Road Test:

Mackie Onyx 820i FireWire Mixer
(Look In the Box For a Big Surprise)

By Bill Evans

Fittingly, it all began with a plain black box. But we'll get to that—let's start at the real beginning. A few years ago, Mackie did a major upgrade of its upper-end mixers adding a slew of features, including a very musical EQ section, dubbed "Perkins EQ," after the audio engineer who designed it. The Onyx Compact Series received good reviews and were followed by the Onyx I-Series—8, 12 and 16 input mixers equipped with FireWire connections and shipping with a copy of Mackie's Tracktion recording software.

I used Tracktion for a long time. In fact there is still an old version installed on the machine on which I am writing this review. But it was never a program I liked to use. I was raised on Pro Tools and was comfortable with that interface but stopped doing a lot of studio recording when my ProTools 001 could no longer interface with my new Mac. I picked up an Alesis HD24 for recording my band live and used Audacity for mixing.

Back To That Box…

I review a lot of gear, so having UPS or FedEx at my door is far from unusual. I can usually look at the box and guess what's in it. Most have a logo printed prominently on the box.

But this was a plain black box. No logo. I brought it into the house, took it into the studio/rehearsal room and—with some trepidation—opened it. Inside, on top of whatever else was in the box, was a disk and what looked like a ransom note. The disc just said "Insert Me." The ransom note was a list of instructions…
- Open the box (oh wait, you've done that)
- Watch the video
- Stop reading ahead, watch the video
- Read included instructions to hook up the gear
- Mixer. FireWire. Your favorite DAW.
- Problem Solved.

Under the ransom note were two boxes, one contained a Onyx 820i mixer and the other a full copy of the latest version of Pro Tools.

So What Does It Mean?

Computer recording software falls into a couple of categories. The one called ASIO-compliant worked with a plethora or interfaces, mixers and software plug-ins. That plethora included just about everything except Pro Tools.

Mackie was in a tough situation. They have some very good software engineers, make probably the most popular small mixers in the world, and spent a lot of time and money developing a software package that was languishing. Meanwhile, their very good interface mixers were fighting with pretty much everyone else in the business over less than half of the market.

Keep in mind that this is not a company that backs away from a challenge. Along with the Alesis ADAT, Mackie mixers were the major force behind the project studio revolution that changed the recording business forever. I am kind of surprised they didn't take this step before. Well, actually the project has been a year and a half in the making.

The project is a piece of software called the Mackie Universal Driver. A simple install process and a FireWire cable and what had once been impossible was happening right on my desktop.

Getting Down to Work

This is not a review of Pro Tools 8. It's a great program and Bruce Bartlett did an eight-part video review that can be found at L2PNet.com in the WL2P-TV Video Review section along with (as soon as we get it shot) a video of this whole system in use. It may be there by the time you read this. So let's look at the rest of the system.

The Universal Driver will support any mixer in the Onyx-I Series. The review is based on the 820i but the system requirements say it will work with 1220i, 1620i or 1640i. The 1640i is a 16 channel, four-bus mixer that is big enough for a lot of bands to gig with. In a pinch, and if I submix the keys, I can even make it work for my 10-piece. We haven't tried it yet, but theoretically, you could bring the board and a laptop loaded with Pro Tools and plug-ins and both run and record your show. I would want to try it in a rehearsal situation first to make sure there are no surprises, like latency issues.

Awesome.

A couple of thing to keep in mind: The driver works with the M-Powered version of Pro Tools. The system requirements say it works with version 7.4 but I only had 7.3 and 8 so could not confirm that feature. Also, there are a couple of set-up steps that are a little different—not more difficult just different—than you might be accustomed to as a Pro Tools user. This is a mixer, not a dedicated interface, so it does not include a MIDI interface. You're on your own there.

In the meantime, the 820i will let you do a lot in a project studio and even record a small combo live. Three XLR mic inputs plus two mono line inputs and three more stereo line inputs. All of the inputs except the combo XLR/stereo input have three-channel EQ and channels 1 and 2 have sweeapable mids. Channel 3 has four band EQ. You can switch the FireWire send on each channel between pre and post EQ so you can perform with the onboard EQ and send a dry signal to Pro Tools (or Logic, Sonar, Nuendon Cakewalk or Traction—remember this s a UNIVERSAL driver). In fact, there are more places to send to FireWire than most people will ever use but makes for real flexibility. It sounds great and is easy to use.

Hell, I may actually start recording again…