

PT Tips: MIDI

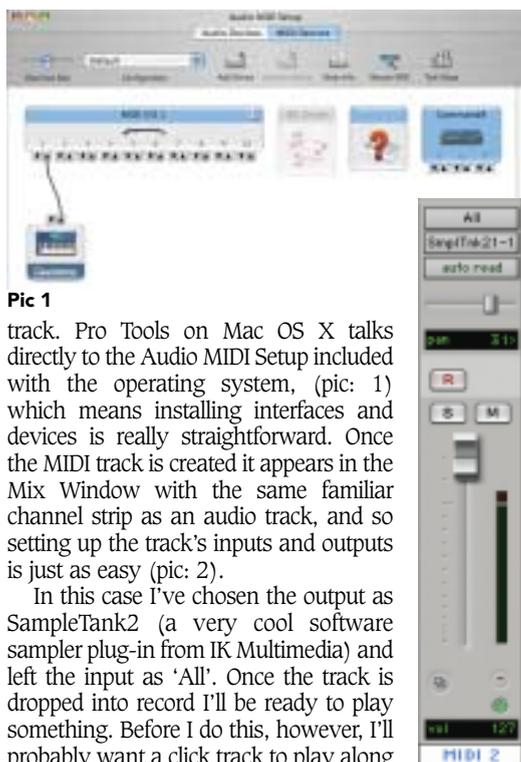
It has been consistently overshadowed by other packages when it comes to the 5-pin DIN but Pro Tools has a fair bit going for it as a MIDI tool, providing you hit the right buttons.

BILL CUNNINGHAM

AS I SUGGESTED in my previous article on all things loopy in Pro Tools, this issue I want to take a look at the MIDI sequencing capabilities of the software. For many, Pro Tools is not considered a viable option for composition and sequence-driven work, often overlooked in favour of more obvious applications such as Logic or Cubase. There can indeed be little doubt that at this time, the feature set of both of those pieces of software is larger than that of Pro Tools, and this is often cited as a reason to choose them. However, Pro Tools' implementation of MIDI has some advantages over its competitors, and for many, its capabilities are ample for the kind of work that needs doing. A big feature set is one thing, but ease of use and the ability to do the basic things well is often of more importance to all but the most hardcore sequencer users.

Let's look, then, at the standard process of recording a piece of MIDI, editing it, looping it, and arranging it with other MIDI and audio regions in Pro Tools. One of the nice things about working with MIDI in Pro Tools is how seamlessly it integrates with audio; the same editing tools are used in the same Edit Window, eliminating the need to move through (and arrange) several windows to achieve the desired result, and the MIDI tracks in the mixer window have the same kind of fader and automation modes. Anyone who can use the audio side of the software should thus have very little difficulty in understanding how its MIDI sequencer works.

So, to begin, it's simply a case of making a MIDI



Pic 1

track. Pro Tools on Mac OS X talks directly to the Audio MIDI Setup included with the operating system, (pic: 1) which means installing interfaces and devices is really straightforward. Once the MIDI track is created it appears in the Mix Window with the same familiar channel strip as an audio track, and so setting up the track's inputs and outputs is just as easy (pic: 2).

In this case I've chosen the output as SampleTank2 (a very cool software sampler plug-in from IK Multimedia) and left the input as 'All'. Once the track is dropped into record I'll be ready to play something. Before I do this, however, I'll probably want a click track to play along to tempo, and this is something very

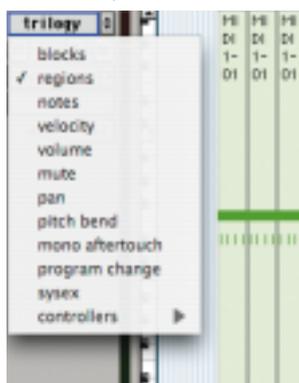
Pic 2



Pic 3

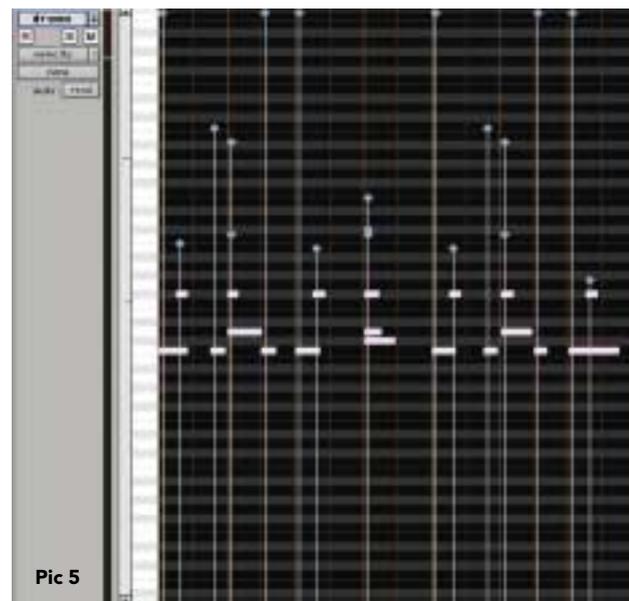
simple that until fairly recently was unreasonably awkward in Pro Tools. Now, thankfully, Digidesign has provided users with a simple click plug-in (pic: 3) that handles the job really well. Once this plug-in has been inserted on an aux track, there's a button on the Transport Window that will enable or disable the click, to save having to manually bypass and un-bypass the plug-in every time. With the click playing back, then, it's time to play a few bars of the usual indescribable genius that pours out of my mind.

Once I have a part recorded, I'm going to need to be able to edit it. A good tip here is to leave the MIDI track in 'Regions' mode, as this enables easy arrangement of whole parts on the timeline, and use the 'E' key shortcut to zoom in on any MIDI region you need to edit. I would strongly recommend having the 'E' key preference set to 'Extreme', which means that when you select a region and use the shortcut key, almost all of the screen will be used to edit the region. This shortcut key will also automatically put the MIDI track



Pic 4

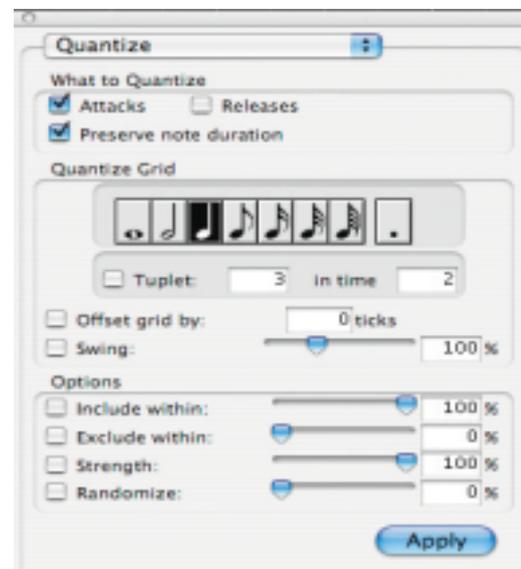
into 'Notes' mode so straight away you can start editing what you've played, a little like going into a matrix editor or similar. Just as with audio tracks in Pro Tools, MIDI tracks have different view modes depending on what you want to be editing (pic: 4). So I'm first going to correct any wrong notes I played (while this is extremely unlikely) before correcting the timing and so on. When editing notes in this way, a really useful method is to use the 'Unlink Edit/Timeline' button in the top left of the Edit Window, and put Pro Tools into loop playback. This way I can continuously loop over the region, using the grab tool to move notes up and down, the trim tool to increase or decrease notes' length, and the selector tool to select and delete groups of notes, without ever changing the loop points. Without this little trick, MIDI region editing can be very awkward in Pro Tools, and as long as you remember to re-link once you use the 'E' key again to go back to the standard Edit Window view, you'll find this will save a lot of time and frustration.



Pic 5

With Pro Tools standard editing tools, then, I'm able to achieve most of the manual MIDI editing task I'm likely to need. The view that the track is set to naturally determines what parameter I'm editing but whatever it is, finding the right tool to edit is very simple. Most of the standard modes such as Volume and Pan use the same kind of rubber-band automation view used by audio tracks, whereas MIDI-unique elements such as Velocity look a little different (pic: 5), but all of it uses the same three main tools.

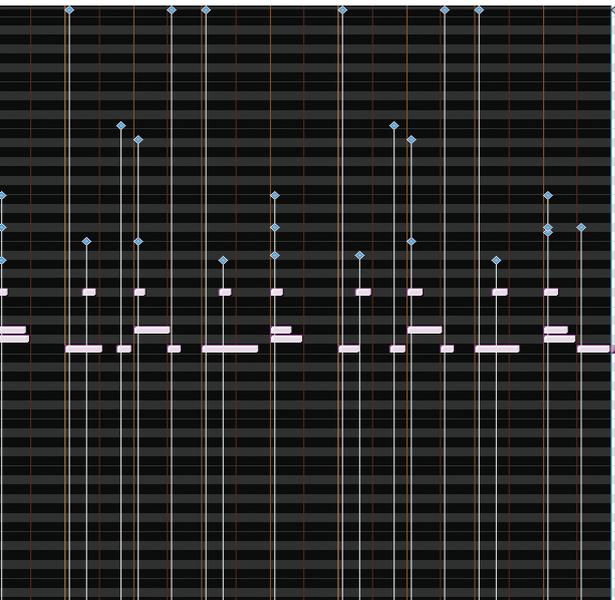
Now I'm reasonably happy that the notes are correct, I'm going to go in and fix the timing. To do this I'll bring up the MIDI Operations window, and select the 'Quantize' mode (pic: 6). Conveniently this



Pic 6

window floats, so it can be quite useful to leave it on the screen all the time (although with a one-monitor configuration it can take up a little too much screen estate). As you can see, the quantising parameters are pretty much everything you'd expect from a basic sequencer.

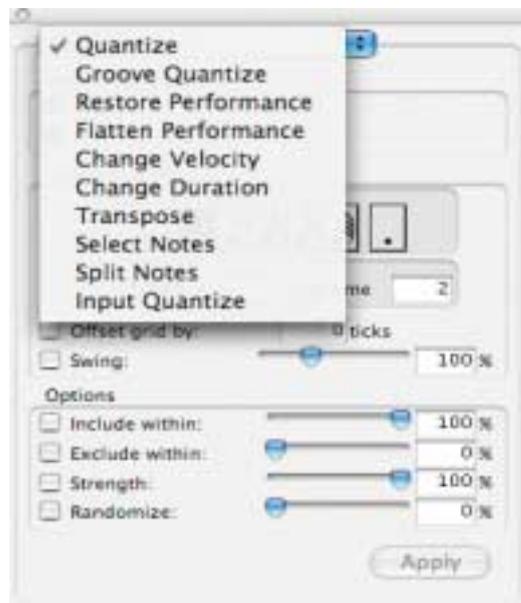
Once I've worked out what division of note I need to use, and set any other parameters, I hit the 'Apply' button to apply those settings to the selected MIDI. Note this is a big difference to most other sequencers — in Pro Tools, MIDI operations like quantise are



essentially destructive in that they are applied to the MIDI directly and not done in real-time. This can of course be a problem if you have applied several quantise steps and decide you want to hear what the original was like, for example, so thankfully there is a mode available in the MIDI Operations window entitled 'Restore Performance' that will put a MIDI region back to exactly how it was when it was first recorded.

If I need to quantise to a groove as opposed to rigid grid-like timing, I can simply choose 'Groove Quantise' in the MIDI Operations window menu and this will give me the option of using a groove from a selection of presets or, better, one that I've made myself by analysing audio using Beat Detective as described in the last issue. This, in my opinion, is one of the niftiest features of composition work in Pro Tools — the ability to extract grooves from audio and use them to quantise other audio and indeed MIDI. This feature is presently TDM only, but it really does help to make a track sound tight.

Most of the other parameters necessary to tweak a MIDI part are available in the MIDI Operations window with no real notable absences (pic: 7). These features,



Pic 7

coupled with the ease of on-screen editing, mean that it is pretty straightforward and intuitive to achieve the desired results. Once you get to the arranging stage, it's simply a case of putting each MIDI track into Regions mode and using the standard editing tools to create your final masterpiece, and then using all of the mixing functionality of Pro Tools.

So what's missing? There are a few things that users of Logic and Cubase might wish was in Pro Tools. The lack of tempo curves, for example, is a major blow to creative composers, and the fact that the MIDI clocking is derived from audio clock can be a disadvantage. This is most clear when using actual audio regions in musical positions. For example, if I had a single kick drum audio region on the beat and

then changed the tempo of the session, the kick would not move relative to this new tempo change and hence be completely out of time. The ability to have tick-based audio tracks (i.e. MIDI clock derived) would thus be of great use.

However, in terms of basic day-to-day MIDI work, Pro Tools now offers a lot more than it ever has in the past. With things like Beat Detective, ReWire support, the ability to use Windows as well as Mac, and a host of synth and sampler plug-ins now available for the platform, Pro Tools is becoming a more attractive option. If a few more features were added (and if they'd just put Beat Detective in LE) it may be that Pro Tools attracts more defectors from the more accepted MIDI sequencer applications. ■