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**The Complete Guide to
Remixing**
Erik Hawkins

Chapter 7
Target a Style



Press ESC to cancel sound.

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Target a Style

Dance and electronic music is constantly evolving. Just when you think you have all the current styles identified, a new one crops up to confuse the categories. Nevertheless, there are many good reasons for labeling styles, despite the fact that doing so might initially seem narrow-minded. Without labels, record stores would have no means for creating sections, and customers would be unable to browse through records by music style. Everything would need to be organized alphabetically, and finding a particular recording would be an exercise in cross-referencing song titles and the names of artists. Categorizing make releases easy to find; this helps sell music, and that's a good thing for all of us.

When promoting your remix, or simply passing it out to potential fans, knowing what category your remix falls under will help you target an audience. Using industry-accepted labels to describe your remix will help people know what to expect before they hear that track, and this can help you focus your promotional efforts. For example, giving a drum-and-bass track to somebody who listens to smooth jazz probably isn't a great idea, and most likely just a waste of your product. Club DJs, in particular, tend to play very specific styles of music, and they like to know ahead of time if your remix will go with their sets. Do your best to match the style of a remix with that of the DJ you're pitching it to.

DESCRIBING YOUR SOUND

It's okay to combine a few different categories when describing a remix's sound, as long as the categories you use are well known (like drum-and-bass meets ambient, or tribal-progressive-house). Try not to get carried away with long, flowery descriptions; keep your prose short and sweet. DJs, A&R (Artist and Repertoire—the people at labels who are in charge of scouting new talent), and press people who are constantly swamped with promotional releases, will appreciate concise and to-the-point labels.

Style and Tempo

Before you begin a remix, it's a good idea to determine what dance music style you're going for. A key deciding factor is the original song's tempo. Most every style of dance music inhabits a select range of tempos, and it's impossible to make a song conform to the entire range of every style. The less you change a track's tempo, the better it will sound, in the end. Extreme time compression or expansion, no matter how it's done, and regardless of the algorithm that's employed, always results in reduced-quality audio. By first identifying the tempo of the original song, then comparing it to the tempos of popular dance music styles (see figure 7.1), you'll be able to narrow the field of possible target styles for the remix.

Tempo changes that are less than ± 25 BPM are usually safe. However, this figure may be significantly less if the track you are trying to tempo-change contains material that doesn't stretch or compress well (such as a vocal track with lots of effects or a bass line with long sustained notes). In general, speeding a track up sounds better than slowing a track down. When you slow a track down, attacks become mushy and lose their punch because transients get smeared. Speeding a track up has the opposite effect, compressing transients to create punchy, crisp attacks.

MUSIC STYLE	TEMPO (BPM)
Drum-and-Bass	150–170
Trance	130–150
House	100–130
Hip-Hop	85–110
Down Tempo	65–95
Ambient	85 and below

FIGURE 7.1 Style and Typical Tempo Ranges.

Recognizing Styles

There are several primary dance and electronic music styles that have evolved over the years (listed in figure 7.1). Many sub-categories have flowered, combining these styles in unique ways and with different world music influences (such as Brazilian or East Indian). However, at the root of every new style, there continues to be some component of these main styles. Recognizing these elements will help you to understand current trends and styles, and give you direction when targeting a style (or creating your own style) for a remix.

Know that even between dance and electronic music experts, labeling different styles is a heavily debated topic. Defining where one style ends and another begins is, at best, an imperfect science. The following are brief descriptions of several of the most popular styles today to help you distinguish one genre of dance music from the next. However, the best way to really understand the differences between the styles, is to listen to songs in those styles. Magazines such as

Urb are a great way to get the scoop on hot new releases by genre.

It seems that new dance music styles are emerging every day.

—Chris Gill (Gilla Monsta),
editor of *Remix Magazine* (1999–2002)

DRUM-AND-BASS

Jungle is the slower paced forerunner of today's drum-and-bass. Drum-and-bass has probably succeeded in the popular spotlight, where jungle did not, because it adds melodic elements and sometimes vocals to the purely drum-driven rhythms of jungle. It is often portrayed as the thinking man's electronica because of its complex rhythms and jazz chord voicings. Tempos are always frenetic, between 150 and 170 BPM. However, the bass and melody lines are usually performed half-time, actually following tempos of 75 to 85 BPM. Bass lines are usually characterized by very low frequency, sub-bass sounds, and the drums generally have an acoustic, real-drum sound about them. In fact, the drums are often samples of an r&b or jazz drummer, either sampled from an old record, or made to sound that way, then cut up, sped up, and the individual beats rearranged to create unique sounding drum beats.

The complex technique of recycling and rearranging a live drummer's original beat has given rise to a popular style called breaks (also sometimes called *breakbeat*, though this term better describes the drum loop centered style that predates jungle). This style takes the production techniques of drum-and-bass and fuses them with the electronic sounds of trance, usually at less frenzied tempos of 135 to 140 BPM. *Tribal* is a return to the austere arrangements of jungle, but at house tempos and with acoustic percussion elements.

TRANCE

Starting around the same time as house, but originally dubbed "electro" (or "techno") because of its heavy electronic sound, trance has become hugely popular in dance clubs worldwide. It has really

become the poster child of music for the pop rave scene. It's characterized by faster tempos than house, 135 to 145 BPM, combined with electronic drums, synthesizer pads, arpeggios, and hook-driven lead lines. Because of its tempos and lush synth arrangements, the bass lines are usually pretty simple, such as two alternating notes, or even a single note played on the up-beats. Vocals are usually simple, short, and catchy melodies, or ethereal female leads floating amongst the synths.

Trance has given rise to several other styles, characterized by fusing elements of drum-and-bass and house with the musical elements of trance. Today's *techno* is a sort of raw, stripped-down version of trance, with much simpler musical ideas and hints of breaks style programming. *Hardcore* is faster, with many more breakbeat influences and the sped up melodic elements of house. Trance has also turned inward, towards its darker emotional elements, to spawn *progressive trance* (such as *goa* or *psychedelic acid*)—harder, deeper, grittier versions of the comparatively happy sounding, popular trance music.

HOUSE

Growing straight out of the '70s and early '80s disco music, that evolved into the Chicago "warehouse" dance-music scene of the mid-to-late '80s, house music's roots are still very prevalent in contemporary tracks. It's characterized by a conservative dance tempo (around 120 BPM), an open hi-hat on the up-beats driving the rhythm track, with a keyboard playing a simple, alternating major to minor (or vice versa) chord progression, and a plucked guitar (or similar sounding instrument) adding extra elements of funk. Often, the track will have a standard song structure (such as intro, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, break, and so on). The melodic hook is usually carried by gospel-tinged vocals, and sometimes a lead instrument, like a horn. Bass lines can sound like they would work equally well over an up-tempo r&b tune, and are usually performed by a real bass, or a synth patch with real-bass overtones.

Over the years, many harder-edged versions of house have emerged. They are generally characterized by

faster tempos, more driving sounds, and less soulful lead lines. However, many of the distinctive drum elements remain intact, like the cliché open hi-hats or conga-like percussion parts. Garage (also called UK garage and two-step), progressive house, and acid house, are all styles that have evolved from house.

HIP-HOP

Not generally heralded as a form of electronic dance music, hip-hop does fit the mold. There are dance clubs that play hip-hop, the production of hip-hop depends heavily on electronic music equipment, and production teams like the Neptunes even do hip-hop remixes. In fact, to give credit where credit is due, many of the production techniques (such as loops and dirty drum samples) used in the more traditionally accepted forms of electronic dance music (like house, drum-and-bass, and breaks) were pioneered by hip-hop producers.

Hip-hop production techniques grew from kids making music in the streets, working with what they had available (old record players and drum machines) to create tracks for rappers. The musical influences behind hip-hop, its "feel," stems from r&b and soul, and to a lesser degree (depending on the song) funk, jazz, and disco. Most hip-hop songs are characterized by a lively groove, driven by a bouncy kick pattern, a laid back snare, and a swung hi-hat (often attributed to the MPC drum machine's quantize set to a swing value of 64%). Bass lines play a similar rhythmic pattern to the kick, and dirty vinyl samples and sound effects are usually employed to spice up the groove. Chords are played by a variety of instruments, from Rhodes keys, to analog sounding synths and funk guitars, while leads are almost universally performed by singers and rappers.

The most prevalent sub-genres on the electronic music scene, which have been heavily influenced by hip-hop, are acid jazz and trip-hop. From the conscious decision to merge the rhythms of hip-hop and the musical complexities of jazz comes *acid jazz*. At faster tempos and with a heavy jazz direction, acid jazz becomes a modern day bebop, while its less jazzed tinged and slower songs can melt into brainless

lounge music (ideal “chill out” music). The combination of hip-hop and dancehall reggae forms the backbone of *trip-hop*. Less musically high brow than acid jazz, but striving for more enlightened lyrical sensibilities than gangster rap, trip-hop is characterized by ethereal sounding loops and effects, glued together by mid-tempo, funky grooves. Spoken word often delivers the song’s lyrics, and may be underpinned by the soulful crooning of a female singer.

DOWN TEMPO

Lounge music and jazz ballads are the main progenitors of down tempo. With electronic sounds, noisy samples, and funkier grooves, these classic genres are given a musical facelift without losing that relaxed, cool vibe. Rare drum grooves culled from old records often form the down-tempo song’s basic rhythm track. Bass, strings, pianos, and acoustic guitars sound real, and if they aren’t sampled loops of real performances, they are probably live musicians. If there are vocals, they are likely sung by a female with a sultry and mysterious voice. Down tempo often follows traditional song structures, and its arrangements can be fairly complex, bordering on a pop music production.

AMBIENT

Not every electronica song must have a big, driving beat. At some point during an evening of dancing, you’ll want to take a breather, and an ambient track may be just the ticket. A good DJ can mix an ambient track into their set without upsetting the evening’s flow, using it to take the audience excitement level down for a spell. Warehouse raves have traditionally had at least one dedicated “chill-out” room where nothing but ambient is played.

The ambient style is characterized by lots of ethereal synth pads, mixed with a variety of world instruments (like East Indian sitar and Australian didjeridu), occasional light percussion (such as hand drums), unique sound effects, and everything is awash in lush reverbs and delays. Bass lines may be droning, extremely simple, or nonexistent altogether. Drum machine patterns are sometimes woven into the aural tapestry, usually with a lot of effects.

Tempo Figuring Tactics

Before you can decide on the dance music style you should target for your remix, you need to figure out the original song’s tempo. The more precisely you can determine its tempo (preferably to at least two decimal places), the more precisely you will be able to change that tempo. For example, some time compression/expansion programs require that you enter the track’s original tempo, then your target tempo. If your original tempo calculation is off, the program’s output tempo will also be off.

There are only a couple of ways to calculate a song’s tempo accurately. Both methods require carefully extracting a 2- to 4-bar loop from the song to use in calculating its tempo. Figuring out the tempo from a perfectly cut loop will give you the best estimate of the song’s overall tempo, allowing you to focus on a specific section and ignore possible tempo variations over the course of the song as a whole (see the sidebar, Accounting for Human Feel). Tapping out the tempo while timing yourself with a stopwatch, no matter how good your timing is, will not give you a completely accurate reading, nor do most automatic BPM counters (such as those found on some DJ mixers).

ACCOUNTING FOR HUMAN FEEL

The tempo of a song that is arranged with a drum machine is easy to figure out because the drum machine’s timing is constant and unwavering. By contrast, the tempo of a song played by a real drummer, live, without the benefit of a headphone click-track, will speed up and slow down over the course of the song. Many remixes just focus on short loops, extracted from key sections of a song (such as the first four bars of the chorus), so tempo variations aren’t a big cause for concern. However, if your objective is to remix an entire song, using all of its verse, chorus, and bridge melodies (as is usually the case when remixing a name artist for a major record label), tempo variations can be a pain.

You should still follow the steps for calculating the song's basic tempo in order to decide on a remix target style. However, making an entire track that has lots of tempo variations conform to a new tempo requires time-consuming and painstaking editing, often at a microscopic level (a process called *micro-editing*). Though it's possible to create a tempo map of the entire song (in the top digital audio sequencers), and sequence parts to this map, this does nothing to straighten out its tempo. Dance music is best written with steady, repetitive beats, so using such a tempo map is not recommended for a dance remix. Micro-editing is really the only sure way to adjust an entire track with tempo fluctuations to match one straight tempo all the way through. Conforming all of a song's vocals to a new tempo, accounting for tempo variations, tuning, and fixing time-stretching artifacts is discussed in chapter 9.

EXTRACTING AN 8-BAR LOOP

Find a section of the original song that has a good solid beat, then cut out a 2- or 4-bar loop. This loop will be used for calculating the song's tempo.

STEP 1. Open the original song in either a waveform editing program or your digital audio sequencer's waveform editing window. You will need to zoom all the way into the waveform to find your edit points, zero crossing points (where the waveform crosses the X-axis), so make sure your waveform editor has good zoom controls.

STEP 2. Find a 2- or 4-bar section of the song with a clear, defined beat.

STEP 3. Set your program to play back your selection in a continuous-loop mode.

STEP 4. Find the first downbeat of the loop and make a cut, or "separation," at the very start of its waveform (see figure 7.2). This is the stage when you will need to zoom all the way into the waveform to find its zero crossing point, where the cut will be made.

STEP 5. Find the beginning of the first downbeat immediately following your looped section, and make a cut directly in front of its waveform. (What you should see will look very similar to figure 7.2, only that downbeat represents the end of your loop rather than its beginning.)

STEP 6. Check your loop to make sure that it loops in perfect time, that there is no delay or jump in the beats when the section loops around. This may take a couple of tries. Play with your loop end point, by moving it forward or backward slightly in time, until you get it right.

A CAPPELLA IS MISSING BEATS

If you are working with an *a cappella* version of a song, since there are no beats, it's pretty tough to extract a perfect loop. Instead, use a version of the song with beats, preferably the version that the vocal track matches, probably the radio version. (You can line up the *a cappella* version with the radio version in your digital audio sequencer to hear if they match, see figure 7.3.) Cut a 2- or 4-bar loop out of that version, and use it for calculating the song's tempo, and by default, the tempo of the *a cappella* version.

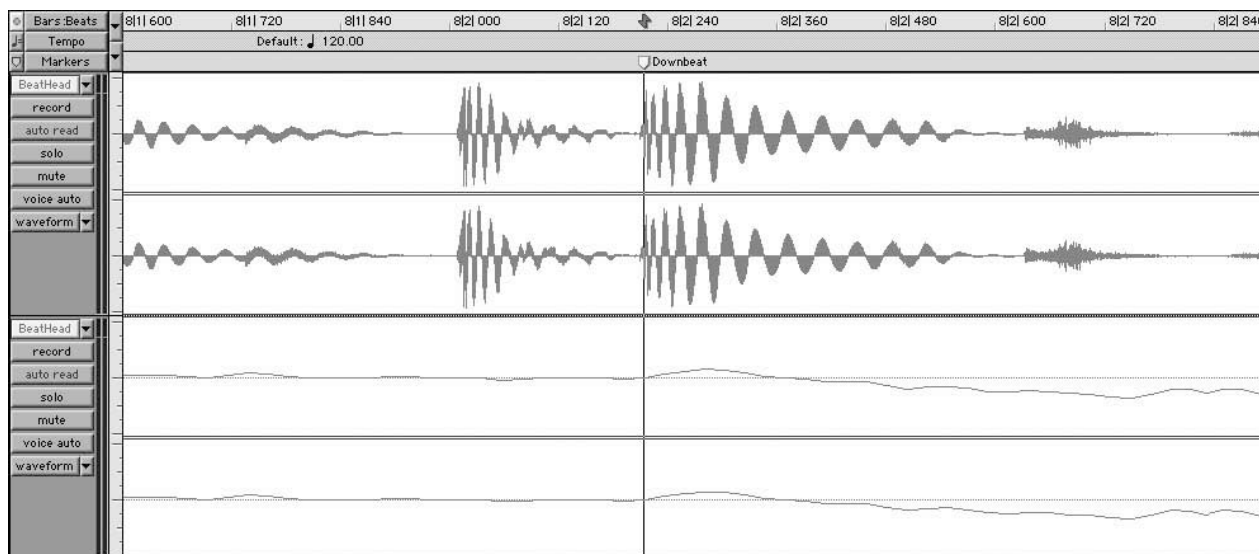


FIGURE 7.2 The Downbeat. The waveform of your downbeat will look something like this zoomed out (top), and zoomed in to make the separation at its zero crossing point, where the playbar sits (bottom).

I always start by determining the original tempo of the song. If all you have to work with is the vocals, the best way to figure out the tempo is by putting them on an audio track, then writing a very basic drum loop; kick on every quarter note, hi-hats on the eighths, and a clap on the backbeats. Adjust the loop's tempo until the vocals are in time with the drums. You may need to slide the vocal track around a bit to get its first downbeat to line up with the drums' first downbeat. When everything sounds good at the very beginning, check the very end of the song to hear if things are really on. If the vocals have drifted, you know that your tempo is a little off. A lot of times you can't just make whole number BPM changes to line things up, you have to do hundredths of a BPM to get everything exact.

—Pablo La Rosa, Tune Inn Records

DO THE MATH

Here is the equation for figuring out the BPM of a loop, in 4/4 meter:

$$(60/\text{loop s length in seconds}) \times (\text{number of bars} \times \text{number of beats per bar}) = \text{BPM}$$

Figure out what the BPM is for a 6.86 second loop that's four bars long.

STEP 1. $(60/6.86) \times (4 \times 4) = \text{BPM}$

STEP 2. $8.75 \times 16 = \text{BPM}$

STEP 3. The answer is 140 BPM.

LOOP CALCULATOR

A handy Loop Calculator to help you figure out tempo changes is available at AcidFanic (www.acidfantic.com), and it's freeware.



FIGURE 7.3 The Instrumental and *A Cappella*. An *a cappella* version of a song lined up with its radio version in *Pro Tools*. Since the vocals of the *a cappella* version line up with the vocals of the radio version, we know that their tempos are identical and that it's okay to figure out the song's tempo using a loop from the radio version.

RECYCLE FOR TEMPO

Propellerheads' *ReCycle* program is excellent for figuring out the tempo of a loop. It can also expedite the entire operation, you don't need to crop a perfect loop in a waveform editor because *ReCycle*'s breakpoint editing is excellent for designing loops.

STEP 1. Separate out a rough 2- or 4-bar loop from the original song. Make sure it's a section with a clear, well-defined beat, and that there is plenty of overhanging waveform on either side of the loop (see figure 7.4).

STEP 2. Save the rough loop as its own separate WAV audio file on your hard drive.

STEP 3. Open this WAV file in *ReCycle*.

STEP 4. Move the Sensitivity Amount slider forward until you see breakpoints on most of the beats (see figure 7.5).

STEP 5. Snap the L marker to the breakpoint at the beginning of the loop, and snap the R marker to the breakpoint at the end of the loop. Press Play to hear if the loop plays back seamlessly. If not, readjust the L and R markers until loop playback is correct.

STEP 6. Enter the loop's bars in the Bars field. Make sure that the effect Preview button and all of the Effect buttons are off. The loop's tempo will automatically appear in the Orig. Tempo field.

Speed Up or Slow Down

Now that you know the original song's tempo, you can make a wise decision about a style you want to target. If the song's tempo is 120 BPM, a trance style is within easy reach of the original tempo. At 104 BPM, you could keep this tempo and do a down-tempo remix, or speed the song up for a house remix. With an original tempo of 80 BPM, you could speed the song up for a down-tempo remix, or keep the tempo the same and do a double time, 160 BPM drum-and-bass remix.

Remember that slowing down a song doesn't usually sound as good as speeding it up. And double timing a song that you slowed down can lead to a train wreck. So if you have a 70 BPM song, slowing it down to a 60 BPM in order to make a house remix may not work. Ultimately, it depends on the material.

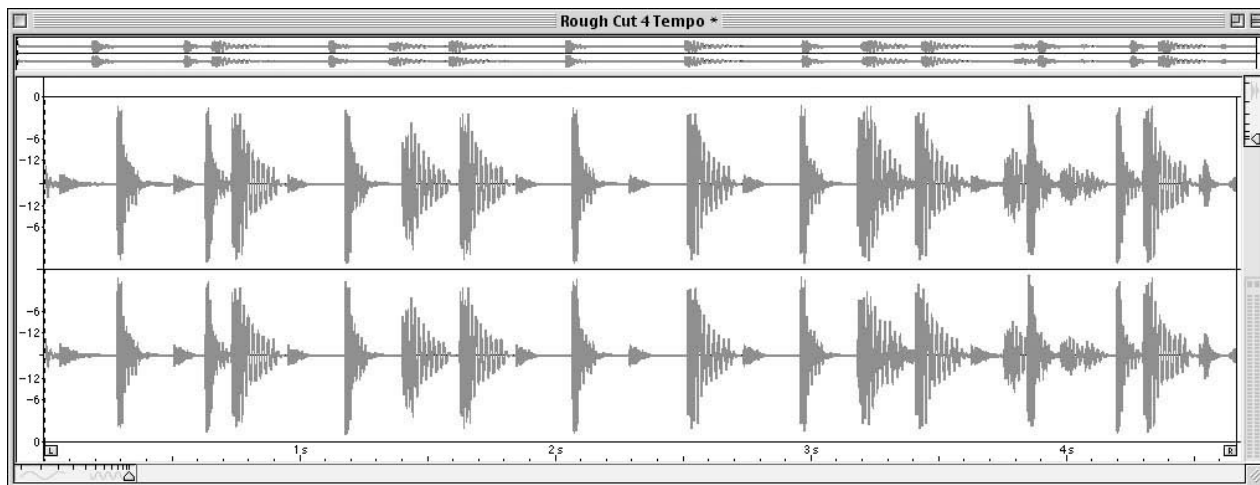


FIGURE 7.4 Extra Overhang. With lots of overhanging waveform on either side of this 2-bar loop, there is plenty of room to adjust the loop start and end points.

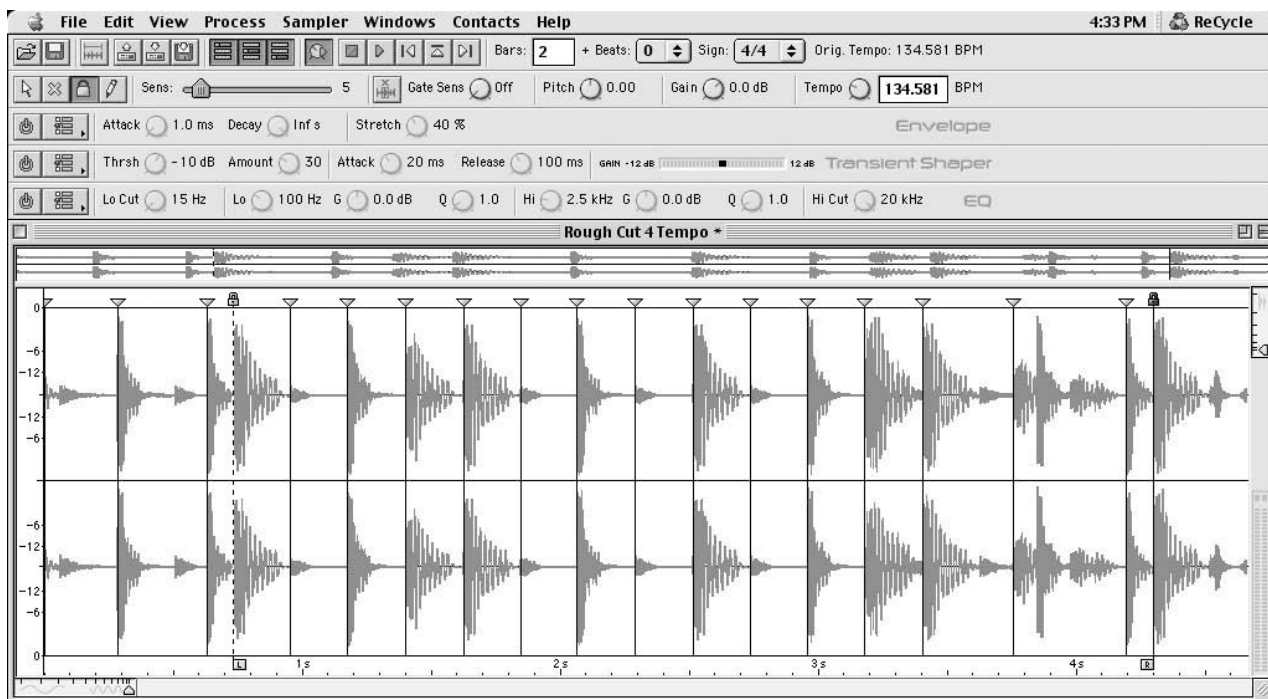


FIGURE 7.5 Working in *ReCycle*. The Sensitivity Slider in *ReCycle* lets you set breakpoints that follow the waveform's peaks.