Make an EP in 30 Days
Ableton Course

# Day 2

Ableton Basics

Ableton is undoubtedly a powerful programs with tons of nooks & crannies. You can go incredibly deep into the little details (and we will) but it's incredibly important that you understand that 80% of the songwriting process is done with the basic editing tools.

Ableton is a unique program as it allows a different songwriting approach that other DAW's don't. It's session window allows you to jam loops in a number of ways without having to commit to a traditional arrangement.
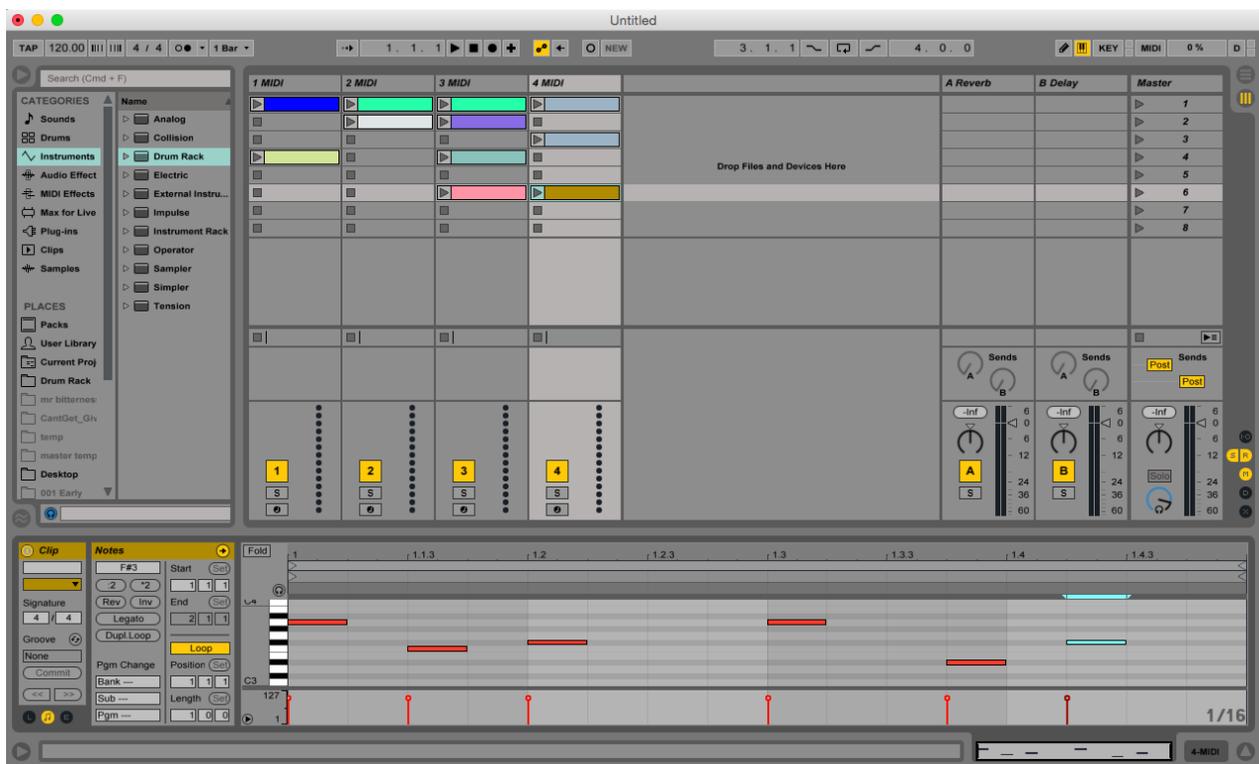

Session Window

Because of the tendency to not commit to a songwriting structure in the session window, and the fact that all songs eventually need to be completed in the arrangement window, we are going to take a more traditional approach to creating our ep.

When working quickly, I think it's important to see your idea as a song as soon as possible instead of an abstract idea. The arrangement window forces you to commit to song structures.
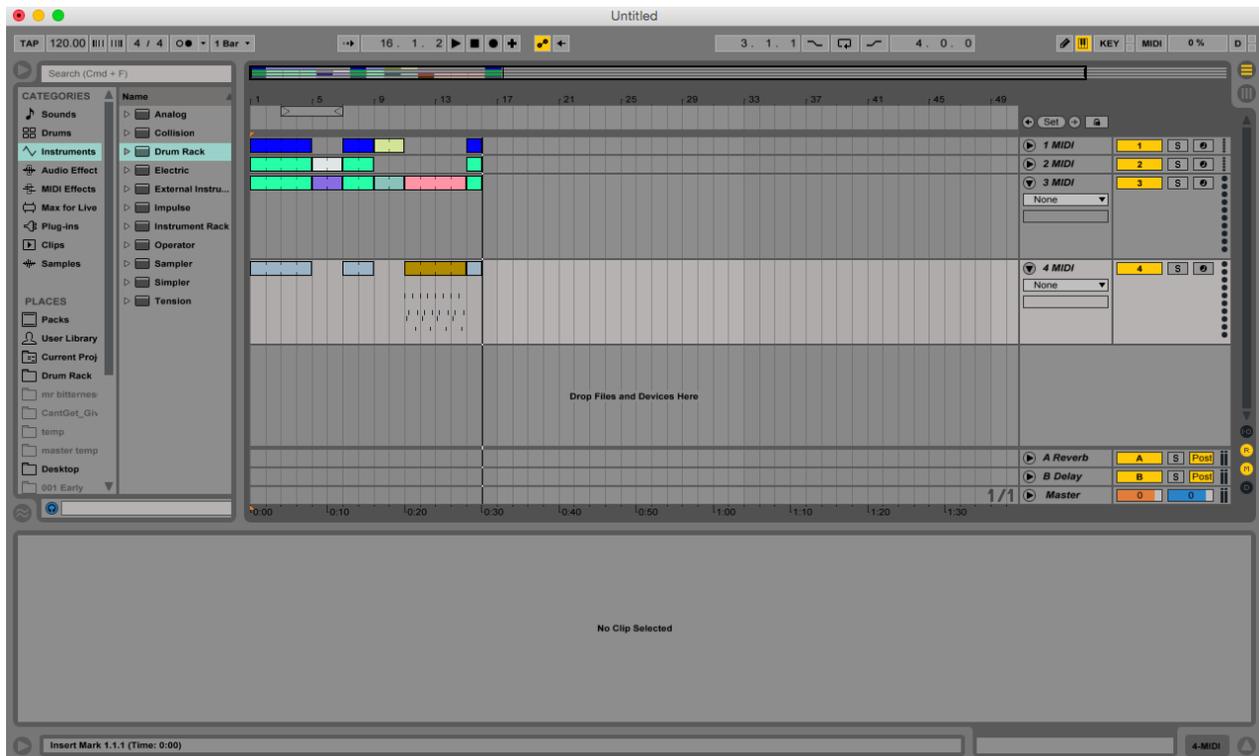
Arrangement Window

The goal

Keep in mind that the goal of this course is that you finish songs quickly, not that you have an encyclopedic knowledge of everything Ableton can do.

The need to "know it all" is an addiction that afflicts many creative people & actually hinders their ability to finish anything.

Although we will be going pretty deep into this program, I am purposely sticking to teaching you things that you will immediately put to use. Trust the process.

In order to create a song in Ableton, you need to get content into your software. This is usually done in 1 of 3 ways:

1. Recording audio into the program
2. dragging in prerecorded audio samples
3. Recording midi from a software synth

External Soundcard

Recording audio into Ableton is pretty straight forward. This is how you would record live instruments, vocals or hardware synths.

In order to get the quality that you want, you'll need a decent soundcard (You don't want to use the one that comes with your computer).

There are a number of usb soundcards available for this purpose. As long as you have 2 inputs & 2 outputs with a microphone option, you should be good.

If you don't have a usb soundcard, don't worry too much. Most of the songs I make are comprised of already recorded samples & midi instruments.

As long as you aren't recording a physical instrument or vocals, you are totally ok working with your computer's internal soundcard.

Audio Preferences

To set up Ableton for recording audio, you'll want to go into your preferences:

1. For Mac click on "Live" in the menu & then you'll see preferences. For Windows click on "Edit" & preferences should be one of the last options.

2. Once the pref. window pops up, click the "Audio" tab

3. Choose your preferred soundcard from the drop down menu. Obviously input is what you'll be recording into & output will be where your sound comes out.
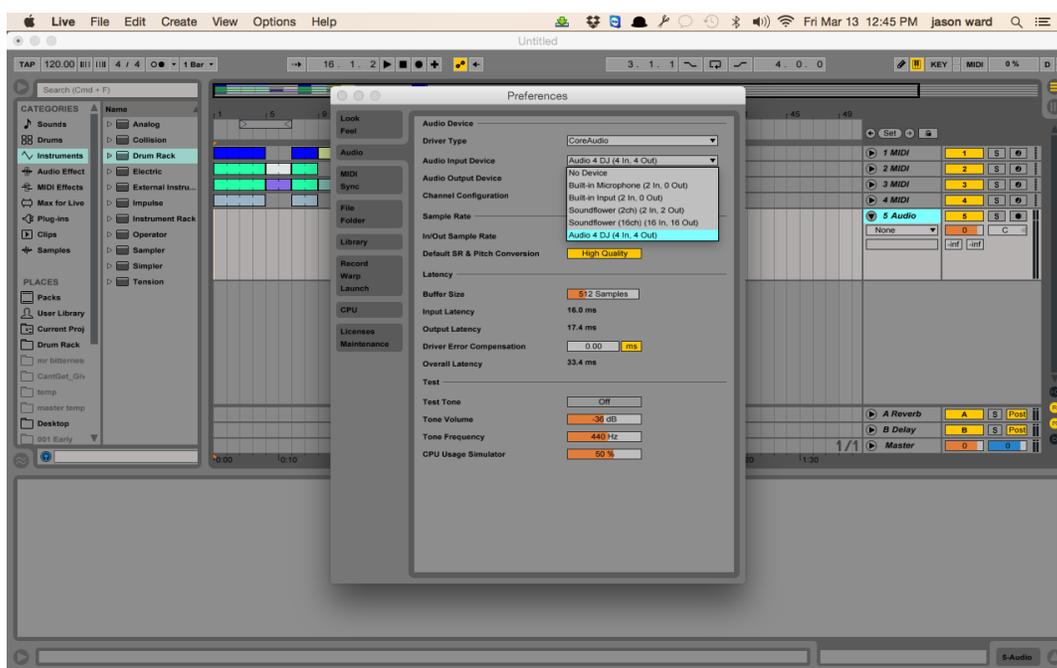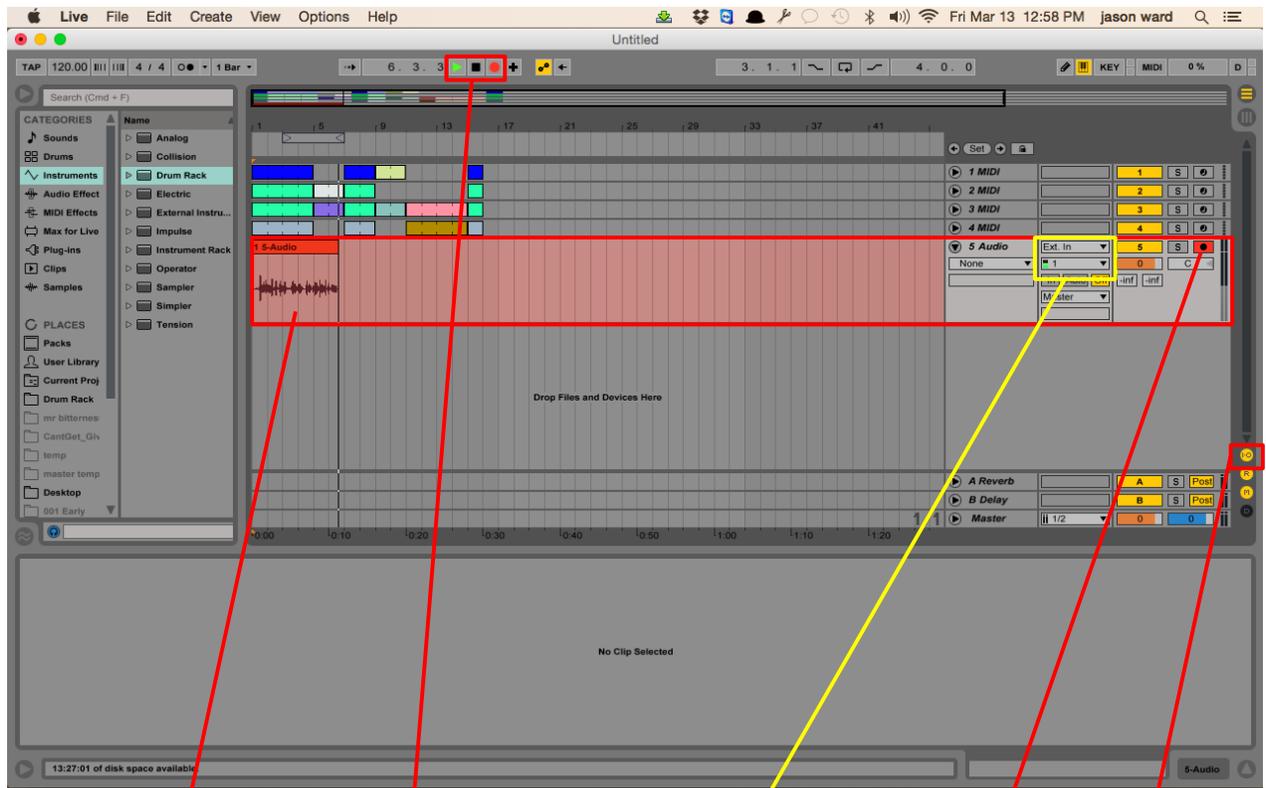
Count in

In order to be prepared for your recordings Ableton will give you a count in of 4, 8 or 16.
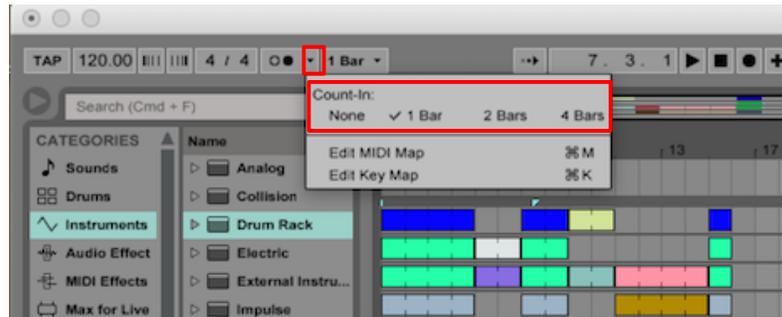
Simple click the down arrow next to the metronome & then choose a 1, 2 or 4 bar count in (1 bar is a count of 4 beats)

Recording audio

Recorded audio

Record button

Soundcard in/out
Settings

Arm audio track

Show input/output

Recording audio is pretty straight forward in Ableton:

1. Choose or create an audio track (command T/control T)
2. Make sure your track input is set to the correct soundcard.
3. Arm the audio track you want to record on

4. Set the playback marker to the location you want to start recording from.

5. Hit the record button

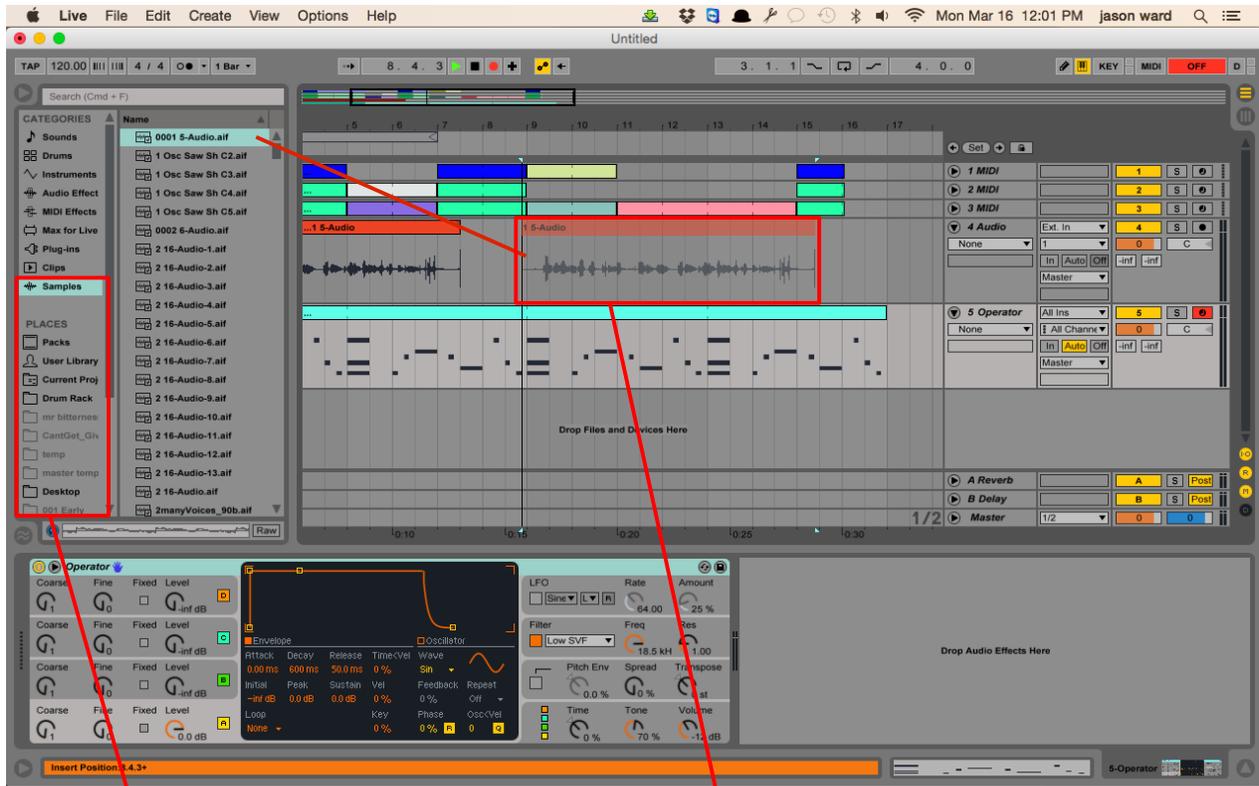6. Play your part

7. Hit the space bar to stop recording
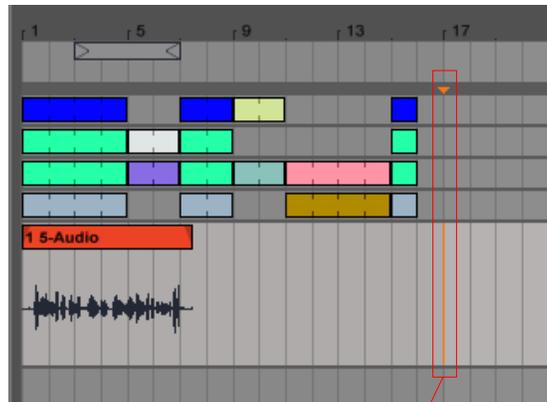
Playback marker

You can also type in your playback marker location here

Audio samples

Another way to get audio into Ableton is simply
to find the sample in your browser & drag it
onto your chosen audio track.

Audio samples   Drag from browser

Audio Samples can be found in the browser under
"samples" of you can locate your own in "places".

Recording midi

Recording midi is almost the same as recording audio except you will be using a midi track (command shift T/control for pc) & you'll need to drag your midi instrument into the midi track to get sound.
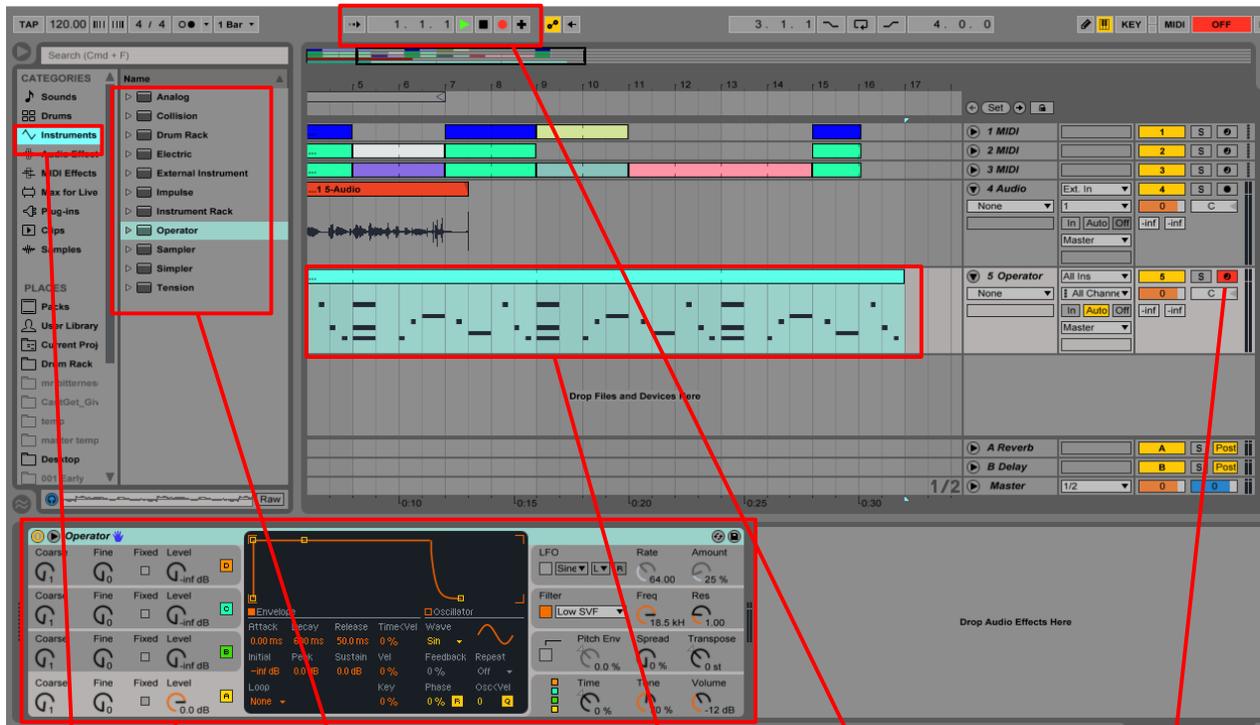
Instruments

Midi instrument

Instrument options

Recorded midi

Transport

Arm track

To record midi:

1. Create a midi track (command shift t/control for pc)
2. Select and drag (or double click) the midi instrument to the track
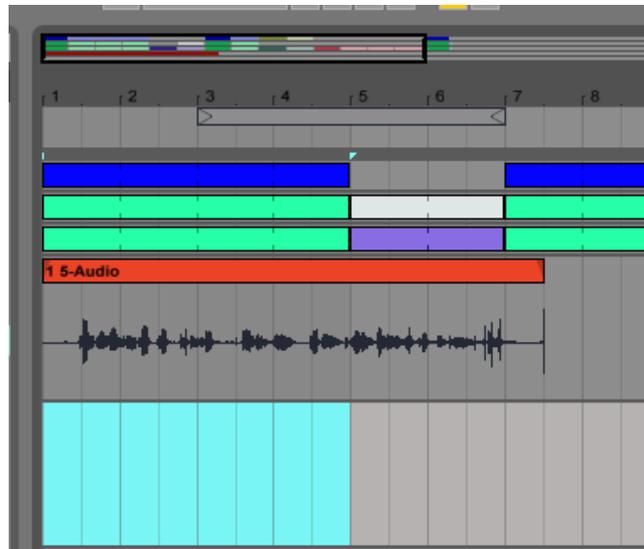3. Arm your midi track

Recording midi

4. Click Record button on the transport
5. Use your qwerty keyboard or midi controller to play in your notes
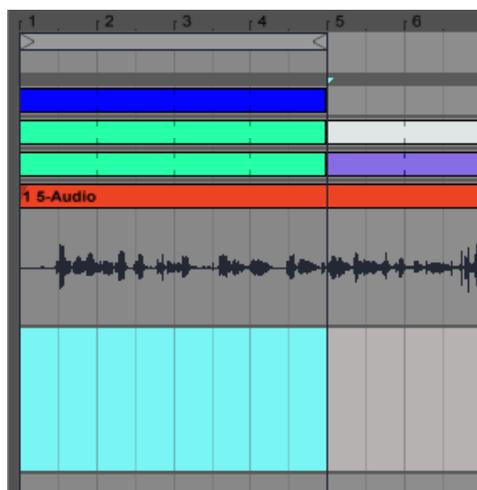6. Hit the space bar to stop the recording

Record a midi loop

Often when recording midi you'll want to loop 2-4 bars and keep recording until you get the part right.

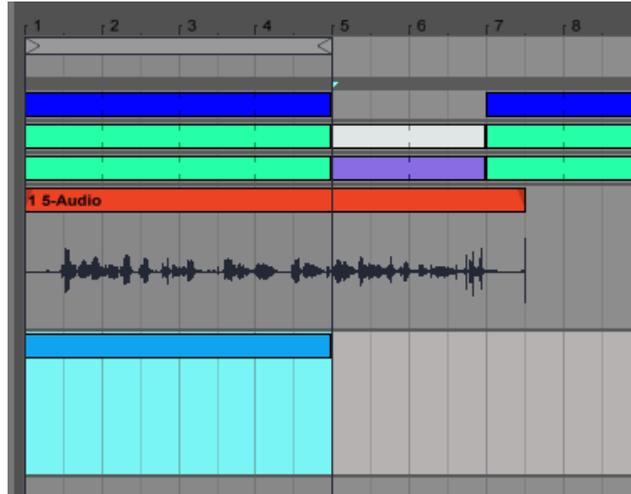To do this:

1. Highlight a 2-4 bar section

2. Set the loop marker to that section with Command L (Control for PC)

Record a midi loop

Create a midi clip – command shift m
(control for PC)

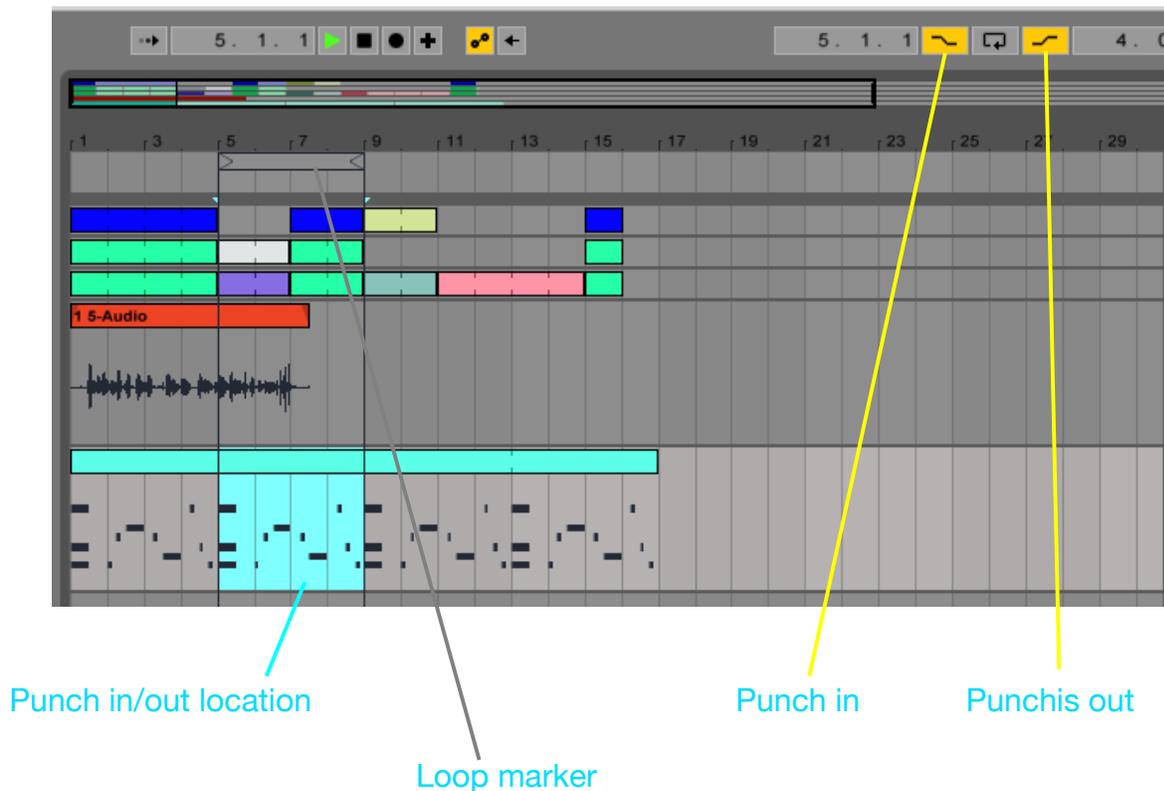Make sure the loop icon above is highlighted

Recording drums

When recording drums with drum rack or impulse, you may want
to add a sound to what you have already
played with each pass (kick, then snare, then hi hats..etc)

To do this click the plus symbol (above), this way nothing you
record will be recorded over, you'll just keep adding layers.

Punch in/out

Sometimes when you record midi or audio, you goof in a certain section. This allows you to record over only the part to goofed while leaving the rest alone.

Punch in/out location

Loop marker

Punch in

Punchis out

To record a punch in/out:

1. Highlight the section where you want to punch in/out & set the loop markers with command L (Control for PC)

2. Make sure the loop icon is NOT highlighted & highlight the punch in and punch out icons

3. Arm your track & hit the record button. It won't record until it reaches the punch in location, then will stop recording at the punch out position.

Drawing in midi parts
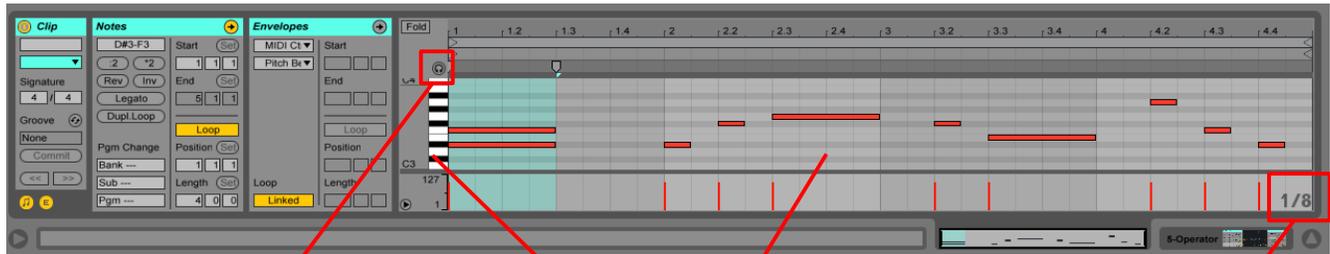
turn on to hear notes as you enter them

Piano roll

Draw notes in this window

Right click to choose resolution

Very often you may find it easier to draw in your midi notes or drum parts instead of recording them live. This is as simple as choosing your resolution (I suggest 16th notes) and double clicking in the place you want a note.

You can also click the B key to get the pencil tool. Then selecting and erasing notes are only 1 click instead of 2. Click B again to return to the regular cursor.

Essential keyboard shortcuts

Although there are tons of keyboard shortcuts in Ableton, these
are the ones you will likely use the most. 90% of what you'll want
to do will be accomplished with these simple commands
(they will also be explained further in future lessons).

Note: All shortcut will be for Mac, just use control
instead of command for pc.

Copy – command c
Cut – command x
Paste – command v
Duplicate – command d
Delete – delete key
Loop – command l
Create audio track – command t
Create midi track – command shift t
Pencil tool – b
Rename – command r
Consolidate – command j
Scissor edit – command e
Select all – command a
Switch between arrangement & session windows – tab key
Play/Stop – space bar

You can find these and other commands in your
edit menu & create menu.

More Ableton basics

For more Ableton basics, refer to the video called
"101 Ableton tips"

Homework

1. Homework: practice recording audio & midi & using cut copy paste & duplicate. These will be essential for finishing songs quickly.