

ACOUSTICA MIXCRAFT 4

MULTITRACK AUDIO RECORDER AND SEQUENCER (PC)

by Craig Anderton



Use the included virtual instruments, or insert your favorite third-party ones — Mixcraft 4 hosts VST instruments as well as effects.

In addition to track effects, you can add global effects to the output.

Drop in markers to change key, tempo, time signature, or even CD cuts.

Track automation goes beyond volume and pan to include filtering.



Mixcraft 4 supports virtual instrument, MIDI, and audio tracks.

You can enter exact lengths for files. This is great if you want to create loops for use in other programs where you may not want to stretch them a lot. It also lets you create sample-accurate loops.

Mixcraft 4 will beat-match long files, and parse the tempo.

VST and DX effects are supported, as well as the effects included with Mixcraft.

Multitrack audio recorder and MIDI sequencer with included virtual instruments and loop library.

PROS

Extremely cost-effective. Easy to learn, with an obvious interface. Very good included instruments, loops, and effects. Above-average CD-burning options. Outstanding looping abilities. Surprisingly good beat-matching for long files. Built-in filter automation for tracks. Track freeze encompasses effects, soft synths, and time-stretching. Plug-in delay path compensation. Straightforward documentation. Works well with older Windows versions.

CONS

No ReWire or REX file support. No tempo sync with DirectX effects. Doesn't display multiple lanes of automation or controllers. No aux sends or buses. Can't bounce MIDI clips within a track to a single clip.

Boxed, \$74.95;
download, \$64.95

Acoustica,
www.acoustica.com

I have a ton of great recording software — sophisticated, intelligent programs that can do pretty much everything except anti-gravity (and I suspect that if I dig down deep enough in their menus, I might find that as well). I mention this not to boast, but for context: Despite having all this wonderful stuff, I still find “compact” programs like Steinberg Sequel, Cakewalk Kinetic, and Apple GarageBand highly appealing. First of all, I travel a lot, and they’re all “laptop-friendly.” But they’re also streamlined, and a great way to lay down ideas fast. An analogy is that you might have the most bitchin’ audiophile system in the world, but you don’t go anywhere without your portable MP3 player.

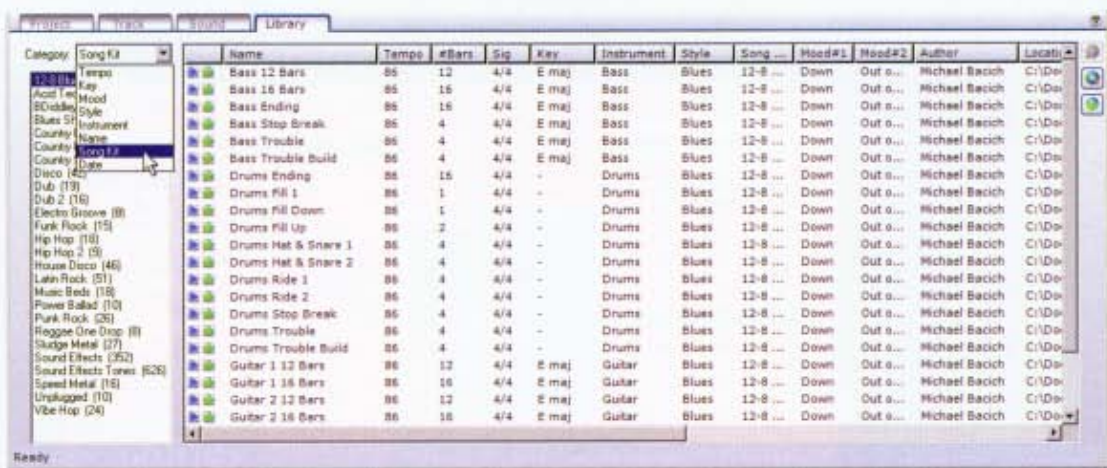


Fig. 1. Mixcraft 4 comes with its own massive collection of loops, and does accurate time-stretching for the purpose of matching beats.



Go to livefrom.musicplayer.com and search for "Mixcraft," and you'll find a video in which Dan Goldstein, senior VP of development for Acoustica, shows off Mixcraft 4's excellent built-in virtual instruments. These include a Minimoog-like analog synth, a modeled clonewheel organ with drawbar control and rotary simulator, and two 250MB sampled grand pianos.

VITAL STATS

SOFTWARE VERSION REVIEWED
4.1 (build 89).

PLATFORMS
Windows 95, 98, ME, NT, XP, or Vista 32-bit.

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS
Pentium 4, 1 GHz or faster, 512MB RAM.

HOSTED PLUG-IN FORMATS
VST, VSTi, DirectX.

AUDIO INTERFACE SUPPORT
ASIO, WDM, Vista WaveRT drivers.

INCLUDED SOFT INSTRUMENTS
General MIDI library, two sampled grand pianos, VB3 tonewheel organ, Minimoog soft synth, Impulse polyphonic soft synth.

COPY PROTECTION
Serial number with online registration.

Mixcraft is another entry in the "compact" field, but goes surprisingly deep. The interface is sort of Sequel-meets-GarageBand, which is a good thing because it works. As with many programs, you can download a trial version; it functions for seven days before you need to buy it — and the price is certainly right, because you not only get the program but built-in effects, instruments, and access to a loop library with hundreds of loops (see Figure 1 above).

Mixcraft has a very friendly vibe. There are bios of the people in the Acoustica company (very cool) as well as a brief, non-preachy explanation of why you should buy software, not steal it. The program is also good about hand-holding. For example, when you start the program, you can call up one of three templates depending on the type of project you want to do: Straight audio recording, beat/loop-oriented remixing, or MIDI-based work with virtual instruments. These are not mutually exclusive by any means, as you can incorporate all of these elements in any project. Rather, the templates are just points of departure.

You can find out about the details yourself via the downloadable free trial version, so let's jump right into using Mixcraft.

BEAT-MATCHING

Taking two files of differing tempos and getting them to conform in terms of beats is a near-magical process, and forms the basis of DJ mixing. On vinyl, beat-matching takes mad skills, as you have to listen carefully to one tune while adjusting the turntable's varispeed on the other until the tempos match, then cue up the tune you want to fade in while crossfading between the two. In the digital age, programs can do beat-matching for you, and Mixcraft 4 does it exceptionally well.

You enable beat-matching in two ways: Either apply it to everything in a project, or selectively, to new sounds you load in. As you do this, Mixcraft analyzes the sound (which can be anything from a loop to a complete song) and tries to parse the tempo — quite successfully, assuming a rhythmic file. Of course, the more stretching is required to match the project tempo, the more likely you'll hear audible artifacts; but beat-matching is really more of a DJ thing, where the tempos will likely be relatively close, and just need to be tweaked a bit to fit together.

To check it out, I dragged in a couple of song files, offset them by four measures, and crossfaded between the two over a four-measure duration. Yup, it worked as advertised, and gave me a rhythmically-matched, seamless crossfade from one to the other. As long as you don't expect perfect fidelity from stretched files — the laws of physics work against you on that one — you'll be pleasantly surprised by how well Mixcraft does its beat-matching magic.

IN USE

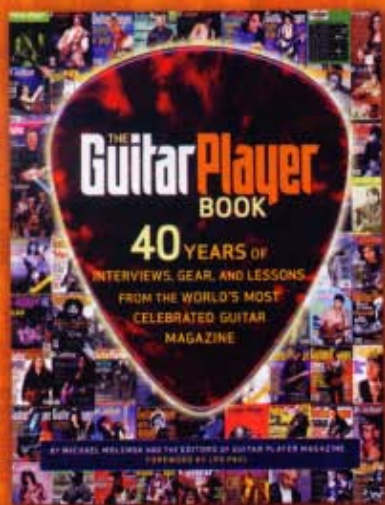
I decided to start off with the virtual instrument-based template and do a dance-oriented piece. After a quick trip to the Preferences, where I set up the Line 6 TonePort KB37 (reviewed June '07) as my audio and MIDI interface, I was pretty much ready to go.

The onboard selection of instruments far exceeds what you'd expect at this price. There's a General MIDI-type sound set, and I gravitated toward the drums, but which to choose? The rock-god power drums? The deliciously bent, Nine Inch Nails-type kit? Orchestral percussion? I opted for a tight-sounding electronic kit that reminded me of Roland's TR-808 and TR-909 analog drum machines, armed the track, turned on the metronome (it took me about ten seconds to figure that out), clicked the record button, and laid down the kick.

It needed quantizing, so I double-clicked on the track, and a piano roll editing window popped into view along the bottom (see Figure 2 on page 60). I selected the notes, clicked on Quantize, chose the appropriate values, and the job was done. I had started off on the second measure, so I click-dragged over the first measure, hit delete, and dragged the segment "flush left." Bingo. Note that I still hadn't looked at the help files up to this point.

Next up would be a snare overdub. The clip ended up "on top of" the kick, and I could switch between them with the tab key — the piano roll reflects whatever clip is selected. I tried to merge the two clips into one clip of MIDI data, without success, so I finally looked in the manual, but didn't find anything about bouncing or merging. I figured that this just wasn't part of what Mixcraft does, but come to think of it, the ability to maintain separate clips on the same track is a useful feature.

The piano roll editing has everything you'd expect: horizontal zoom (but not vertical), a controller pane



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AUCTION ACOUSTICA MIXCRAFT 4

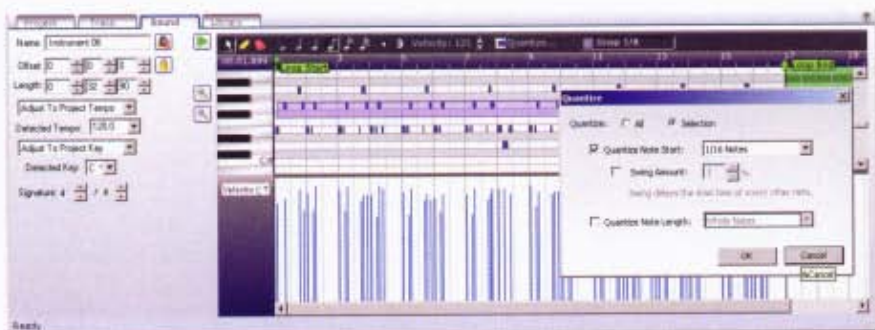


Fig. 2. MIDI Editing is done with a standard, piano roll-type view.

for editing velocity and all types of MIDI continuous controller messages, snap, the ability to draw in notes and offset clips (I moved a hi-hat clip forward a little to push the tempo a bit), and the like.

Now that I had the drums down, I needed some instrument loops, so I grabbed a few from my *AdrenaLinn Guitars* loop library, and just to throw Mixcraft a challenge, I chose AIFF files (not Apple Loops) at the wrong tempo. Turning them into loops was simple: It's the same protocol as time-stretching in, say, Steinberg Cubase or Cakewalk Sonar, where you just drag the file until it conforms to the length you want. Tell Mixcraft you want the audio file to be a loop, and then you can "roll it out" for as many iterations as you want.

Mixcraft includes two groups of effects: Their own, and more evolved ones from Kjaerhus Audio (if you have any experience with the Kjaerhus effects, you know they're good). However, it seems that tempo sync doesn't work with DirectX effects, although it does work with VST effects. I thought a little delay action on the drums would give it some motion, so I inserted Line 6's GearBox plug-in along with a little drive, and threw in some dotted half-note delay. Perfect.

Bass was the next overdub, which led me to discover that Mixcraft has a fine Minimoog-type virtual analog synth. Initially, I thought that you couldn't use Mixcraft's instruments in other DAWs,

but this limitation applies only to the clonewheel organ, which is a specially-licensed version of VB3 from Italian developer Guido Scognamiglio of SoundFonts (www.soundfonts.it). Incidentally, it has great drawbar tones and Leslie simulation, and normally sells on its own for about \$90. You can use Mixcraft's other instruments in other hosts — make sure they look for plug-ins in the "C:\program files\acoustica mixcraft 4\vst" directory. Anyway, as the soft instruments got a thumbs-up, I figured I'd check out some of the Mixcraft loop library (which sorts files according to several categories including mood, style, and instrument).

I started off with acoustic guitar, and noticed there were several loops from Michael Bacich, formerly of the band Oingo Boingo. He's a fine musician, so that was a good omen. As the loops are in Ogg Vorbis format, the library's 187MB size is sort of an understatement — if these were WAV files, it would be a lot bigger. Yes, we're talking value here.

To check out traditional audio recording, I recorded a vocal... nothing too exceptional there, but what was exceptional was how much better it sounded when I added the Classic Compressor and Classic Chorus effects.

After loading in a complete mixed song to check out the beat-matching, I figured it was time for the final touch: Automation. Here, Mixcraft lets you automate not just volume and pan, but also per-track lowpass filter cutoff, lowpass filter resonance, highpass filter cutoff, and highpass resonance. These filter settings are great for DJ-type applications.

By this time, not only was I really impressed, but the word count alarm had gone off, so it was time to wrap up.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, this program is all about value. Note that I didn't say "low price" — although the price is very low — because what you get for that price is just sick. Recording audio is one of these things;

GORY DETAILS

FILE FORMATS IMPORTED

WAV, AIFF, Ogg, WMA, MP3.

FILE FORMATS EXPORTED

WAV, Ogg, WMA, MP3, Red Book CD.

AUDIO RESOLUTION

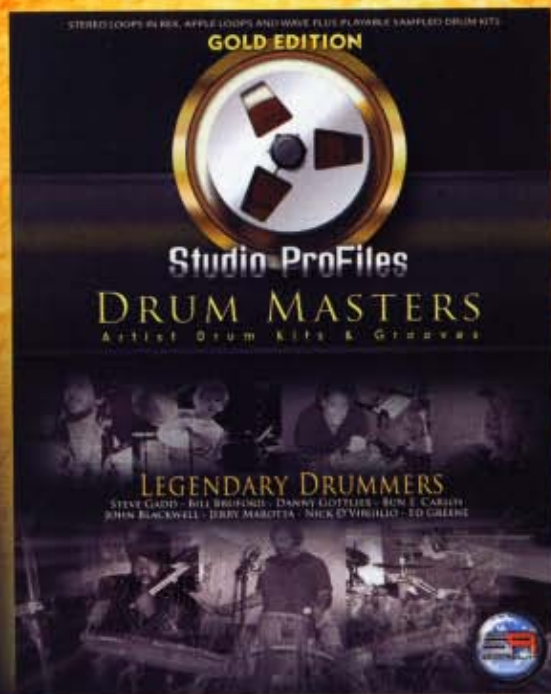
32-bit internal, up to 192kHz.

INCLUDED EFFECTS

2 choruses, 2 compressors, 2 delays, 2 EQs, 2 reverbs, 2 flangers, distortion, auto-filter, mastering limiter, phaser, guitar amp modeler, spectrum analyzer.

Access to the Masters

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John Blackwell (Prince, Justin Timberlake)

Steve Gadd (Steely Dan, Paul Simon)

Danny Gottlieb (Pat Metheny Group)

Ed Greene (Donald Fagen, Barry White)

Bill Bruford (King Crimson, Yes)

Nick D'Virgilio (Genesis, Tears for Fears)

Bun E. Carlos (Cheap Trick)

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AUDITION

ACOUSTICA MIXCRAFT 4

CLAIM CHECK

Dan Goldstein, lead developer of Mixcraft, says, "Like most musicians, we found ourselves spending too much time trying to navigate overly-complex recording software, and not enough time making music. We listened to our customers and set out to build a sequencer that's intuitive, straightforward, and fun to use, without compromising on power. Mixcraft makes the process of recording and producing music as effortless as possible. After all, why should you have to take a class just to lay down a track? With Mixcraft, we've eliminated the steep learning curves with which musicians struggle every day, though Mixcraft is intended for both beginners and pros. In fact, many of our pro customers have abandoned their expensive sequencers and now use Mixcraft on a daily basis to get work done. With our free downloadable trial version, and our \$74.95 price tag, we believe we've made a powerful program that anyone can use, and that real musicians can afford."

adding MIDI with piano roll editing is another. When you include accurate beat-matching, a fine General MIDI sound set, virtual polysynth, "Minimogue" and B-3 organ instruments, two huge sampled pianos, useful effects (the Kjaerhus Classic Series effects are also available as free downloads from www.kjaerhusaudio.com), and a pretty massive loop library, then the value goes through the roof.

The ability to stretch and loop files is pretty impressive, as is the option to change tempo, time signature, and key at any time and have everything follow along. The CD burning capabilities are much better than average, as you can add markers to individual cuts brought into the project, burn as one track for continuous mixes without pauses, and add CD Text.

Props to the interface as well. It doesn't look amateurish; it's a nice balance between being clean and simple, yet colorful and interesting. That's a tough trick to pull off.

Of course, you won't find a lot of the extras of the "big guys." Video window, a mixing console view with faders and built-in EQ, aux buses (arguably the most serious omission), clips that can lock to SMPTE time code, multiple simultaneous lanes of automation, REX file support, or ReWire support.

However, at this price, it's not surprising these features were left out; what is surprising is the sheer volume of useful features that are included, as well as the additional content. What you get for your money here is just unreal. Unreal enough to win a Key Buy? Hands down! 