

Mackie Onyx Blackjack 2 x 2 USB Interface

(\$259.99 list, \$200 street) www.mackie.com

What: Minimalist, compact, self-powered 2 x 2 USB interface, with Mackie Onyx mic preamps and excellent specs—all wrapped in a rugged metal enclosure suitable for the road.

Why: The average laptop's audio capabilities are consumer grade, especially if said consumer doesn't know what good audio sounds like—so you need a quality interface for recording on the go. Blackjack subscribes to the philosophy of "you don't need a lot of features as long as the ones that *are* included do what you need."

Faraway Factor: Photos of the Onyx Blackjack don't prepare you for just how small it is—the front panel is 6-3/4" x 4". The rear panel is about 1-3/4" high (not including the front panel knobs, and a removable bar across the back that props the unit at a convenient angle). It's not super-light due to the sturdy metal construction; if you dropped it hard the knobs might snap off, but the guts would likely survive just fine.

Strengths: Mackie's Onyx preamps have a reputation for sound quality, and Blackjack offers two of them—as well as Cirrus Logic A/D/A converters with a quoted dynamic range spec of 114dB (A-weighted). The input jacks are Neutrik combo jacks, with front-panel switches to choose between line or hi-Z input for the 1/4" input; the gain runs up to +60dB on the mic in, and -15dB to +45dB for line/instrument ins. Phantom power is available, and unlike some older Mackie interfaces, delivers the full 48V (actually I tested 47.4—close enough!). There's an input monitor (mono/stereo) for zero-latency monitoring, phone jack with level control, and separate left and right balanced/unbalanced 1/4" outs with their own monitor control. As to operating systems, you're covered: Windows XP 32-bit, Vista/7 32- or 64-bit, and Mac OS X 10.4.11 – 10.6.4, including PPC processors back to the G4.

Tested with the RightMark Audio Analyzer, the swept sine wave frequency response is down 0.67dB at 20kHz, and essentially ruler-flat from 20Hz to 10kHz. The dynamic range and noise levels are actually better than quoted (see Figure 1),

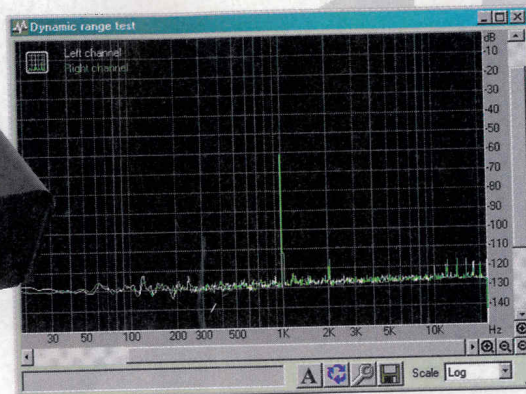


Fig. 1. The Onyx Blackjack's specs show that if anything, Mackie is underselling the level of quality.

and crosstalk goes from a high of -65dB at 5Hz to a low of better than -95dB at 4kHz. Intermodulation + noise (swept frequencies) is below -84dB at all frequencies. Bottom line: The audio performance is excellent.

Limitations: There's no MIDI I/O, which may or may not matter to you; given the size, I'm not sure where they would have put the jacks anyway. Phantom power is global, not per-input. Also, the Traktion bundle that comes with Blackjack is the Basic Bundle, not the Project Bundle or Ultimate Bundle.

Conclusions: The obvious comparison is to the Saffire 6 USB, but there are some differences. They both top out at a 48kHz sample rate, but the Blackjack is smaller, while the Saffire includes both MIDI I/O and four DJ-friendly phono jack outs. Software-wise, Blackjack comes with the full version of Traktion 3 and the Mackie suite of mixing and mastering tools, while Saffire 6 USB includes Ableton Live Lite 8 (arguably a more limited DAW than the full version of Traktion) but also, a variety of loops and samples. Both units spec out as audiophile-quality, but the Onyx Blackjack's angled panel scores big on ergonomics.

When size matters, the Onyx Blackjack is exemplary because it packs a lot into a very small package—and there's no denying the audio quality. Onyx Blackjack proves that even when you gravitate to the portable/low end of a line, you're *still* getting performance that runs circles around the very best interfaces of not too long ago.

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