



Mackie Onyx Satellite



There are a lot of choices when it comes to USB and FireWire mic preamps these days; the price points vary from amazingly inexpensive, with all the quality of something that should be sold at Radio Shack (as they no longer exist in Canada it's much easier to be mean to them), all the way up to audiophile quality systems that record a surprising number of vocals that we hear on current recordings. With Mackie entering the fray, you'd like to think they had a little something up their sleeve as they don't seem to miss the mark very often.

First Impressions

Upon opening the box for the Onyx Satellite – the heavy box, I found (easily) the best built FireWire mic pre I have ever come across. Yes, it can double as a paper weight, door stop, and possibly even a wrecking ball. This device was built to be portable; but beyond that, it really is built to survive abuse – FULL MARKS! I hate having to baby gear, anyone who has seen my Kurzweil PC 82 keyboard (didn't know they made an 82 note keyboard?) knows that I'll take function over form any day, and my gear tends to take a beating because my head is thinking about function. I am personally not someone that makes a lot of stereo location recordings, but if I did, this piece of gear is made for travel.

I have always been a fan of Mackie gear. Having done my own personal "shoot-out" of FireWire mic preamps for my own studio, value for money, I like the Onyx preamps. Without sounding like some questionable wine connoisseur ... no, I have never thought that Mackie mic pres sounded big and warm; rather, I have always liked the fact that they were quiet and sounded "accurate". There are certain mic pres that everyone likes for their "colour". Mackie has never really fit into that. For me, quiet and able to capture transient dynamics has always been more important. There are all sorts of physical modelling plug-ins that can take well-recorded data and manipulate it into sounding more "colourful". For my money, (especially in the value for money category) accuracy is much more important.

So What Is The Deal With This Satellite Thing?

Okay, here's the deal: The Onyx Satellite is a 2-channel mic pre that slots into a base unit that you keep at your home studio. When in its base unit, it offers you a talkback mic,

the option of output to two sets of monitors (VERY cool), a button that can switch between stereo output and 5.1 surround output (also very cool) and several input choices per channel. The satellite can be pulled from this unit and offers you two mic or line ins that can be plugged into your laptop. Basically, the idea is that you pay for a couple of good mic preamps and A to Ds and then get a travelling rig and a home rig with a bunch of I/O options. If you are setting up a surround sound monitoring system this is a VERY cool little unit that can go portable in an instant. If all you ever do is plug in your guitar and the odd mic and monitor on headphones, the plusses of this system might be wasted.

These Are A Few Of My Favourite Things:

You can output to your monitors without having to have your computer turned on; it works like a line mixer.

You can permanently plug in several different instruments, or insert processors (tube compressors come to mind) and not have to re-patch to go record somewhere else.

Even if I am only going to record at my buddy's house, I like to listen on monitors instead of having my ears squished by headphones; this means I want the vocalist in another room. Microphones are on balanced cables so that you can take advantage of running them some distance, having a talk back mic is a very nice touch ... rather than yelling through the walls at buddy's house.

I did mention that this is the best built desktop recording device in the history of ... well ... desktop recording devices.

Value for money, the Mackie Onyx mic pres are excellent!

It can be bus powered (this means it can run off your computer's power) or run on a 12 V wall wart.

Comes with a solid piece of recording software – Traktion 2.

What's Missing?

There is no internal effects processor; if you are plugging in a guitar and want distortion or your vocalist wants to hear reverb, you are at the mercy of the dreaded latency of your computer.

I would personally love this system with four mic pres and a two channel removable satellite. For me, this would make more sense to have a stereo mic, for perhaps a piano and one for a vocal. The FireWire systems tend to be multi-track recorders in comparison to their USB counterparts (for reasons that I don't actually understand). It would be nice to have a base station that I could multi-track my small band with, and then pull two channels to go and do a location recording.

In Conclusion

Excellent preamps (value for money), outstanding build quality, the satellite idea might not be for everyone, and having to use effects with latency from the computer may be a drawback for some, but for me, I think this is an excellent little recording system.

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