

groundwork

The Evolution of Comping

One of the greatest luxuries most artists and producers have in the studio—whether it's the corner of a bedroom or a state-of-the-art facility—is the ability to record numerous takes of the same part. But this same luxury can feel like a burden when it's time to evaluate and combine these takes in a “comp” (composite) track.

Fortunately, Pro Tools 8 introduces a new set of tools designed to simplify the process of working with multiple takes. These tools allow producers to quickly choose the best material from a multitude of regions without breaking the production flow, and build a comp track that meets their highest standards.

In this workshop, we'll go through the steps for setting up a vocal comp to accompany a guitar part. (Feel free to mentally substitute the instruments of your choice whenever I use the words “guitar” and “voice.”) Many of these techniques can also be applied to much more complex projects.

From the Top

Before recording, go to the Operations tab in Preferences (Application or Setup menu) and enable a new preference in Pro Tools 8 called “Automatically Create New Playlists While Loop Recording.” This is an incredible timesaver—you can record take after take in Loop Record mode, and instead of recording over the previous takes, each pass is saved as a new take. Each recorded region is automatically numbered and filed away in its own playlist.

Record a good reference track of the whole song on guitar using a click track. If you're mic'ing the guitar, it's helpful to silently mouth the words as you play, so you can easily keep your place in the song and crank out the whole piece with minimal edits.

Next, select Enable Loop Record under the Options menu and choose a section of the vocal to start recording. For a fast-paced song with short lines, you might want to start with the first verse, and for slower, more difficult ones you might want to choose the first line.

Even if the vocal starts right at the beginning of the song, be sure to set the region to start recording a bit earlier. If you don't, the recorded region will cut off the incoming

breath and the initial attack of the first note. To make it easier for the vocalist to jump in on the right note with the right feel, try copying the measure that precedes the next similar verse, and temporarily place it before the first verse begins as a kind of musical “shim” (see figure 1).

Now it's time to record a few vocal takes. Keep in mind that only completed loops are placed into new playlists, so be sure to let the last loop completely cycle through to the beginning again. Then just delete the snippet of white noise that remains, and you'll have a nice “blank canvas” track to work on.

A New View

Change the vocal track's Track View Selector to Playlists (new in Pro Tools 8), and you will see a waveform view of each of your takes, now in lanes, running underneath your vocal track. Playlist lanes are similar to the new Volume, Mute, and Pan automation lanes, which you can reveal by clicking the small white triangle at the bottom of your track. (And if you do, your track and all its playlist lanes can stay in waveform view. Pretty cool, huh?)

If you hit the Solo button in a playlist lane, Pro Tools solos the take, but not the track. This is a great feature, because it lets you quickly hear each take in the context of the rest of the music. You can edit audio in playlist lanes to your heart's content (see figure 2), and you can also press the Shift key to select and edit across several (or all) of your takes—something you could never do before, unless the takes were on separate tracks.



Figure 1: A one-measure copy, or “musical shim,” at the beginning of the loop helps the vocalist enter in the right place with the right feel.



Figure 2: Playlist View: All takes are in plain view, fully editable, and easy to audition.

The beauty of Pro Tools playlists is that they are simply alternate layers of music for the same track. Each playlist shares all of the properties of its parent track, such as its tempo, time base, counter, fader position, memory locations, sends, inserts, and so on. This makes working with playlists a natural way to manage multiple takes, as opposed to working with multiple tracks.

After you've recorded the vocals, you can take out the “shim” (the copied measure from later in the song that you pasted at the beginning) and select as much or little of the initial breath and attack as you need (see figure 3).

There are several different methods of working with playlists in Pro Tools 8, so you can choose the one that works best for you. You don't have to use loop recording to end up with multiple takes that are simultaneously accessible in Playlist view. You can also manually create a playlist for every new take, if you prefer to work that way—or drag regions from the Regions List into their own Playlist lanes. Alternately, you can right-click on Regions and choose Copy Selection to New Playlist.

Take 37, Take 38, Take 39...

Depending on the complexity of the music and the number of takes you're working with, you may want to jot down some notes about each of your takes, with an eye towards combining the best parts into one track. Some people use a copy of the lyrics that incorporates a matrix of the different takes, and work syllable by syllable. You need to balance your sense of perfection with your willingness to spend time getting the edits right. Also, if you stop and start recording a few times, your playlists might get out of numerical order; I find it easier on the brain to drag them into order so that my notes can be sequential.

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Pro Tools 8 offers another new feature that comes in handy when it's time to evaluate takes. You can rate each take or region in a session on a scale of 1 to 5—and you can even filter them by these ratings. For



Figure 3: With the “shim” removed, the new vocal takes are ready to edit.

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example, you may choose to work only with the ones you've given the top rating.

To rate a region, highlight it and choose Rating from the Region menu. Deep listeners can rate regions with their eyes closed by selecting Control-Alt-Start (Windows) or Command-Option-Control (Mac) and typing a number from 1 to 5 on the numeric keypad.

Under the Hood

Let's say you've settled on three takes that you've rated 5 for "excellent." To focus exclusively on these, right-click on the name of your track, scroll down to Filter Lanes, and choose Show Only Lanes With > Regions Rated



Figure 4: The ever-handly Filter Lanes command.

1-5 > 5 (see figure 4). The takes rated 1 to 4 are hidden, but not gone forever; you can recall any or all of them by filtering for other ratings, or by choosing Show All Lanes.

But filtering is only the beginning of what you can do by right-clicking in Pro Tools 8. Right-click on any region in any lane or on any track, and you can swap it out for any other region in your session. You can choose the criteria that Pro Tools uses for offering "matches," or regions that match the region you've right-clicked, enabling you to instantly swap in alternate takes or punches (see figure 5).

This even works across multiple tracks—so if you've loop-recorded your vocals using two mics on separate tracks, you can swap out the takes across both channels at once. With filtering and matching, the possibilities for arranging regions are pretty staggering. You don't even have to confine yourself to regions that share the same time stamp, or even the same instrument.

All Together Now

Pro Tools 8 provides some useful tools for managing takes even if you're not creating a comp. If you already know which take you want to use, just highlight the take and click the lane's Copy Selection to Main Playlist button (see figure 6). A copy is inserted into the track, and you're done!

You can also use this move to quickly pull out a good take to use for the rest of the recording session, knowing that later you're going to go back and review them again for the final mix and possibly choose another one. No more running with the last take just because it's easier!

If you want to mix and match sections of your best takes to make a comp track, Pro Tools 8 gets you there in style. Select pieces of a take with the Selector tool, select Copy Selection to Main Playlist in the playlist lane, and your selection pops up to the track. Pro Tools keeps the copied regions the same color as the original take, so you can see at a glance where the new regions came from. Since they're a different length than the original take, Pro Tools rennumbers the new regions.

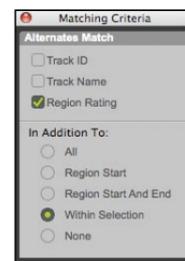


Figure 5: With the Matching Criteria dialog, you can right-click on any region to swap in any other region in your session that matches your chosen criteria.



Figure 6: The Copy Selection to Main Playlist button.



Figure 7: With one click, you can select the best parts of your takes and promote them to the comp track.

If the track already has audio in it when you promote material from your takes, regardless of the mode you're in (Slip, Grid, etc.), your promoted material will replace whatever is there (see figure 7). You'll find that this workflow is much simpler and faster than copying and pasting between playlists.

I find it most useful to work in Grid mode when comping, using a high-resolution grid such as 1/64 note, and then go in and fine-tune the edit points once you're happy with the overall comp. Zoom in tight and use the Trim tool in Slip mode to close the gap between regions at a good zero-crossing point (between a waveform's trough and a peak), and then add a small crossfade to mask any inconsistencies between the adjoining regions. (For a workshop on crossfades, see the Winter 2008 issue of *DigiZine*.)

Once your comp is completed, select all the material in the comp track and choose Edit > Consolidate to unify your edits into a single region. And now that you know the moves, comp away! 

David E. Weiss is a San Francisco Bay Area based songwriter, self-producer, and music technology writer.

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