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Classic Gear: Avid Pro Tools

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

The best classics are often those first made to solve some particular need of their creator. This is one of those - a digital-age classic made possible by the power of the personal computer, a piece of software that has revolutionised the world of sound: Pro Tools from Avid.

Today, Pro Tools is a multi-track recorder, hugely powerful mixing desk, visual waveform editing station and versatile effects system all rolled into one. It began life as something much simpler. Its creators, Evan Brooks and Peter Gotcher, were high school friends and University of California graduates. Their shared interests in music and electronics had led them to found a business called Digidrums, making and selling EPROM chips containing alternative drum sounds for the popular Drumulator drum machine. Each sound had been recorded on the Sony PCM-F1 digital recorder, but the duo wanted a more flexible solution.

Debuting at about the same time was Apple's Macintosh: Brooks and Gotcher realised its potential and set to work on their own editing system for short digital samples grabbed by the new breed of samplers. Called Sound Designer, they released it to the public in 1985. Four years later came Sound Tools, a direct-to-disc stereo recording system for which they created their own 16-bit convertor hardware for the new Macintosh II's expansion slots, giving higher quality audio than the Mac's own 8-bit D/A system.

The first Pro Tools followed two years later, in 1991, a combination of hardware and software that, for $6000 plus the cost of the Mac, gave you a four track, 16-bit, 44.1kHz system with separate programs for recording and editing. 1993 saw the first Pro Tools application that would be familiar to today's users, integrating all of the functionality in one app and offering non-destructive audio editing. Its capabilities have expanded ever since as the power of computers has increased - 48 tracks at 24-bit by 1997, 768 tracks and up to 192kHz/24-bit resolution today.

Particularly clever was that the Digidesign team realised they would never be able to offer every effect every user wanted, so they created a plug-in architecture allowing others to extend Pro Tools' functionality. They also offered interfaces to external controllers when more hands-on control than a keyboard and mouse can offer was required. And they realised that not everyone could stretch to the full cost of the system, offering light versions to draw people into the Pro Tools world. Plus it can now run on PCs as well as Macs - in both cases, all that functionality now available on even a tiny, highly-portable laptop.

As a result, Pro Tools can be found everywhere sound is recorded, made or manipulated: in recording studios, in movie sound and editing suites (the company was acquired by film editing specialist Avid in 1995 and is now called Avid Design), in television control rooms, in theatres. It is just taken for granted - so much so that no-one even thinks about how they would have achieved the same results two decades ago, if they could have been achieved at all. It's Photoshop for audio. Though there is, of course, now a backlash, with some musicians proclaiming that they make their work more organically, without the 'artificial' aids Pro Tools offers . . .

A revolutionary classic, then - but also, as it moves beyond version 10, something even harder to achieve: a practical, even dominant, classic that has survived and continues to thrive.

Pro Tools today: www.avid.com/US/resources/digi-orientation
Learning Pro Tools: www.showmeprotools.com