

SONY ACID PRO 6.0

Acid has gone on its own trip — and it's a good one

by Sam Wheeler

Acid has come a long way since its humble beginnings as a 4/4-only loop-based software sequencer. I first got on with Acid Pro 2.0 back around the dawn of the millennium, and found it remarkably capable for recording stereo or mono tracks, as well as arranging loops. Its ability to do on-the-fly loop time stretch/compression, pitch transposition, or both, all with a graphic waveform display that sure beat messing around with the jog wheel on my antiquated hardware samplers, were unique at the time.

Although Acid didn't do MIDI until version 4 (nor did it do MIDI particularly well), and originators Sonic Foundry never leveraged its hard disk recording capabilities beyond recording one stereo track at a time, the excellent user interface, powerful editing features, and relative versatility and affordability were the main draws for most users.

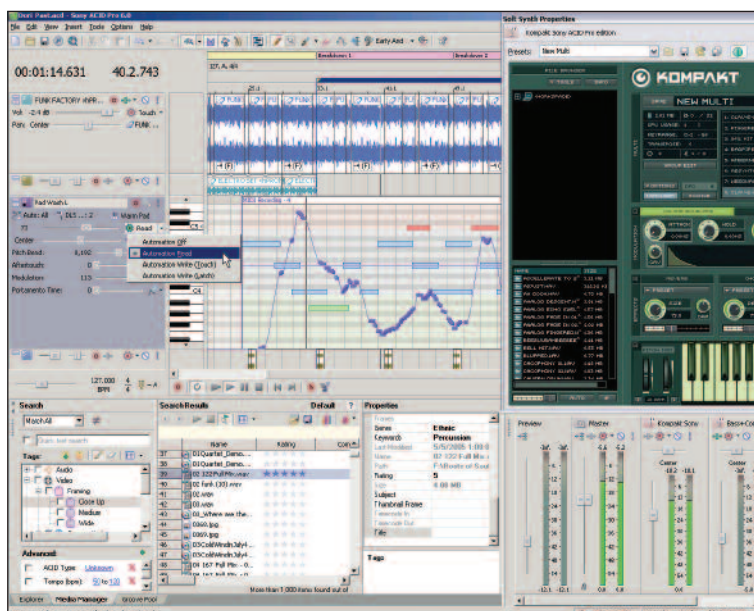
As other DAWs began adding loop functionality, Sony kept their competitors in check by including ASIO compatibility, video and surround sound support, and ReWire functionality. I didn't upgrade until last year's V5.0, by which point Sonic Foundry had been acquired by Sony, and the application had already evolved into something far more than just a loop sequencer: Sample rates up to 24-bit/192kHz, enhanced file compatibility, greater overall versatility, and plug-in support took it out of being just a "groove" program.

So, I was not entirely surprised when Sony announced the arrival of Acid Pro 6.0 as a full-fledged DAW. And it is: V6.0 is more like a makeover than an update, adding in-place MIDI editing, external

controller support, multitrack MIDI and audio recording, VSTi parameter automation, MIDI track envelopes, automatic keyframes, and even a custom edition of Native Instruments' Kompakt — a very nice deal, especially given the price. You can see the full list of features at www.sony.com/mediasoftware.

APPLYING ACID

Why would anyone choose Acid over other DAWs? For groove-oriented musicians, the answer is obvious: great looping capabilities and loop editing, along with all other traditional DAW functions. But it's also an audio-for-video powerhouse. Given some decent loop libraries, you can throw together soundtracks almost as fast as you can paint in loops, and alter tempo to match up with hit points. Did the producer cut a few frames? Speed things up a bit. Acid's audio engine was greatly improved in V5.0, so stretched audio sounds better than ever. And even if you don't care about looping, Acid delivers almost all the same features as the "big DAWs" for less money.



You're not hallucinating: Acid now features robust, in-place MIDI editing. Peeking out from the right side is the Sony edition of Kompakt, which is bundled with Acid 6.

In keeping with its stretching orientation, Acid has redone MIDI (the original way to stretch time and pitch). In fact, the most surprising and impressive new feature for me is the MIDI sequencing. ACID Pro 6.0 provides the same precise control and editing on MIDI tracks as it does on audio, with the same basic interface. This is great for setting up MIDI backing tracks and being able to transport them to other MIDI instruments. As if that weren't enough, the Sony ACID Pro Edition of Kompakt provides a host of instrument sounds, and works seamlessly within the Acid interface.

My Pentium 4 laptop runs XP Pro at 3.2GHz and has 1GB of RAM; I was able to run over 30 tracks at once (audio, MIDI, and virtual instruments combined) with no problems. It takes a while to build the graphic image of the tracks when you scroll through the tracks afterward, but its recording process is flawless, even when monitoring with effects.

So how much can you record at once? I brought over two associates with diverse talents to play various acoustic instruments into an array of five mics, plus direct inputs from five analog electric instruments, plus two tracks of MIDI (one from the keyboard, one from the drum machine) and a stereo S/PDIF feed from the DJ mixer. We ended up making a fearsome racket, like three dueling one-man-bands all trying to get as many things going at once as we could.

Unfortunately for any potential listeners, the software had no problem recording every nuance of our asinine behavior and playing it back precisely — with not one stutter.

Dumping effects onto these tracks by the barrelful did slow things down a bit on my machine, but there really isn't any need to use four different reverb plug-ins at once, plus multi-tap delay, compression, EQ, and flanging on every single track in real life, is there? For more "normal" use, V6.0 runs smoothly and without hassle. A limited, admittedly unscientific survey sample (two other friends with older computers) indicates that the

Acid software suite itself still has remarkable stability even on less robust systems (one of Acid's hallmarks has always been the ability to run on just about any computer with a pulse). The number of tracks that can be supported effectively does seem lower with lower processor speeds, but most home or laptop users will likely run out of inputs on their interfaces before this happens anyway. True pros with dual CPUs and outboard effects processing may, for all practical purposes, never run out of tracks.

Speaking of interfaces, all three of the main interfaces I use (RME MultiFace 2, E-mu 1616m, and MBox 2) worked just fine with V6.0, but of course, only one at a time. This versatility is important to me, as different interfaces have different strengths in certain applications.

CONCLUSIONS

This may sound a bit over the top, but I think Acid Pro 6.0 is taking aim squarely at the other pro DAWs. It may take some time to earn the same respect as some of

the major, obligatory software suites (Pro Tools, Nuendo, etc.), but Acid has clearly stepped into a whole new league by keeping all the elements that made the program unique (ease of use in particular), while adding all the elements expected from today's advanced DAWs *and* upping the audio quality associated with stretching. Its ability to work with just about any file format or interface is another exceptional strength. In fact, given its stability and versatility, I expect to see Acid making ever-greater inroads into the professional digital recording world. Although the lack of a traditional mixing console view may irk some old school engineers, I don't miss it at all.

If this sounds good to you, Sony makes it easy for you to "get acidized" by offering a downloadable, full-function 30-day demo. If you liked Acid but drifted away, it's time to come back. If you've never used Acid before, you're in for a major surprise. Indeed, it's not just a DJ tool any more. **EQ**

Product type: Digital audio workstation for Windows XP or 2000 SP4.

Target market: Anyone who wants a pro-grade DAW with exceptional looping capabilities for under \$400 street price.

Strengths: Support for high sample rates (up to 192kHz/24-bit). Powerful, easy-to-use interface. Can edit loop markers in Acidized files. Compatible with most major file formats and interfaces. Excellent multitrack and (finally!) MIDI recording/editing. Video and surround support. Bundled with Native Instruments' Kompakt Sony Acid Pro Edition. Comprehensive soft synth support.

Limitations: No notation. Doesn't support REX files. Lack of traditional console view may bother some.

Price: \$499.95 list (boxed version), \$374.96 (download).

Contact: www.sony.com/media/software