

Mackie Onyx Satellite

It's one of the coolest implementations of fairly commonly encountered functionality that Mackie has uniquely packaged together and presented. **ROB JAMES** can't decide whether it's two-in-one or one-in-two but he still wouldn't want to drop it on his foot.



FIREWIRE PROMISED a lot for audio and video applications, not forgetting its uses as a general peripheral interface and networking interconnect. After initial hiccups, video is now mostly sorted as are external hard drives, audio not for the first time, has taken a lot longer. Early implementations were flakey to say the least and even thoroughly laudable attempts such as MLAN are not without snags. Part of the problem is that the FireWire interface in PCs uses the PCI bus, which is already a very busy highway. The architecture of the motherboard and the chipset used in the FireWire interface directly impacts on the success or failure of FireWire as a real-time audio interface. Against this background products with under-developed drivers and their own inherent problems have not helped the FireWire cause. The good news is there are signs of real progress and at highly attractive price points.

Mackie regularly delivers a lot of performance for a modest asking price and Onyx Satellite continues this tradition. For an almost unbelievable US list of \$500 you get two boxes — a mobile recording interface, primarily intended to be used with a laptop, and a docking station that significantly adds to the functionality with six output channels and versatile connections. Two sets of speakers, two pairs of headphones and up to 8 sources can be simultaneously connected, although there are only two concurrent input channels.

Construction immediately inspires confidence. Part one, the Pod, is a simple, no-nonsense, two-channel recording and monitoring box intended for use 'in the field'. The case, built into a massive aluminium extrusion shell with steel front and back plates, would support the proverbial brick outbuilding (*Frequently located in the field. Ed*). I once broke a toe dropping something less substantial onto my foot while filming. Not so sure that the knobs would survive though. Part two, the Base Station, is similarly butch and the Pod slides into a massive slot and docks via a three-row connector. Satellite Pod and Base Station can be powered

directly from FireWire (assuming the computer has a 6-pin FireWire connector), or from the 12V DC wall-wart included in the box along with a less than generous 1m FireWire cable and handy 6-pin to 4-pin adapter.



Installation is reasonably straightforward. For Mac users it's plug-and-play but Windows whines about installing an unsigned driver as usual. More worryingly, despite following the instructions to the letter, i.e. not plugging the Satellite in until requested to do so by the installer, the Windows 'found new hardware' dialogue appeared and, when installation was complete, there was an error message suggesting the driver might not be correctly installed although in fact it was. WDM, GSIF, ASIO and Core Audio drivers are included.

Onyx Satellite ships with a fully-featured copy of Mackie's Traktion 2 music production software with mixing and mastering tools that I also installed but, in the interests of a level playing field, elected to test with Wavelab. After selecting the Satellite ASIO driver it just works. An Onyx Satellite Control Panel is installed along with the driver. Just two adjustments are possible — sample rate (44.1, 48, 88.2 or 96kHz) and latency i.e. buffer size. With external power Satellite can also be used standalone for monitoring the inputs without turning on the computer.

Two Neutrik Combo inputs on the Pod back panel deal with microphones or line with instrument options for each, selectable via buttons on the front panel.

Two jacks provide monitor out, a single 6-pin FireWire connects to the computer and a coaxial power connector caters for laptops that cannot supply power over FireWire. On the front, two pots set input level with four signal level LEDs apiece. These light at -40, -20, -10 and Overload. 48V phantom powering can be imposed on both mic inputs by pressing a button, which also lights an indicator LED. Satellite uses buttons from the Mackie parts bin. These small round items are pleasing in use and are bi-coloured such that when they are 'up' a white ring shows. In theory this obviates the need for LED indicators. In practice, it can be quite difficult to tell if they are up or down from normal viewing angles.

The first output volume pot influences the Control Room outputs and the Phones 1 front panel socket while the second controls the Phones 2 circuit. Around the back of the Base Station the Pod connections are expanded with two pairs of Control Room outputs, outputs 3 to 6, Mic XLR, Instrument and Line 1&2 jacks for each of the two input channels along with an insert. On the front panel under the Pod are Mic, Instrument, Line 1 and Line 2 select buttons. These are joined by a To Phones button for talkback to Phones/Control Room outputs, a talkback volume pot and a To DAW button that routes talkback to the DAW source channels, 1&2.

Then comes Source Select for the Control Room outputs, default DAW, down equals inputs routed to the monitoring. The Control Room Level pot is followed by an A/B output select button and the 1/2, 1/6 select switch. When this is up the control room level control adjusts the level of Control Room outputs (1/2) on the rear of the Base Station. When pressed, all six outputs are adjusted. Fixed output level is nominal +4dBu, +18dBu max and a talkback mic is built-in. Last on the right is a sturdy power switch.

This Onyx is a somewhat enigmatic creature. When the Pod is docked in the Base Station it is one chunky beast that has little in common with a gazelle. On the plus side, it certainly isn't going to trot off your desk; on the minus side it occupies a fair bit of space, especially vertically. The Onyx mic amps are far from shabby along with their AKM 24-bit, 96kHz converters and the utility of taking such a relatively small and robust box on location with a laptop for stereo recording is undeniable.

Once the Pod is docked, the extra I-O and studio facilities are most welcome and allow for working in 5.1. For musicians with a laptop and a studio computer there are obvious attractions not least is that you don't have to dismantle your mixing set-up to go off recording. Conversely, there is no digital I-O or MIDI interface. In many situations, where the product will be a CD-R or just a file, the lack of digital I-O will be irrelevant. The absence of MIDI seems a stranger omission in a device so clearly aimed at music recording. As a one-stop solution for recording stereo on a laptop followed by mixing back at base, Onyx is both attractive and amazingly affordable. ■

PROS

Good sound; value for money; well thought out for convenience; an innovative two-in-one solution; from a quick look, the Traktion 2 software is a considerable bonus.

CONS

Looks — love it or hate it; no MIDI or digital I-O; nothing else at this price.

Contact

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