it may not possess all the bells and whistles of the full version, as a freebie it makes Acid Pro 5 even better value for money.



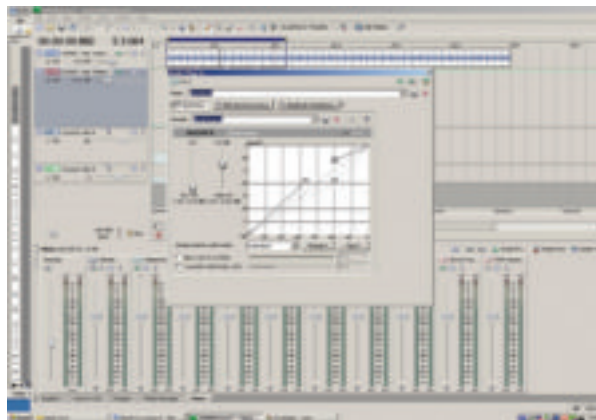
best bits from each take, which is handy for those tricky vocal parts or guitar solos.

So far so good, but bear in mind that the above was achieved using the supplied loops that come bundled with Acid Pro 5. What happens when you want to use a non-Acid loop of your own?

To find out we used Media Manager to select one of our own home-made drum loops. This was a four-bar, full-kit groove with a few seconds of silence at the end. Acid created a track for it, but when we hit Play our new loop was – not surprisingly – out of time with the rest of the track. This is because Acid works best with loops that are truncated to exact bar divisions. Right-clicking our loop enabled us to access a sub-menu from which we could edit the sample in Sound Forge. This done, we saved our amended loop and watched as Acid immediately re-analysed and played our track, with everything in perfect time.

What a feeling

One of Acid 5's star attractions has to be its new groove-quantising features. You now get a menu with over 50 groove quantise templates that range across many genres of music and rhythm. Applying them is easy: select one from the menu and draw across the segment you wish to apply it to. As you do so, a string of groove quantise segments will appear underneath. Now when you hit Play you will hear your chosen audio file quantised with an entirely new feel, just as though it were MIDI. Should you wish, it is now possible to make your own groove quantise templates, and a quick visit to the Groove Pool



RELATED TECHNOLOGY
Fully loaded
MIDI has not been overlooked in Acid 5, nor has the need for VSTi support. As well as being able to import MIDI files, you can now capture your own performances. Here's how it works: selecting Midi Track from the Insert menu creates a MIDI track to work on. You can either play in your MIDI via a keyboard or other MIDI controller, or use the Piano Roll and List editors to program your notes one at a time (as you would in Cubase or Logic). The editors are far from basic and afford full control over data such as pitchbend, velocity and continuous controller information, plus a quantise feature for ironing out your timing.

reveals an Editor window in which timing can be advanced or retarded on a per-beat basis, thus dictating how the time stretching will quantise your loop.

Taking this one step further, you can also open up a selected audio loop in the Track Properties window and home in on a single beat (one tom hit in a roll that's too late or early, for example) and re-quantise that slice of audio so that it now plays with a more appropriate feel.

We were disappointed that a dedicated groove extraction tool was not present; one that could create a quantise template by examining the slice points, as you can in Cubase. This enables you to quickly quantise your audio loops to the feel of just one of them, and is a well-known trick in dance music production. In theory, you could achieve this with the current tools, but it would not be the quick, automated experience that you expect from a package like Acid Pro 5.

Chain gang

Mixing may seem a little strange until you get used to Acid's somewhat non-linear approach. Each track on the Arrange screen has its own four-band parametric EQ and you can patch effects plug-ins here, too. The more effects you add, the bigger your effects chain grows, and each link of this chain can be repositioned before or after other links. This is a great touch and skilfully implemented by the Acid boffins, as it helps to vary the sonic implications of your personal effects palette.

Send and return

Send effects are (confusingly) selected via the Insert menu, and individual track sends are handled

You can create FX chains and then swap the order of the 'links' for maximum sonic flexibility.

via automation envelopes. This is cool because not only can you set the general effects send level for a given track, but you can instantly draw effects automation curves in the same breath.

The mixer now supports up to 26 stereo buss channels, enabling the creation of sub or group mixes that can share the same EQ or effects. Finally, you can insert effects on the master output channel, and considering that Acid now supports VST plug-ins, the sky really is the limit. Moreover, should you want to integrate Acid with another audio sequencer, you can thanks to the inclusion of ReWire technology.

Listen up

Sony has obviously listened to the requests of Acid's loyal fans and implemented a plethora of changes. Better still, these new features all work well and are easy to use. Now that VST support is on board we can consider Acid 5 a serious contender in the audio-creation and production stakes. **MTM**

SUMMARY

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

- PC Pentium 4 800MHz, Windows 2000/XP, 256MB RAM, DirectX 8

KEY FEATURES

- Unlimited audio and MIDI tracks
- Real-time pitch and time stretching
- 5.1 surround mixing
- 24-bit/192kHz audio support
- Beatmapper remixing tool
- Loop cloning tool
- Video scoring track
- VST and ReWire support

WHY BUY

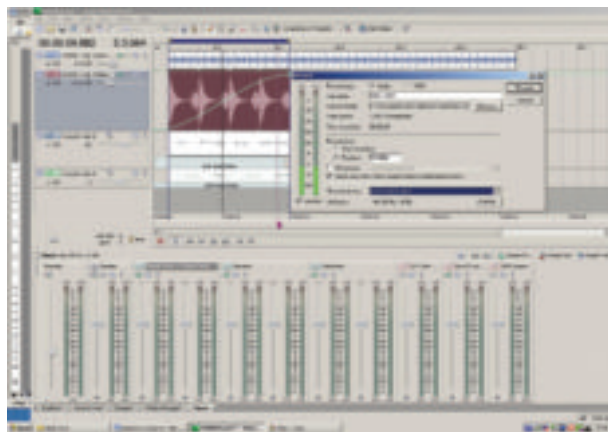
- Great new tools
- Improved time stretching
- Intuitive interface
- Groove quantising
- Excellent media management

WALK ON BY

- Lack of in-depth groove quantise template extraction

VERDICT

Acid Pro 5 takes this familiar platform a big step closer to attaining fully fledged audio sequencer status. Enhanced media management, new tools, VST and ReWire support, plus an impressive bundle of free software could well make it hard to resist.



You're one window away from recording live audio. Here you can check your level, name and your file and choose soundcard options.

