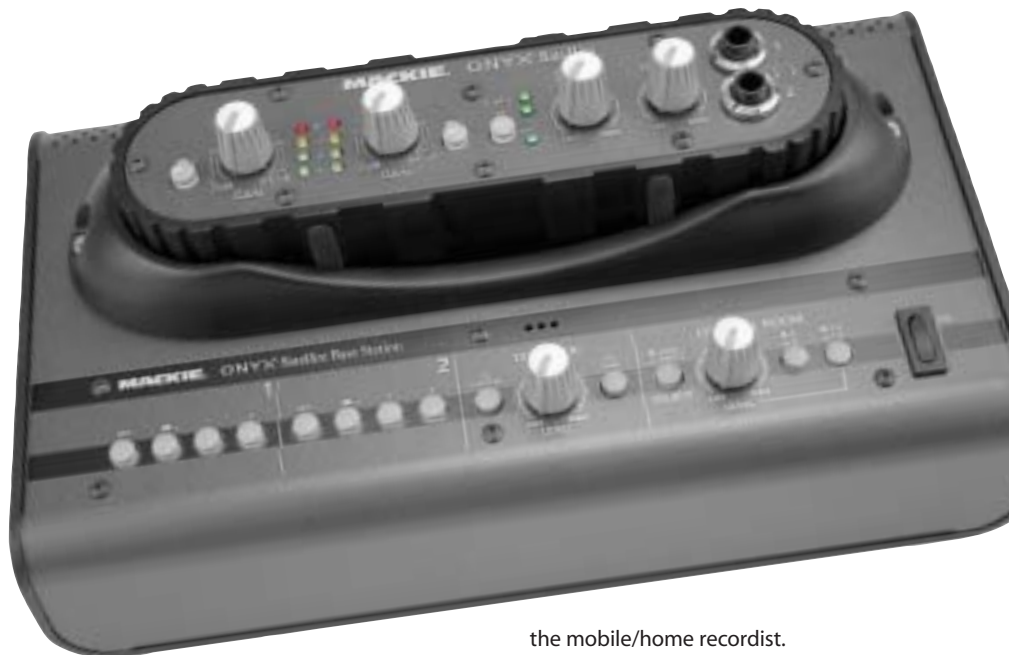


ONYX

Satellite

PORTABLE RECORDING SYSTEM



The choice of digital/audio interfaces and software packages for the musician/engineer is now pretty diverse (to understate the matter completely). As a user and reviewer of audio gear I love to play with new toys and I have to say that, having played with a large number of interfaces, pretty much all of them do their job well. But every now and then I get to play with a new toy that's not a toy at all and that soars way above the rest. This review is about just such a joy device.

My first encounter with the term ONYX was when reviewing the Mackie 24.4 live console. I recall commenting that with the specs and sound quality of this circuitry the 24.4 was equivalent in sound and quality to a top studio recording/mixing desk. Now it seems that Mackie have combined these technologies into something completely useful for

the mobile/home recordist.

The Mackie ONYX Satellite portable Firewire recording system is a complete recording/mixing solution featuring a two input channel recording desk with a deattachable preamp module. Although it comes bundled with Tracktion 2 software the system is designed to work with any ASIO or Core Audio compatible application – which is pretty much most platforms these days. The package works on either Mac or PC – for purposes of this review I used an iBook G4, running system 10.4.9, with 1GB RAM. The full version of Tracktion 2 software is essentially a fully-fledged recording/mixing/mastering solution. I have to say that installing the system on my Mac was extremely straightforward – the description of PC installation in the manual seemed considerably more complex.

Reviewed by Sam Airy

The unit itself is the most unusual 2-channel recording solution I have ever seen, but after a week of play I can attest that it is also probably the most comprehensive of its ilk available today. The centre section is what most musician/engineers would recognise as their standard mic pre digital audio interface. The fact that this interface then slots seamlessly into a Base Station with features that that you'd normally associate with a control room console is what sets it apart.

The satellite unit is a 2-channel, phantom powered interface weighing a little more than a standard block of butter, with front panel mic/line selectors and knobs alongside independent LED level monitoring for each channel. In addition there are two 1/4 inch jack headphone sockets with independent level controls. On the rear are two combo jack/XLR inputs with separate left and right control room (speaker) outputs that accept TS or TRS jacks. There are also Firewire and 48 pin docking sockets.

It's via this last connector that the satellite connects to the base station, so there's nothing to line up, no pins to bend, it just slots straight in. The rear panel of the base station has the types of features you'd only expect on a control room console... insert points, balanced TRS and XLR inputs, output for two sets of monitors for A/Bing, and even a talkback system complete with built-in mic. With labels such as CR (control room) Out Mackie's intentions are clearly that the base station is to be used as a fixed studio installation. Overall the ONYX Satellite has specs that rival any digital audio interface. With up to 24bit/96kHz sampling, 103dBu (mic to line out) dynamic range and a typical Equivalent Input Noise (EIN) of -110dBu @+60dB gain. This also rates as a professional device with a +4dBu standard operating level.

From the moment I turned the unit on I knew we were off to a good start. My studio is dark even when it's lit and with the power switch conveniently on the front panel there's no fumbling around at the back for a change. The buttons have a proper professional feel, not the soft



rubber variety which bend over as they sink down. The first set on the left of the unit give access to the instrument line inputs, which turn out to be a huge blessing. Normally if you plug a guitar straight into line inputs the tops will be missing by the time it gets to record software and a DI needs to be used as a work around. Mackie have got this one completely sussed. Insert points are something so many home recordists don't know they're missing. I have never used a software plug-in that was able to adequately compress a signal to disc. Surely, the only proper way to achieve this is by compression before the signal reaches the software and this is something that Mackie appear to understand well.

My one honest gripe is that the talk back facility might be rather ambitious for such a unit. It seems unlikely that Satellite users will have an entire control room and separate studio and only want to record two simultaneous tracks of audio. Today many recording engineers will use the control room and not the studio where quick takes need to be recorded. Sure, the To DAW button means that one can 'slate' spoken documentation about the track to disk, but such documentation can these days readily be included in filenames and track info found in most recording applications.

It's all too easy to forget that this not really an analogue unit. Signals do not pass through an analogue buss for routing purposes. Much of the process is digital – and that's without the software! This means that precise gain structure must be observed and when those red O/L lights come on – it really is time to consider backing off a little. The sound coming off those ONYX mic preamps just glistens with energy. For me, the whole thing is worth it just for this alone... and on top of that there's the really useful stuff like the Tracktion software!

Mackie have taken a particularly exciting direction with the ONYX satellite. I have used many dedicated all-in-one solutions over the years and there's definitely a point to having a permanent set-up that is there to do just one thing very well. Conversely, hardened users of dedicated software systems can mix in the bathtub if they're careful, however their system is not set up to work as an integrated recording studio. The ONYX comes one step closer to bridging this gap by allowing musicians the freedom to roam, whilst reminding them that they are also de facto audio engineers.

In the past it has been easy to return a mic preamp digital audio interface; unplug it, re-box it, return it. But with the ONYX satellite system it became necessary to dismantle a very functional, brilliant sounding recording studio (bugger!). Tellingly, the moment I reconnected some of my other gear and recorded several tracks alongside those from the ONYX Satellite I had one of those moments of complete clarity... I had just taken a big backward step. Time for an ONYX, me thinks.

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