

TEST

MACKIE BIG KNOB

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The Big Knob provides some of the much-needed pro console recording features previously missing in desktop studio systems. **Keith Gemmell** takes command.

BIG KNOB

Manufacturer **Mackie**

Price **£325**

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If your studio is a desktop setup, you've probably yearned for some of the convenient control room features commonly found on a dedicated professional recording console. Well, your prayers may have been answered, because Mackie's brand-new studio command system provides a signal routing and monitoring solution specially designed for DAW-based studios. Humourously entitled Big Knob, it provides four separate stereo input sources, monitoring via three different pairs of speakers, a separate headphone mix, a studio output for the performer, a built-in talkback mic and headphone cueing. So, with features like this, is the Big Knob about to make life easier for the desktop recording engineer?

Space saver

For a unit with such an impressive array of features, Big Knob takes up a surprisingly small amount of desk space. However, if you've a lot of gear to connect to it, you'll end up with something like a rat's nest of cables spewing from its rear panel.

Apart from two RCA inputs for turntables, all the rear-panel inputs and outputs are 1/4-inch TRS connections. Most have either a trim control or a level switch for -10dB and +4dB operation.

Once set up, Big Knob proved itself an absolute godsend, and using it can only be described as 'easy peasy'. The front-panel controls are grouped into five clearly defined areas, with a volume knob placed conveniently in the centre.

Depending on your studio setup, you can monitor up to four stereo sources – the DAW mix, two 2-track mastering machines and a turntable.

Of course, you can also use these inputs for anything else, such as CD players, guitars or keyboards.

Checking your mixes on various different speakers is always a good idea and Big Knob provides you with facilities to switch between three monitoring systems. You could, for example, connect a pair of active speakers and a subwoofer. Because you can select more than one source at a time, you could then switch the subwoofer in or out for comparison. On Big Knob, though, A/B switching requires you to press two buttons simultaneously (a manoeuvre at which recording engineers of the past were very adept).

Studio performers usually require a different mix from that which the engineer hears. Although you can set up a customised mix for them on most DAWs, getting it to their headphones can sometimes prove difficult. Providing your DAW has at least four stereo outs, the problem's easily solved with Big Knob by routing the main stereo mix to one set of inputs and the headphone mix to a second set. The mix is then routed to the performer using the Phones/Studio Out controls.

Walkie talkie

As with a pro console, Big Knob has a built-in talkback mic, and with the aid of a foot or hand switch (an extra purchase) you can move around your studio and still communicate with the musicians. Another useful pro touch is the facility to route the talkback signal to the 2-track and DAW outputs and record an announcement of the 'take' number at the beginning of a recording.

Also found on the front panel are two – very loud – headphone

outs. So powerful are they that Mackie saw fit to include a warning in the manual, just in case you forget to turn down the individual level controls before putting them on.

All in all, Mackie's Big Knob is a well-thought-out and extremely useful piece of studio kit. In fact, for anybody working with a digital audio workstation who needs the extra controls associated with a conventional console, it's an absolute 'must have'. And whether you've been working with a DAW from day one or have maybe downsized from a pro desk, we think you'll love it. **MTM**

SUMMARY

KEY FEATURES

- Big, convenient volume knob
- Switch between three monitor sets
- Built-in talkback mic
- Monitor four stereo sources
- Dual headphone outputs with volume controls
- Phono preamp for turntable connection

WHY BUY

- Perfect for computer-based systems
- High-end sound quality
- Robust construction
- Compact and easy to use

WALK ON BY

- Cables on your desktop
- Talkback foot switch not included

VERDICT

Simple but clever desktop unit with all the essential control-room routing facilities commonly found on a recording console.



METHOD SPOT Off the record

Stereo RCA inputs, on Big Knob's rear panel, can be fed by the outputs of a turntable. They include a built-in preamp that provides the equalisation and gain required to convert a phono-level signal to a line-level signal. This is useful for playing and archiving vinyl records.