Sonic Studio SoundBlade

Most DAWs are said to 'do' mastering yet few actually ever master as their primary function. ANDY DAY encounters a mastering specific program that he describes as a Sonic Solutions for the naughties.

With several DAWs already in the market, it's refreshing to encounter a new one that is aimed very specifically at mastering with specialist features for the discipline. Mastering remains a much underrated process and while all DAWs or computer based systems offer 'mastering' features, such as plug-ins for EQ, dynamics and other signal processing to make mixes sound punchier or tighter, there are many other more technical aspects of the mastering process that are not really addressed by the average DAW.

That's where Sonic Studio's SoundBlade comes in. Apart from having some unique editing tools (more of which later) it has all the pre-mastering requirements, such as PQ editing, to create Red Book standard audio CDs.

Those of us old enough to remember, will recognise the name Sonic from the original Sonic Solutions DAW, which was the first DAW to use a computer and was the standard mastering and editing tool for most studios in its day. Time has moved on and people use more integrated solutions for music creation, like Logic and Pro Tools, but the need for dedicated, focused software for mastering is still there. Incidentally, the Sonic Solutions brand now concentrates on DVD authoring and Sonic Studio is the audio spin-off.

SoundBlade runs on Mac OSX 10.4.3 or newer on Power PC or Intel processor machines. There is a 1GHz minimum processor spec but that is really not such a big deal nowadays. Authorisation is done using an iLok and one really nice feature of SoundBlade is that you can use any OSX core audio interface, which opens up just about every audio interface on the market. Sonic Studio also makes its own high quality reference audio interface but it's good to know that its confidence in its software is so strong that it supports other interfaces too.

Sonic Studio breaks Red Book CD production into four distinct steps. These are: loading the audio tracks and assembling the audio; editing and processing the tracks; adjusting crossfades between tracks; and finally burning the project to a CD. I'll use these steps as the basis for this review and create a compilation CD while I'm at it.

Loading tracks is easy to do either from the File menu in the software or by dragging audio files directly into SoundBlade. All formats are supported including WAVE, BWF (including timecode), AIFF and SDII. If you have your finished mixes as separate files in a folder, you can select them in the finder, drag and drop holding the command key, and SoundBlade will automatically create CD tracks within the software (including PQ codes). This makes it really fast to create a compilation, but you still need to spend time in the next section to match the tracks sonically.

This stage is handled nicely too with straightforward editing and easy (or complex) crossfade creation. There's even support for VST and Audio Unit plug-ins so you can still apply your favourite mastering plug-ins at this stage. This is done in a mixer window with inserts similar to those of most other DAWs. Sonic Studio is responsible for the excellent NoNoise restoration process, which was the industry standard for many years, and while it's not included as standard it can be applied as a plug-in. Another very useful feature of SoundBlade that you encounter at this editing stage is AutoSpace, which puts a predefined space between all your tracks.

However, the real power of SoundBlade is in the PQ code editing and creation that generates the final TOC (table of contents) for the replication master. Some replicators can create these for you but professionals will always want to create their own. As mentioned earlier, they can be created automatically by the software when importing files or they can be inserted manually. As you create the PQ codes a DDP image is automatically created and this will be used by SoundBlade to generate your master CD. DDP, or Disc Description Protocol, is the standard method for delivering all the data and metadata needed for disc replication to a replicator. Unlike audio CDs, DDP file sets contain error–protected audio data plus all ancillary metadata.

DDP file sets, when used for replication, avoid the potential errors that can crop up between the time you create a replication master and the moment that a glass master is created during replication. CD-DA discs, or audio CDs, do not protect the audio data from errors since they assume that the CD player will hide or 'conceal' any errors during playback. This situation leads to errors in replication when recordable CDs, formatted as Red Book (audio) discs, are used as replication masters.

Finally, SoundBlade will then burn your completed disc and you're ready to deliver, knowing that you'll get exactly what you created when the CD glass master is created.

I found the software relatively easy to use, although being more of a Pro Tools user the interface is less 'clickable' than I am used to but that is just a personal preference. For the specialist pre-mastering and CD production facility, this software is unique. It's basically a Sonic Solutions for the naughties with the added benefits of not being hardware specific and supporting VST and AU plug-ins. If you're involved in mastering or still limping along with a NUBus-based Sonic Solutions then this is a no-brainer. ■

PROS	Dedicated PQ editing and creation — very focussed on CD mastering; Autospace for track spacing; not hardware specific; VST and AU plug-in support.
CONS	Priced at US$1495 it may limit mass market sales.

Contact
SONIC STUDIO, US
Website: www.sonicstudio.com