

Creating composite performances from multiple "takes"

# Comping as a Way of Life

by Tal Herzberg

It's been done in the movies since the dawn of cinematography: Each scene is acted and shot multiple times from different angles, and the final result — the movie — is a composite made out of raw footage, assembled in the cutting room. This process involves watching the raw footage, taking notes on which scenes ("takes") are better than others, while taking into consideration light conditions, set sound issues, etc., and then, finally, cutting the film and assembling the final product. This process has also been used in sound production and recording for many years, first with razor blades and tape, now using a DAW. "Comping," as it's called, has evolved into a powerful method for creating composite tracks, where different performances, or "takes," are assembled and morphed into a single improved performance.

## WHY COMP?

Recording is the single vehicle we all use to deliver music and sound to our audiences. A recording is final, re-playable and predictable, and once manufactured and distributed there's normally no way back. For the most part, the ultimate goal is the creation of a recording that's pleasant to listen to over and over again. We achieve this by presenting the best available performance moments, relative only to the different musical styles we're dealing with (surely some of the parameters used in analyzing a great punk performance are different than the ones used in determining a great pop performance). When auditioning several performances of the same material (song, narration, etc.), we can always count on finding better and worse singing/drumming/

guitar-playing moments between separate "takes." The process of selecting and assembling those moments is referred to as "comping," short for "compositing."

## RECORDING WITH COMPING IN MIND

With some pre-recording preparation, we can greatly simplify the comping process. There are three main tracking/comping methods to choose from (loop recording creates the vertical or layered types of tracks automatically):

**VERTICAL** — Suitable for any situation (but less for drums because of the number of tracks usually involved in the record-

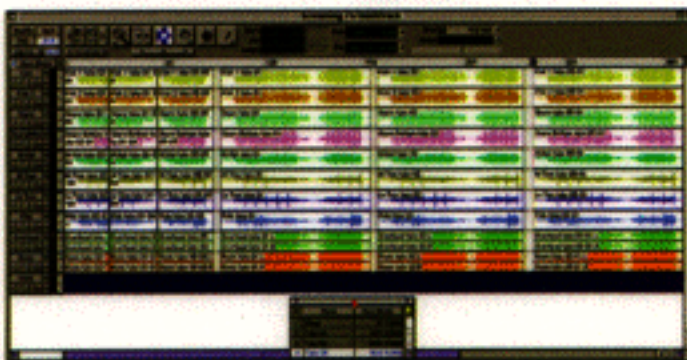
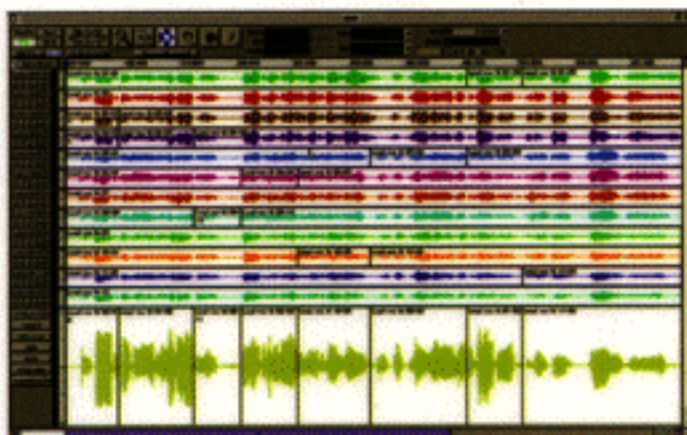
take on the first track, mute it, record on the second track, mute it, and so on until you've filled as many tracks as you want.

When comping, set up an empty track above or below the group of tracks where the takes were recorded. After identifying the best segments within the various takes, simply separate them from their parent tracks, and drag them into the same location on the clean comp track, until a new final performance is built.

**HORIZONTAL** — Suitable mainly (but not only) for drums, this method requires the pre establishment of a tempo map. First, choose a fixed speed (or set up and paste a moving tempo map). Then set up

the very beginning of the session to become bar 1; create a click track (using MIDI or an audio sample), and decide how many count-off bars will be used to cue the start of the music (two bars for example). Record take 1 at bar 101 (music starts at bar 103), take 2 at bar 201, take 3 at bar 301, etc. Assuming the structure of the song hasn't changed between the different takes, we will find (for example) all the intros at bar 3 of each take (103, 203, 303), verses at bar 11 (111, 211, 311), choruses at bar 19 (119, 219, 319), etc.

When comping this way, accessing parallel points between the takes is a breeze. Either enter the locations numerically, or set up the DAW software's nudge value to 100 bars and jump between parallel points using a single keystroke. After auditioning the different takes and making decisions about the cutting points, copy and paste the corresponding bars into the comp track's bar number (bar 3 for intro, 11 for verse, 19 for chorus, etc.). Note: If the song is longer than 100 bars, start take 1 at bar 201, take 2 at 401, etc.



Here we see vertical comping (top), where multiple takes are recorded on separate tracks then comped to a new track, and horizontal comping, where multiple takes are recorded into different locations in the same tracks.

ing), this is the most commonly used method for recording and comping. You set up several new tracks with identical I/O settings, label them as "lead vocal take 01," "lead vocal take 02," etc. Record a