



# MACKIE Onyx Satellite

Docking stations used to be only for NASA and the Soviets, but Mackie's new Onyx Satellite makes earthly collaborations a space-age reality. *FM's* Jason Blum explores.

**+** For quite some time Mackie has circled the DAW business, offering products that extend and enhance the capabilities of modern digital recorders like the Mackie Control, d8b digital mixing consoles and a wide range of studio monitors. It isn't until the past couple of years, though, that they've tackled the computer recording bull by the horns and offered audio interfaces and multitrack software. Their latest product, the Onyx Satellite, is a perfect example of Mackie's thrust into the crowded entry-level audio interface market.

The Onyx Satellite is a somewhat ungainly beast, a unit clearly designed to sit front and center on the studio desktop, not tucked away in a rack behind the scenes. The Satellite's most striking feature is its two-piece design: a tabletop base station unit serves as a docking station for a smaller "pod," a two-channel audio interface that can be removed and used for field recording.

Looking at the Onyx Satellite's dockable design, I had to wonder

why it's taken so long for someone to come up with this. Laptop manufacturers have been producing docking stations for years; why not extend the same concept into the audio realm? Plenty of companies make portable audio interfaces that are lightweight and versatile, but none have so elegantly addressed the needs of project studio users who can't justify the expense associated with two separate pieces of gear. The Satellite's two-piece approach is

an innovative and unique solution that's long overdue.

#### GROUND CONTROL

The Onyx Satellite's heftier half is the base station, a table top unit that sports an impressive array of buttons and switches along with a healthy dose of analog I/O on the back panel. The Satellite is only a two input interface, but each channel sports four separate jacks—two Neutrik brand XLR connectors offer a pristine path

#### THE TIP SHEET

**LIST PRICE \$519**

**CONTACT** Mackie.com

**KEY FEATURES** Innovative two-piece "docking" design; Onyx mic preamps; rugged metal casing; insert jacks.

#### SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

OS X 10.3.9

PC Windows XP SP2

into the Satellite's mic preamps, and three additional 1/4-inch jacks provide connectivity for multiple sources.

You might think that these surplus jacks mean more input sources for your DAW, but sadly, this is not the case. The extra inputs are merely additional connectors that let you hook up multiple sources so you don't need to patch and re-patch cables when you want to record a different piece of gear. Essentially,

they're hardwired "Y" adapters. The Onyx Satellite only offers two inputs to host applications regardless of which jacks are in use. It's misleading at first glance, but in small studio situations it's a convenient feature. Instead of fumbling for plugs when you want to swap sources, you can simply select which input jacks are active using pushbuttons on the front of the base station.

Each input channel also sports one insert jack—seldom seen on computer audio interfaces—offering an easy way to route signal through compressors, EQs or other outboard processing gear before it hits the Satellite's A/D converters. Rounding out the base station's features are six 1/4-inch outputs, a FireWire jack for host connectivity, volume knob for control room monitors and a talkback section that keeps you in touch with singers or session players without yelling through headphones.

The base station provides plenty of analog inputs for stationary studios, but the brains of the Onyx Satellite lie in the removable pod—in fact, the base station won't work without it. At just a hair under two pounds and roughly a foot long by an inch deep the pod is lightweight and easy to pack for transport, and its rugged metal casing looks like it could see the wrong side of a shotgun and still keep on ticking.

The pod packs a somewhat smaller complement of jacks and controls than the base station, but its functionality is nearly identical. The pod is also a two-channel, bus powered FireWire interface with Onyx-series preamps on both channels. Two headphone jacks are provided along with a pair of 1/4-inch outputs for monitors, and phantom power ensures compatibility with condenser microphones. If you're a PC user, keep in mind that you'll need to pack the pod's power adapter for mobile use—PC laptops lack the six-pin FireWire connectors required to provide power over the FireWire cable.

Using the pod with the base station is simple; just drop the pod in the slot and it's ready to rock. The reverse is true when you're ready to hit the road. There are no

buttons to push, levers to flip or procedures to follow. It's instant gratification, grab-and-go. I did notice some loud and unpleasant popping from my monitors on occasion while removing the pod, but with a little practice I found that swiftly undocking it prevented this behavior. Nonetheless, some sort of automatic mute feature would be nice to prevent any potential damage to monitors.

I've always held Mackie in high regard when it comes to sound quality, and the Onyx Satellite doesn't disappoint, offering pristine I/O that sounds far superior to most other units in the same price range. The critically acclaimed Onyx preamps are pulled straight from Mackie's big mixing consoles and sound ultra-clean, detailed and quiet, allowing the true sonic character of your source material to really shine through.

The Onyx Satellite extends this precision into the digital realm with support for bit and sample rates up to 24-bit/96kHz. A/D converters from AKM ensure that every detail captured by the Onyx preamps is faithfully replicated, and the end result is a pristine digital recording that retains all of the warmth, openness and presence of the original performance.

Output stages are equally clean. True to classic Mackie form, there's a frightening amount of gain on the control room and headphone outputs, and I never found it necessary to nudge the volume far from the lowest setting. Both the pod and base station sound equally good, so there's no need to worry that you're compromising sound quality by leaving the "big boy" at home.

#### SOFT AND SIMPLE

Unlike most other audio interfaces, the Satellite offers little in the way of driver features. The unit's software control panel keeps it simple by providing control over nothing more than sample rate and buffer size. Any routing or alternate input selection must be done from the Satellite's base station. Standard sample rates from 44.1 to 96kHz are available, along with five buffer sizes from 128 to 2048 samples.

The driver package might be a no-frills affair, but the bundled Tracktion software is another case entirely. We've covered Tracktion in exhaustive detail previously so I won't dig too deep here, but it's worth noting that its inclusion with Onyx Satellite makes the whole package a potential one-stop-shop for digital recording and mixing. Tracktion hasn't been around too long and as a result doesn't have the entrenched, rabid user base that others sequencers like Cubase and Logic enjoy, but nonetheless it's an outstanding program that includes many of the same features. If you aren't already committed to another DAW, a free copy of Tracktion just might tip the scales in the Onyx Satellite's favor.

#### THE FINAL MIX

Mackie always delivers quality gear and the Onyx Satellite is no exception to the rule. The unit's specs are top notch and it delivers great sound, thanks in large part to Mackie's Onyx preamps and quality AKM converters. However, I found it lacking in areas of key importance for serious studio work—the Onyx Satellite offers no digital I/O, word clock or host-based software mixing features, with only a bare minimum of options adjustable from a host PC. The Satellite is best suited for small studios that primarily record analog sources like vocals, guitars and the occasional outboard synth.

While permanent installations will be better served sticking with a less portable device that satisfies a broader range of needs, anyone who moves from studio sessions to field recording on a regular basis will love the Satellite's grab-and-go design. The portable pod is solidly constructed, easy to tuck into a backpack or messenger bag and has just enough I/O to do quick and dirty tracking through the pod's stellar Onyx series preamps. If you don't need digital I/O and are looking for a portable, analog-centric recording solution that's equally at home on the road or in the studio, the Onyx Satellite delivers quality sound at a reasonable price. **fm**

#### WHY SHOULD YOU BUY IT?

If you need a good digital audio I/O that's equally at home in the studio or in the field, the Onyx Satellite is an out-of-this-world gem.

#### ALTERNATIVES



#### Mark Of The Unicorn Traveler

Motu.com

If you need a full-fledged studio interface on the go, MOTU's Traveler provides 20 channels of I/O, AES/EBU digital, word clock and more all in a compact and portable package.

List Price: \$895



#### Tapco Link USB

Tapco.com

For no-frills field recording, this two-channel bus powered USB interface sports a rugged, lightweight frame with a tiny footprint that fits easily in tight quarters.

List Price: \$199.99