

TAPE OP MAGAZINE

Berklee College of Music *Producing with Pro Tools Online Course*

by Glynn Durham
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This is a fully web-based course, covering the technical use of Pro Tools and—to a lesser degree—music production. I took the course in the summer of 2003, and I had a blast. I met some cool people and went from being able to launch Pro Tools to basic competence in all of its features. I've even solved technical problems for a couple of friends since then. To take this course, you need any working Pro Tools rig, a mic, a musical instrument, a MIDI controller and interface, and a MIDI sound source: nothing fancy, just something to work with getting music (and MIDI) in and out of your computer. The discussion of studio setup and acoustics will give you plenty of ideas on how you can improve your setup from there. You'll also need an Internet connection, preferably high-speed for transferring sample MP3s to and from the course server.

Following a one-week introduction, the course runs 12 weeks, divided into three four-week sections: setup and audio recording, audio editing, and MIDI recording and editing. There are occasional forays into music production, with some useful materials such as forms for project schedules and budgets. The class is graded pass/fail, with a certificate on completion, and you can get Continuing Education Units if you need them. A full course syllabus is available at the Berklee website.

The value of the course comes from four general inputs:

One: The published material. The textbook is *Producing in the Home Studio with Pro Tools* (Berklee Press), which is generally available. Required reading covers about three-fourths of the book, with the remaining material being optional. There are some assignments to read in the Pro Tools Reference Manual, a good resource to get to know. In addition, Berklee publishes additional reading on the website every week for the class, equivalent to another 200-300 pages of printed text in total. Web pages focus and supplement the assigned readings, sometimes including animations to clarify concepts or procedures, and MP3 files for examples. Virtually every week there's a non-graded quiz in a small number of shortcut keys, to encourage efficient use of the software. The textbook includes a CD of Pro Tools sessions in various stages of completion, which provide some of the working examples for use in class assignments.

Two: The instructor. The course instructor is David Franz, who authored the textbook as well as the website. I get the impression that he was an early adopter of Pro Tools, as he knows quite a bit about various obsolete and current versions. He's done some beta testing for Digidesign, and he publishes articles in their online Pro Tools magazine at www.digidesign.com/digizine. He owns his own studio in Boston (www.undergroundsun.com) and has a band, so he actively understands the technical and human issues in running a recording project. Nice guy. Throughout the class, he runs online chats at least twice a week for a few hours, contributes to discussion threads, and responds to email queries. He's certainly an expert in Pro Tools, is a good explainer, and seems incredibly patient. (He's one of those teachers who live the maxim that there are no stupid questions.)

Three: Classmates. The assignments include various writing tasks (describe your studio setup; discuss how you record vocals, drums, etc; discuss how you schedule a project) as well as projects, submitted sometimes as Pro Tools sessions, sometimes as MP3 files. What's cool about this class is that you don't just

submit work: you get access to everyone else's submissions—great way to learn a few tips. Some of the assignments include partnering, to discuss examples of audio mixing or editing. Berklee publishes an email address for each student in the class. These elements and the discussion board and regular chats give you plenty of opportunity to get to know classmates. My class included all sorts, from a digital industrial freak, to a guy who had owned his own tape-based studio for years, and in locations from Taiwan, to Jamaica, to Houston. One of the students even put up a server for ongoing discussions following the class end.

Four: Your own time. Berklee says the class takes a time commitment of four to six hours a week. That's true on light weeks, but some weeks I spent more time than that in a single audio editing session. It works well to put in one or two hours a day most days, with one more half-day or so to work on some larger assignment.

In addition to the course, Berklee provides students with access to a jobs/gigs directory, general online discussion board, and an online store. They're really making an effort to extend their campus to the Internet. (Fun fact: The founder Lawrence Berk named the school after his son Lee Berk, who is now the current president.) Berklee provides other courses online, from production, to lyric writing, to music theory, to music business courses.

Overall I'd say this is a great course if you can't get to a school and you don't want to just read a book to get busy with Pro Tools. It's a high-content curriculum without a lot of padding. About the only downside of the online nature of the course is the occasional time-drag when someone in a chat room needs to do some simple menu-choice-click-drag sort of operation to solve a problem, and no one can lean over their shoulder to simply show them how. It's most mortifying when you're the one having the problem. But hey, what's an engineer's life without a bit of pain, followed by a little breakthrough success? (www.berkleemusic.com)

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