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# ACOUSTICA MIXCRAFT 5

## Should I Buy 15 Mocha Lattes, or a Cool DAW?

by Craig Anderton



### HANDS-ON

- ① You can see the video track behind the top of the resizable video window.
- ② The Details section can be docked and undocked. Choose between piano roll and notation views here.
- ③ Choose between piano-roll and notation views here.
- ④ The resizable controller strip can show any one MIDI controller at a time.
- ⑤ An automation lane is available per track, and can show any automatable parameter.
- ⑥ Clip automation can be used instead of, or in conjunction with, track automation.
- ⑦ The effects selector makes it easy to assemble effects chains, as well as choose presets for the selected effects.
- ⑧ Tabs bring up different windows for the Details section.

In a world where entire countries are going bankrupt, money's tighter than James Brown's horn section. So for those getting into computer-based music, a \$75 program looks great on paper – but of course, when you start working with it, your expectations will have to be tempered by reality. After all, that's about the price of 15 lattes from the Starbucks at LAX. How good can it be?

Surprisingly good. Mixcraft is not a toy, it's a no-excuses tool for accomplishing real work, from audio recording, to MIDI with virtual (or hardware) instruments, to creating a video to get your band up on the web. Of course, there are limitations compared to the "big guys," but these seem to be based

around the question "So, does the end user really, *really* need this?" Wrap this all in a straightforward interface, and you have a program that offers outstanding value.

### I GET AROUND

Finding your way around the interface (which is not unlike Steinberg Sequel) is easy. The upper part of the window has a standard track/arrangement view with track headers, tracks where clips reside, a timeline, and the like. The lower half, called "Details," has several tabbed views:

**Project.** This is where you specify tempo, key, auto beat matching, metronome, global effects, etc., and enter song info in a notepad.

**Track.** Choose a color and size, implement track freeze, duplicate a track, and manage track effects.

**Sound.** "Editor" would probably be a better term; with a MIDI track selected, you see a piano-roll view with editing tools. For audio, you see the waveform, with the main options being to change loop start and end, do time stretching, change offset and length, etc.

**Mixer.** This console view includes faders, meters, pan controls, solo/mute, a basic three-band EQ (hi/mid/lo boost and cut), effects selector, and preset chooser for the instruments in MIDI tracks.

**Library.** Access content through this view; again with the Sequel analogy, it's somewhat

**PROS**

Outstanding value. Better than expected video support. Several decent virtual instruments. Now includes a dockable mixer view, track and clip automation, and unlimited sends. Built-in per-clip noise reduction. Can burn Red Book CDs. Notation editing and printing. Considerable free content is available via downloading. Lets you play notes from a QWERTY keyboard.

**CONS**

MIDI editing, included effects plug-ins, and mixer channel EQ are basic. No support for REX files or ReWire. No MIDI plug-ins. No control surface support. Can see only one track of notation at a time.

**INFO**

\$74.95 download, \$14.95 for 60-day license (just enough to record your CD). [acoustica.com](http://acoustica.com)

like the Media Bay. Content is organized as 50 sound kits, but you can search for content based on criteria like tempo, key, mood, and the like.

The Details section can be undocked, so you can create more space for the track view – this is particularly useful with dual-display systems. Or, you can keep the single-window interface when lapping.

**VIRTUAL INSTRUMENTS**

Mixcraft 5 carries over the instruments from V4 (Impulse synth, Minimogue virtual analog synth, VB3 organ, and Acoustica Instruments) but adds the Messiah polysynth, a lite version of Applied Acoustics Lounge Lizard electric piano, G-Sonique's Alien 303 bass synth, and Acoustica Expanded Instruments (which adds 66 more sounds to the existing Acoustica Instruments). One cool feature: If you insert more than one instrument, they layer automatically. Lounge Lizard, VB3, and Messiah won't load into other programs because Acoustica's license for these is Mixcraft-only, but all other included VST effects and instruments will work fine – just remember to flag Mixcraft's VST folder in your other hosts.

Messiah is your basic Prophet emulation, but with an Edit page for editing the arpeggiator, effects (distortion, delay), drift for that detuned analog sound, and modulation (but not matrix modulation;

destinations and sources are fixed). I even like the presets, and this is a fine addition to the package.

The name Alien 303 tells you what to expect, and it doesn't disappoint if you want acid-house bass lines – I can see the smiley faces now.

Like the original Acoustica Instruments, the Expanded Instruments – 66 in all – can't be edited; you call up the preset, play, and use it if you like. The new instruments fill in some of the gaps not accommodated by the original set, and many – if not most – of these sounds are very useable. And I'm picky about presets.

The one instrument that's missing is a good drum module where you can create your own kits, although the GM drum sets and other kits are actually quite good. Then again, with the money you save, you can probably afford Toontrack EZ Drummer, FXpansion BFD Eco, or something similar.

**EFFECTS**

Mixcraft bundles several of its own effects: chorus, compressor, delay, distortion, EQ, flanger, and reverb. These are basic; don't expect sidechaining or sync-to-tempo. Also included: Kjaerhus's nine classic freeware effects (whose delay *does* sync to tempo). Yes, they're freeware, but they're good. You also get the Shred amp simulator, Voxengo Boogex Amp Simulator, and Voxengo SPAN Spectrum Analyzer. Though EQ in the mixer itself is minimal, plug-ins include two graphic EQs and G-Sonique's way-fun

**NEED TO KNOW****C'mon, what can I expect for \$75?**

A lot. Just remember you're paying for an efficient, capable core program, not a big bundle of effects plug-ins.

**Will Mixcraft 5 work with my computer?**

Yes, if it's a Windows 7, Vista, or XP machine – including Macs that run Windows via BootCamp. It works fine with a 1GHz processor and 2GB of RAM.

**Can you actually do anything with the video track?**

You can split video clips and do crossfades, lengthen or shorten clips (similarly to how you stretch audio within the program), as well as export movies as AVI or WMV files. Realistically, Mixcraft 5 is about solid video support for audio more than video editing.

**What are the biggest missing features?**

MIDI editing is basic; you won't find features like drum maps, logical editors, or MIDI plug-ins. There's no REX or ReWire support, and though you can bring in Acidized clips, you can't edit the transient markers. Also, there's no support for control surfaces.

**What kind of plug-ins does Mixcraft 5 accept?**

VST, DirectX, and Acoustica's own plug-in format.

Pultronic EQ-110P, which emulates a rare and expensive Pultec tube EQ.

As most effects are freeware and the Acoustica effects are fairly simple, this is



Fig. 1. Mixcraft 5 offers new soft synths, and the option to bring up a screen that lets you play notes from your QWERTY keyboard – great for laptops.

one obvious factor in the low price. However, given the plethora of freeware plug-ins and the low cost of many commercial versions, I'd rather see a low price than pay more for plug-ins I may or may not use. That said, you'll probably want to spring for a better reverb than what's included.

## NOTATION

While you can't expect engraving-quality printing from Mixcraft – and you can only see one track's worth of notation at a time – musical notation is implemented very cleverly. Each note is superimposed on a grayed rectangle, like what you'd find in a piano-roll editor. You can change the rectangle's duration (which also changes the corresponding note's rhythmic value onscreen), as well as move the rectangle around to change pitch or start time. It's also possible to snap to particular rhythmic values, "tidy up" notes to try and make a performance more notation-friendly, and print out the notated track. This is an interesting way to edit, as it

## VIDEO SUPPORT

Video used to be considered a relatively specialized feature found in high-end DAWs, but that was before YouTube. Adding video to a program isn't trivial, but Mixcraft does it well: You can import or drag-and-drop AVI and WMV files, which creates a video and audio track. (Although Acoustica says you may be able to import other formats if you have a suitable codec on your machine, I didn't have any luck with Flash, MOV, or MPG files. It would also be cool if version 6 could render videos to iPod/iPhone format.)

Once loaded, you can open a resizable video window, split clips (yes, remove the part between songs where the guitarist is tuning up), trim beginnings and ends, stretch video, and even crossfade between clips. After creating the soundtrack, you can save the video by itself or with the soundtrack; and Mixcraft simplifies the arcane rendering process by letting you simply move a slider to choose quality vs. size, but if you're savvy, you can open up a separate window for WMV compression settings (video bit rate, encoding type, audio quality, dimensions, etc.) or basic AVI settings. This is very impressive in a sub-\$100 audio program.

bridges standard notation and MIDI piano-roll notation.

## BALANCE IN THE FORCE

As you work with the program, you'll find little things you didn't expect, as well as features that are missing from other

programs. For example, although you can drag-and-drop clips, you can't drag-copy MIDI notes in the piano roll editor; you have to cut/copy, then paste. For crossfading, your only curve option is linear (I would have preferred equal-power). To zoom in and out, either in the track view or in the

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Fig. 2. You can show and edit MIDI notes using a standard piano-roll screen, or choose per-track notation.



Fig. 3. The included Pultronic EQ emulates a four-band Pultec, and adds character to your sound in a way that more conventional, surgical parametric EQs can't.

piano roll editor, you can use the + and – buttons or a mouse wheel (very handy), though there aren't click-and-drag or "spinner" zoom controls. I also couldn't figure out any way to hook up a control surface

(e.g., Mackie Control), or do custom keyboard commands. And, not supporting REX files is an issue: These days, sample libraries often include REX files as the primary time-stretchable format.

On the other hand, the noise reduction feature works like ones you find in dedicated digital audio editors: It finds a space that's blank except for the noise, "learns" the noise, then removes anything from the file that matches that sample's "noise print." Marker implementation is also cool, as markers can not only serve as navigation references, but also indicate changes in tempo, key, or time signature in a manner similar to Acid. Furthermore, Mixcraft can record at sample rates up to 192kHz.

## CONCLUSIONS

Some might see Mixcraft as a reaction against bloatware, but I think that with much music software, the bloatware tag is unfair. Some people really do use most of what a

DAW offers, and different people use different features. One feature set wouldn't be adequate for everyone.

Even so, Mixcraft convincingly accommodates the world of straight-ahead audio recording, MIDI-based composition, looping, and beat-matching – even with video. The essential features you need to create music are there, the interface is pretty obvious, and the virtual instruments not only let you make music out of the box, but are a bargain in this context. Throw in the free downloadable content library, and you have a very complete package.

Mixcraft is a likable program, combining friendliness, value, and a realistic feature set. While there are some definite omissions, I doubt anyone would dispute that Mixcraft 5 offers exceptional value for the money. But don't take our word for it: There's a downloadable demo, and you can see for yourself what the program has to offer. Although there's never been a better selection of budget programs, Mixcraft goes the extra mile in several crucial aspects, and for that, wins our Key Buy award. **K**

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