

Mackie Big Knob

Another offering in the seemingly continuous stream of new monitoring controllers for DAW use, this one has a curious name that evidently is less humorous on one side of the Atlantic than it is on the other. **ROB JAMES** resists the temptation for Frankie Howerd innuendo.

THE DAW HAS CHANGED the way we work — things will never be the same again. One of the things the DAW has made obvious is that for many applications any conventional mixing console is overkill and probably not ideal for the purpose anyway.

Time to analyse what is really required to support a DAW. A lot obviously depends on just what the DAW is used for. If you routinely work in surround, the Big Knob isn't for you. But for many people stereo is as complicated as it gets. In many cases, the whole point is the variety of stereo tasks that can be undertaken. So, as a minimum any box with the title 'Monitor Controller', or in this case the rather more grandiose 'Studio Command System', needs to cater for several. Monitor level control and switching are top of the list. For studio recording, talkback and foldback are essential. Signal routing and level control for recording to and from external machines are nice to have. There is an argument for including mic pres in the equation

but I feel this is probably better left to a separate unit. Choice of mic pres and/or 'channel strip' type front ends is a very personal decision and there is a lot to choose from. Mackie has had a look at the monitor controller market and added a few wrinkles of its own. There are four independent, summable stereo main inputs plus a phones mix input. A talkback mic is built in to the surface and there are two talkback send keys. One of the main inputs is dedicated to phono complete with an RIAA preamp.

The Big Knob unit is reassuringly heavy with a built-in power supply. The unit has a solidity and an air of quality about the knobs and buttons that belies

double-entendre, is about as close as you're going to get to a Carry-On joke.

Although less 'purist' than some recent passive designs, the Big Knob may well be more practical in the real world. Simple matching of -10dBV and +4dBu sources and destinations, an RIAA gramophone input and talkback with AGC add to the appeal. Smooth switching between input sources for comparison checks requires some manual dexterity and practice, but quickly becomes instinctive. The only strange omission is the lack of an automatic dim option on the main, A, B and C, monitor outputs when talkback is invoked. The resultant howl-round will be a salutary reminder to drop the input mic level(s) (or hit the Dim key) before pressing the talkback button.

Apart from sound quality, the most critical element of a monitor controller is control layout. Buttons and pots should fall naturally to hand without the operator needing to look or consciously think. Obviously, some acclimatisation is required, but Mackie's designers have it spot on with the Big Knob.

Careful attention to design and the feature mix has produced a keenly priced unit. Mackie has clearly done its homework. The addition of a dedicated gramophone input is a welcome bonus to those who frequently need to input vinyl to a DAW, whether for restoration or sampling purposes. The Big Knob should be on the short list for anyone seeking a monitoring and routing solution to support a simple DAW installation. ■



Up front All the buttons, apart from talkback, are mechanically latching. The main monitor out has Mono, Mute and -20dB Dim keys set in an arc beneath the main volume control. A pot sets level from the talkback mic and further pots set studio output level and independent



volume for the two front panel headphone outputs (1/4-inch jacks). The Studio output also has an On/Off button and fairly rudimentary, but adequate, six-segment LED meters show the level of the currently selected stereo source(s).

Input Source Select gives you four additive buttons selecting the DAW mix output, 2-Track A and B, and Phono. In the Phones section a button selects between the phones picking up the main, Input Sources, mix or the independent DAW Phones Mix input (fed from, for example, an aux out on the DAW via a separate physical output.) Three further latching buttons select the three possible stereo pairs of main monitor outputs. Typically, these might be used for Nearfield, Main and Subwoofer. Since they are additive, it is simple to compare the sound with and without the sub.

In the bottom right-hand corner the talkback level pot is accompanied by two momentary buttons sending talkback from the built-in mic to either the two-track outputs, or the phones and studio outputs. If a footswitch is used, it sends talkback to all destinations.

Backside All the back panel audio connections apart from the gram input are 1/4-inch balanced jacks. Each pair of monitor outputs and the Studio output has a trim pot with a range of -10dBV to +4dBu. 2-Track and DAW inputs each have a -10dBV/+4dBu switch and +/-10dB trim pot. The 2 track, DAW and Phones Amp outputs each have a level push switch selecting between +4dBu (out) and -10dBV (in). The DAW Phones mix input has the same. The Phono input is on two phono sockets with a +/- 10dB trim pot. Mackie thoughtfully supplies two phono shorting plugs for situations where this input is not required, to minimise the possibility of added noise in case it is accidentally selected. In traditional fashion a separate grounding screw terminal is also fitted.

PROS

Aggressive pricing; good mix of features; easy adaptability to various source and destination levels.

CONS

No auto Dim when talkback is invoked; active circuitry must introduce artefacts; may be a bit big for some installations when fully cabled.

Contact

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