



## Mackie Blackbird 16x16 FireWire Interface

Flexible I/O, headroom, and eight transparent preamps

BY CRAIG ANDERTON

LET'S GET real: There are a lot of audio interfaces, and if you can't find one that precisely fits your needs, you probably aren't looking hard enough. So where does the Blackbird fit in?

No one interface has it all. Some might have exceptionally low noise but a bit more THD than others, while some have superior crosstalk but maybe slightly more intermodulation distortion. These differences tend to be quantitative, not qualitative, and audible differences are subtle at most.

Blackbird's main asset is its eight Onyx preamps. These preamps have a great rep, but when you put numbers on them, low noise and extremely low intermodulation distortion stand out. Subjectively, these are not "character" preamps, but follow the "straight wire with gain" philosophy. Gain goes up to +60dB, and all inputs are true Neutrik combo jacks that accommodate XLR or 1/4-inch balanced/unbalanced inputs.

**More than Mics** You won't find bells and whistles like onboard reverb or processing. Instead, Mackie has clearly gone for "industrial strength" features like word clock I/O, ADAT optical I/O (eight channels that support the same sample rates as the analog inputs—44.1/48/8.2/96kHz—with dual SMUX ports for the higher sample rates), three stereo outs (Main, Mon, and Alt), dual FireWire ports, dual headphone outs,

low latency (64 samples with ASIO/64-bit Windows 7), and of course, direct monitoring. Curiously, the optical ports can't be used for S/PDIF, and there are no coaxial S/PDIF jacks.

The first two preamps are "special" inputs. They're front-panel and switchable among mic, line, and hi-Z for guitar; they also have a low-cut filter (-18dB/octave with a cutoff of 75Hz) and rear-panel TRS insert jacks. The remaining six inputs are rear-panel combo jacks with no additional features.

Phantom power is switchable in two groups: inputs 1+2, or 3-8. This is the one area where there's an obvious compromise, as you can't initiate phantom on individual channels, or even each channel pair.

As to construction, the 1U chassis is all-metal, and it's built like a tank. If you dropped it, I think the main damage would be cosmetic (e.g., a scratch or dent). Also, the software matrix mixer GUI (which you need to download from the Mackie site) is full-featured—it allows linking, provides flexible direct monitoring with eight individual mixes, indicates peaks and levels, and much more. It also looks like a Mackie mixer, which is a cute touch.

Finally, if you need expansion, the company claims it's possible to cascade four units on both Mac and Windows platforms—so for less than \$1K street price, you can have 16 Onyx pres for complex acoustic sessions.

**Conclusions** I've been impressed with Mackie's Onyx interfaces since the Onyx 400F hit the world several years ago; the mic preamps aren't just hype. If you're looking for "color" you're in the wrong place, but if transparency and headroom are what matters, you'll be very pleased with the Onyx design. Add in the other pro-oriented features, and the result is a solid, utilitarian, no-nonsense interface that just sits there and does its job—unobtrusively and professionally. ■



### SUMMARY

**STRENGTHS:** Excellent mic preamps. Eight ADAT channels that also work at 88.2/96kHz. Very useful matrix mixer software. Excellent build quality. Dual FireWire ports. Clean, obvious ergonomics. Cascade up to four units on Mac or Windows.

**LIMITATIONS:** Phantom power can't be enabled for individual channels or each channel pair (you can do channels 1+2 and/or channels 3-8). No S/PDIF I/O.

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