

Mackie Onyx Blackbird

Affordable FireWire Interface With High-End Features

Following the successful launch of its Onyx-i mixer series, Mackie now expands its Onyx Series with the Onyx Blackjack and Onyx Blackbird recording interfaces. Onyx Blackjack is a desktop 2x2 24-bit/48kHz unit with USB output. I was more interested in the single-rackspace Onyx Blackbird, a 16x16 24-bit/96kHz unit with eight Onyx mic preamps, 8-in/8-out ADAT, and word clock I/O and FireWire output. Blackbird can be used either stand-alone (connected directly to any device with 44.1- or 48kHz ADAT Lightpipe or S/MUX II at up to 96 kHz) or via FireWire to a PC- or Mac-based DAW. Unlike Mackie's Onyx-i mixer series, Onyx Blackbird doesn't support M-Powered Pro Tools, although the interface works with most other recording apps, including SONAR, Logic, Cubase, Digital Performer, Ableton Live, Mackie Tracktion 3 (bundled free with Blackbird) and Avid Pro Tools 9.

One of my pet peeves about interfaces is the way manufacturers tout these as having 16, 24 or 32 inputs, when that number typically reflects every single possible way audio can enter/exit the device. In the case of Onyx Blackbird, its 16x16 capability includes eight XLR analog inputs and another eight channels via the Lightpipe ports. With Onyx Blackbird, the extra ADAT-in port really comes in handy when cascading two units for full 16 analog input capability.

That said, Onyx Blackbird delivers. The first two inputs are what Mackie terms Super Channels; design-wise, they are identical to the rest but add nice touches such as a hi-Z switch for DI inputs, a highpass filter switch, independent phantom power switch for just channels 1-2, TRS insert jacks and a direct monitor section for listening to inputs 1 and/or 2 in the analog domain for no-latency listening. This section also



Mackie's Onyx Blackbird offers eight Onyx mic pre's, 8-in/8-out ADAT, word clock I/O and FireWire output.

includes a mono/stereo listening switch and a monitor level pot. When overdubbing in the studio, I used the latter to affect the balance between playback tracks, the source mic(s) and what goes to the headphone bus, making it great for creating quick "more me" performer mixes without having to jump through a lot of hoops.

The other six analog combo XLR/1/4-inch mic/line inputs (on the rear panel) also offer 60 dB of max gain, bicolor LED signal-present/overload indicators and the same preamp quality as the first two. There's no sense of "two nice ones and the rest"; for example, when miking drums, everything's sonically matched. The "master" section has two independent headphone outs with level controls and a switch for choosing to hear either the main mix or a custom mix created using the Blackbird Control software. There's also a Monitor Level control for adjusting control room level.

Blackbird Control

Installing the Blackbird Control app was a breeze. Rather than include a copy with the interface, it's a fast, free download, so when you install you'll have the latest version. There's no copy protection, so I put it on my MacBook Pro for Logic, desktop Mac for Final Cut/Soundtrack Pro and another version on my PC that runs SONAR. I was off and running in minutes.

Blackbird Control is a full-on matrix mixer that provides pan/mute/solo/fader/routing for all of the inputs, along with assignments for sample rate select (44.1, 48, 88.2, 96 kHz), internal or external clocking (from a digital source or the rear

panel BNC word clock I/Os) and few slick tricks like onscreen phone mix level and muting control, and fast, high-res metering with peak hold. And within Blackbird Control, presets can be saved, cut, copied, pasted—a real timesaver.

All About the Sound

Flexibility is fine, but the worth of any interface comes down to the sound. The preamps are Mackie's Onyx design, offering ample headroom and excellent performance (mic-to-insert response is spec'd at only -1 dB from 10 to 150k Hz, and EIN comes in at a ultralow -127 dBu). I had no problem using the preamps with older, low-output ribbon mics, ranging from a vintage Lustraphone to a favorite pair of Royer SF-1s. Here, used as distant room mics, noise was never an issue, even when cranked way up. Even though it's a small point, I liked the highpass filters on the first two channels; fixed at 75 Hz with a steep -18dB/octave slope, they eliminated the LF rumble and muck without getting in the way of the music.

My only complaint is its lack of individual analog outputs for all the preamps, like the D-25 port on Mackie's Onyx-i mixers. This comes in handy in live location recording where you want to create a separate split for a P.A. feed, but in the studio, this is hardly an issue. On the digital side, the combination of Mackie's JetPLL jitter elimination with top-end Cirrus Logic CS5368 A/D converters and CS4385 DACs provide a level of performance that's far better than I'd dare to expect from an 8-channel unit carrying a \$499 (street) price tag. Thumbs up on this one. III

PRODUCT SUMMARY

COMPANY: Mackie
PRODUCT: Onyx Blackbird
WEBSITE: mackie.com
PRICE: \$629 MSRP

PROS: Simple interfacing. High-quality sound. Great pricing.

CONS: No individual analog preamp outputs.