

## In my humble opinion...

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### Looping Software Has Come of Age Oh No! Not more ACID loops!

*by Richard Repp, Assistant Professor of Music,  
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Flash back to 1999. A student brings me a recording of music he has produced on his home computer and asks me to evaluate it. I am excited that this student (who is not a music major) has done some composing on his own, so I want to encourage him. Then he drops the bombshell: "I wrote this using ACID" (Sony Media Software <http://mediasoftware.sonymovies.com/products/acidfamily.asp>). My heart drops. I know that like most of the other songs I have heard composed in ACID, this could be another mindless, repetitive loop-based piece like so many that have given digital music composition a bad name. I listen to the song, grit my teeth, and try to say some encouraging words to the young composer. Never have I lied more about a software package than when I positively commented about songs done in ACID.

### History

Looping has a long tradition in electronic music. Some of the earliest pieces include Pierre Shaffer's "locked groove" technique—locking a groove of a phonograph record (remember those?) into itself to make a repetitive pattern. Later, when tape came along, many composers would splice a piece of tape back onto itself and produce an actual physical "loop" of tape. Steven Riech's "Come Out" is an excellent example. The first tape loops I remember hearing were on "Prophet's Song" by the rock band Queen. All these pieces, and many others, show that looping can make an effective musical point.

So what happened to give looping a bad name? Looping became associated with rap and hip-hop music. Many musicians resented being replaced by prerecorded loops. There was also a backlash against those who sampled other artists' music without permission. These factors, as well as a dislike for the new genre, came together to produce a bias against looping—a bias I must admit I shared.

### GarageBand

So what happened to change my mind? When Apple released its GarageBand software (<http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband/>), the software sat on my hard drive for a long while before I fully investigated it. I figured it was just another loop-based software package.

Then I became very frustrated trying to teach my freshman the software Digital Performer (<http://www.motu.com/products/software/dp/>). Performer is an excellent software package, but the learning curve is a little steep for younger students. GarageBand served as an alternative.

Since I started using GarageBand, my low-level courses have moved much more smoothly. I spend much less time explaining things like MIDI data structures or software quirks, and spend more time on actual composing. GarageBand saves me two days lecture in a course that is already overfilled with material. Yes, GarageBand is limited as a sequencer, and I do still use other software for my

advanced classes. But, as an introductory software package, GarageBand is perhaps the best I have seen so far (and you can not beat the price – Free!).

### **A Bridge**

I use GarageBand as a bridge to encourage younger students and people without training in music. At the click of a button, a student can see the notation for the loop he or she is using. Suddenly notation is not a foreign concept, but has a context. The piano roll editing function allows me to introduce the concept of MIDI editing without the arduous explanations of more advanced sequencing packages.

I was at a conference recently, and a colleague made the comment that “That GarageBand software is terrible—ANYBODY can make music with it!” I was pretty sure he was not being ironic. Of course, to me the huge advantage IS that anyone can make music with GarageBand. In one day, I can teach someone to loop together a project in GarageBand that sounds more polished and professional than what I could teach a student to do in weeks using traditional sequencing. Yes, I understand that the looped project has its flaws, but looping can start as a beginning motivational tool.

Once a student has put together something in GarageBand I try to get him or her to the next step. I am often heard saying: “Now, wouldn’t it be nice if you had some original material there, and not just loops other people wrote?” or “You know, if you are going to try to sell this, then wouldn’t it be embarrassing if someone recognized those loops from GarageBand?” or “If you took piano course, then you would be able to sequence in better lines.” or “Right here you are trying to match loops in two different keys. Some music theory courses would help you to understand what you are looping.”

### **African-American Music & Sequencing**

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of using loops is the excellent, polished work I receive from my students whose musical tastes are primarily centered on Rap and Hip-hop. Musical revolutions influenced by African-American music include jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll. Sequence laden Hip-hop is simply the latest of these innovations. Rap/Hip-hop has been around for 30 years now, and we cannot deny its impact on society.

### **Conclusion**

I feel that looping software can serve as an excellent tool for introducing students to concepts of sequencing and digital audio, can provide motivation for beginning students to explore music in more depth, and can provide a means for students to become more involved in music. Improvements in looping software and computer hardware have made looping a possibility for schools without an extended budget. So, if you have never looped anything in your life, then find someone with a newer Macintosh computer, open up GarageBand, and make some music! I think you will be as impressed as I am.

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