

GIVE IT A TWIST > The Mackie Control C4 turns complex plug-ins and virtual instruments into a tactile affair. Users have access to as many as 32 separate parameters without the need to switch banks.

LABEL MAKER > The unit includes a virtual scribble strip for each row of encoders, so users will never lose track of where they are within a given plug-in or instrument.



AN EASY FIT > Built with the same aesthetic sensibilities, the Control C4 is a natural complement to the Mackie Control Universal. The C4 will, however, work just fine on its own.

MACKIE CONTROL C4

FOR ONCE, IT'S COOL TO BE A KNOB

BY JASON SCOTT ALEXANDER

> You know, it's a strange phenomenon. Nearly as perverse as the two-decade-old Mac user-versus-PC user rivalry has become, the age of the digital audio workstation has further divided musicians into two new well-entrenched legions of fanatics: the mouse mixer and the fader mixer. And, boy, are they ever hardcore about it! Mouse mixers will proudly sit for hours on end, their rodents under death grip, meticulously clicking, dragging, circling, zooming, minimizing and otherwise going about their business with seemingly effortless flight. The true die-hards will go so far as to suggest that mouse mixing is the only method they'd ever use, oftentimes scoffing at the notion that faders and knobs could make the process faster and more efficient, fun and enjoyable—possibly even more musical. That is precisely the argument you'll hear from the fader-mixer crowd. Call it old school versus new school, left brain versus right brain, but the bottom line is that DAW software has given today's musicians an overwhelming array of new possibilities, and with them come more options, more windows, more buttons to click on and more dials to turn.

The problem with most control surfaces, though, is their distinct lack of knobs. The common compromise made by manufacturers in the past has been to offer a single knob at the top of each channel to act primarily as a pan pot and pull double duty as an assignable controller to a wrath of EQ, busing, effects—plug-in and virtual-instrument parameters. And it's not just a budget-console thing—even high-end control surfaces and digital mixers from those big UK outfits have been slim on knob provisions. So leave it to Mackie to once again break away from the middle ground and offer something so incredibly practical as

PRODUCT SUMMARY

MACKIE

CONTROL C4 > \$1,299

Pros: Lots of knobs. Backlit LCD scribble strips. Universal, software-programmable interface. Performs equally well on its own and in conjunction with MCU, XT and third-party surfaces. Multiple C4s may be used together. User-updatable firmware.

Cons: Limited DAW-application support. Scope of function dependent upon profile implementation of third-party developers.

Contact: www.mackie.com

the Control C4, a dedicated DSP plug-in and virtual instrument controller with all the universal appeal of its family heritage.

THE RUN UP

The Control C4 has led a rather interesting product life. When it was first announced in March 2003, Mackie made more than a few DAW users salivate at the thought of owning a control surface capable of providing knob-per-function command of plug-ins and virtual instruments. Marketed as the knob-laden expansion to its already-popular Mackie Control line, the C4 surely had a vast target audience champing at the bit to slap down their credit cards; unfortunately, it never really got off the ground commercially. Put rather bluntly, no software providers supported it. Essentially a "dumb box," the C4 sat quietly, waiting for support from the DAW world.

Shortly thereafter, Mackie made a crucial and strategic game play by introducing the one-control-surface-for-all-applications concept with the release of the Mackie Control Universal. The MCU, as it's often called, was the final step in bringing the company's original Mackie Control and XT fader-pack expanders in line with all major application types. Running on version 2.1 firmware, it added critical support for Logic Control mode, the protocol of Logic Audio's proprietary control-surface technol-

ogy, coincidentally designed and manufactured under license by Mackie. By bringing then Emagic (now Apple) into the fold, Mackie was aligned with a strong strategic software partner that would prove eager in supporting the MCU line, including the C4. Not surprisingly, Apple's late-September 2004 release of Logic Pro 7—which included emblazoned support—prompted Mackie to quickly rerelease the Control C4 exactly one month later at AES 2004 in San Francisco.

The apparent charm of the C4 is easy to understand. Even an ardent mouse mixer would have to agree that multiple displays and corresponding knobs for fingertip access of as many as 32 parameters of your choice is pretty hard to resist. Furthermore, owners of standard control surfaces and fader packs will surely applaud eliminating the need to bank switch in order to access parameter-rich soft synths and plug-ins. And designed to work independently or in concert with Mackie or third-party controllers, the C4 is about as universal as you can get.

I became the privileged first to receive a C4 for review, straight from the Mackie warehouse. The company also kindly sent along an MCU and an XT expander so that I could evaluate the C4 in conjunction with the entire control-surface system. My test system was an Apple Mac G5/dual 2GHz running

Logic Pro 7 in Mac OS 10.3.5 with an Emagic Unit8 MKII acting as the USB MIDI interface to the tactile controllers. At the time of writing, only Logic Pro 7 was available to test the C4, but early word from Cakewalk is that it hopes to have a C4 profile plug-in ready for Sonar 4 Producer and Studio editions by the time you read this. Mackie also reports that the forthcoming Tracktion 2.0 will include support for the C4.

Incidentally, it seems as though the necessity to be current with your applications and OS will be an unavoidable prerequisite should you wish to run the C4. As an example for Logic users, nothing short of a full paid upgrade to Logic Pro 7—which, in turn, requires you to be updated to at least Mac OS 10.3—will allow you to awaken the C4. Also worth noting for users of Pro Tools and other programs that support the legacy Mackie HUI standard is that the C4 is not at all compliant with HUI mode, and just because your DAW supports Mackie or Logic Control profiles doesn't mean it supports the C4. Rather, the C4 is a completely independent piece of hardware for which your software vendor will have to jump onboard with a supporting profile.

GETTING CONNECTED

Perhaps it's a sign of a well-thought-out technology or perhaps it's like the old saying goes, "The

REVIEW > CONTROL C4



CONTROL IN, CONTROL OUT > The Control C4 requires only a single MIDI In and Out connection to be fully functional. The unit, however, does mandate that those be dedicated ports, making a multipoint MIDI interface a requirement for most users.

simplest of ideas are often the best," but installing the C4 in Logic Pro 7 is about as stupid-easy as it comes. Just like on the MCU and the XT, the C4's back panel sports single MIDI In and MIDI Out ports for bidirectional communication with the host software. Each Mackie device sends and receives active sensing data on its own set of MIDI ports, requiring you to dedicate a pair of ports on your MIDI interface for every MCU, Extender or C4 in your setup. Once you've hooked up the MIDI cables, it's a simple matter of booting up Logic and powering on the C4; Logic subsequently detects the C4's presence, assigns it the newly extended Logic Control profile and automatically sets its MIDI ports. The C4's scribble strips blink and come alive

with text, and the V-Pot indicators jump to show their positions within Logic. You're good to go. Well, almost—there are a few customization choices that you should consider first to make working with the C4 most enjoyable.

When first added, the C4 is placed by default into the same Control Surface Group as any present MCU or XT, essentially acting in series with, and as an 8-channel extension to, the group. This, however, isn't the most advantageous way of using the C4. Instead, it's recommended in the Logic manual to assign the C4 its own Control Surface Group, as this allows you to edit instruments and plug-ins and independently conduct your mixing on the MCU or other control surfaces. To do so, call up Logic Pro >

Preferences > Control Surfaces > Setup, where you'll see a visual overview of your current control-surface topology. Click and drag the C4's icon from beside the MCU and XT to any location below them, and it will take on life as its own Control Surface Group. Now, when you click on the C4 icon to select it, the Parameters menu that appears to the left of the Setup window displays numerous customizing options. I highly recommend leaving these as-is until you get well-acquainted with the C4's operation, but I do suggest changing the C4's display mode from Name to Value. This way, the C4 will always display the values of parameters you call up, no matter how you choose to view your MCU and XT during a session.

Speaking of manuals, the C4 ships with nothing more than a simple four-page "Quick-Start" pamphlet that discusses even less about getting set up than what I've written here. It would seem as though Mackie is leaving the writing of detailed operations manuals up to each individual software vendor. Admittedly, it's not Mackie's responsibility to document third-party implementations, given the C4's universal blank-canvas nature. Fortunately, Apple has done an admirable job in covering all aspects of the C4's Logic 7 operability in a highly detailed installation and operations guide; I strongly recommend reading the pertinent sections of the Logic Control Surfaces Info PDF, which comes on Logic's install disc or is available for download from Mackie's C4 home page. There, you'll also be able to watch for any firmware updates (current ROM 1.02) that can be sent to the C4 via MIDI in Boot Loader mode. (I wasn't able to get my hands on any preliminary Sonar literature to compare content and thoroughness.)

ROWS OF FUN

As its name implies, the C4 features four rows of control, each comprising a full-size scribble strip LCD display and eight corresponding V-Pot knobs that, together, provide instant access to as many as 32 software parameters. Beneath the bottom row is an array of function and navigation buttons that allow you to select the arrangement of parameters and how they show up on the scribble strips.

Physically, the C4's dimensions are exactly the same as that of the XT, approximately 10 inches wide by 17.5 inches deep by 3.75 inches high at the rear. The unit I received for review was part of Mackie's original C4 stock, circa 2003, from which they're currently working. Although these units feature dark-gray plastic armrests and bridges to match those on the old Mackie Control, C4s with light-gray plastic matching that of the MCU and the Emagic-branded Logic Control units will begin shipping later this year. But it's only a cosmetic difference and a minute one at that—functionally, they're identical and work together just fine. The V-Pots are direct descendants of the MCU and XT, having the same great responsive feel and dual-functionality; they act as endless-rotation soft knobs with helpful detents and, when given a gentle push, become integrated V-Select switches providing an affirmative click on the way down. In both cases, the current value or status is displayed graphically via a surrounding ring of rectangular red LEDs, as well as textually on the LCDs, which are all 2x55-character displays with blue backlighting.

I did find that the angle of the C4's front panel is just shallow enough to make reading the LCDs in the bottom three rows challenging under certain seating and unit placement conditions. Although

the first row is comfortably angled in the banked Meter Bridge, the three remaining strips are flush-mounted to the controller's surface, which, when placed at a typical arm's length and to the right of the central mix position, forces you to sit erect and lean over or, worse, stand up to view them clearly and legibly. I would prefer to see a contrast control for each scribble strip or perhaps a recessed angular placement within the chassis, either of which would correct this situation.

TWIST AND TURN

In operation, the C4 took some initial getting used to as it's not the most intuitive device straight out of the box—nothing that a few hours of toying with it didn't cure, though. For example, I had to futz around with the Track and Parameter navigation buttons quite a while before I came to grips with how they interact with the myriad parameter depths and how they update the LCDs. I also learned to pay close attention to the subtle differences between the C4 and the MCU's silkscreen definitions. For one, the C4's Bank- and Single-switch buttons affect plug-in parameters, not channels. They also act as page flips rather than follow the convention of using the left/right navigation diamond buttons, as on the MCU. Instead, the C4's navigation diamond, as I call it, shifts you from channel strip to channel strip using the Track L/R button pairing and shifts from currently edited EQ, send or insert using the Slot Up/Down pair (which, incidentally, you press up for lower slot numbers and down for larger slot numbers). But once I understood the underlying concept that the C4 acts much like a magnifying lens used to zoom in on specific mix functions or parameter families, the implementation made a lot of sense.

Typically, when you open a new project in Logic, the C4 sets its displays for Multi Channel overview mode. There, all track objects from Logic's Arrange page are represented by a V-Pot/V-Select, providing a quick-fix tool for parameters such as fader, pan, track mode, input, output, automation mode, group and displayed automation selection across 32 channels at a time. Various Multi Channel edit views are also available for pan/surround, EQ, plug-ins, instruments and so on. In EQ Multi Channel view, for example, EQ is displayed as a single band across eight channels at a time, with row 1 (V-Pots/V-Selects 1 through 8) representing EQ-band bypass on/off, row 2 (V-Pots/V-Selects 9 through 16) representing band frequency, row 3 representing gain/slope, and Q factor across row 4. You use the up and down arrows to select the EQ band that you wish to work on.

It's only once you start applying Virtual Overlays, though, that things really start to cook and become interesting. Pressing the Channel Strip Overlay button, for instance, allows you to focus in and give

detailed input on a single channel's parameters. Row 1 edits the frequency and gain of bands 3 through 6 (the parametric bands) on Logic's channel EQ; row 2 displays channel-insert slots 1 through 8; row 3 displays the destinations for aux sends 1 through 8; and the final row contains miscellaneous switching and editing parameters depending on the channel type. Pressing a V-Select on an insert plug-in or virtual instrument will bring up the respective plug-in's edit window on your computer screen as well as a full four-row-deep view of the plug-in's available edit parameters on the C4. Plug-ins with more than 32 parameters are simply paged across—

The C4 fits
an MCU,
a Logic Control or
an XT system like a
glove, with a
natural complement
and extension of
functionality.

marvelous! Also in Channel Strip Overlay mode, you can call up highly detailed Pan/Surround, EQ and Aux Sends Edit views. In this view, a channel EQ shows up in its entirety, eight bands across, and, once again, a parameter on each row. Aux sends display their destination, level, position and mute status. A handy Split Edit button in the bottom-left corner of the C4's panel allows you to edit two separate sections of a plug-in or virtual instrument, or even two different ones, simultaneously.

The Marker Overlay button takes you to an incredibly useful page where you can store upward of 30 song-position markers. With their names (as entered in Logic) appearing above V-Selects 1 through 30, you can instantly tap your way to precise positions and even create and delete markers on the fly using V-Selects 31 and 32. The fourth and final Virtual Overlay mode provides 32 single-button-push general and administrative functions, ranging from selecting various edit tools to toggling the grid display in Logic's arrange windows to setting all-channels mute/solo, resetting "over" meters and so forth.


The MIDI response with Logic was virtually flawless. I experienced a few hiccups along the way, to be sure, but none that I could duplicate, and none severely affected my work flow or caused any major problems. Apple has done a fine job in its inaugural C4 profile, but I did spot a few abnormalities and

omissions. For one, you don't seem to be able to instantiate a channel EQ from the C4; either you have to call it up onscreen first, using your mouse, or you can insert a channel EQ plug-in from the Inserts page, but I'd prefer to see a simple fingertap V-Select switch in the EQ row of the Channel Strip Overlay page. Likewise, I'd love to see both individual and bypass-all buttons provided on the Inserts row and Inserts edit-view pages. The Aux Sends Overlay provides Active/Muted toggles on every channel send, so why not do the same for Inserts? It's almost criminal not to have this function implemented!

SYSTEM COMPLETE

During a session, the first thing you'll notice about the C4 is increased work flow and a distinct sense that everything is at your fingertips—because it is! Mackie Control Universal and Logic Control owners who have become frustrated by all of the bank switching that's necessary to perform even the simplest of plug-in edits and EQ tweaks will rejoice at the smorgasbord of parameter options that the C4 lays out. There's no question that the four LCDs and LED rings around each V-Pot added significantly to the C4's sticker price, and some will argue that \$1,299 is out of their range for an ancillary piece of gear. Funny, after using the C4 on a number of mix sessions, I can't imagine calling it ancillary; it rightly deserves to be the centerpiece of any serious DAW musician's mix desk.

The C4 fits an MCU, a Logic Control or an XT system like a glove, with a natural complement and extension of functionality. When you consider the addition of Mackie's also recently announced Big Knob studio-monitor controller and talkback box, you have a truly complete DAW control solution. Also very cool is that the Control C4 can be used with a laptop as part of a mobile studio or live-performance rig. A wide variety of USB and FireWire MIDI devices can interface the Control C4 with your Mac PowerBook, and because the unit ships with a universal external AC adapter for its power supply, it can be used in any country around the world.

None of my relatively minor gripes should take away from the fact that Mackie has created one hell of a useful production tool in the C4. There is a definite rhythm to how the C4 wants to interact with your software, and once you find that flow, it can be a speedy and bountiful assistant. No, it won't replace the mouse and keyboard entirely, and you'll likely still wish to use your mouse in tandem with the C4 on some plug-ins and virtual instruments. My overall impression of the C4, though, is, "Where have you been all my DAW-gone life?" Hopefully, more software developers will jump onboard the Mackie train in coming months so that everyone can be cool and be a knob in the studio. 

CONTINUED ON PAGE 104