



Fiddling with Mackie's Big Knob makes studio control easy.

The Big Knob: Pleasure in the Studio

By Jeffrey Bernstein

(Editor's Note: After I had Mackie send Jeff Bernstein his Big Knob unit, he went a little batty. As one-half of the NYC-based studio team Bastone & Burnz, Jeff is usually fairly together and business-like. But for some reason, The Big Knob's very name launched him back to the Borscht Belt. I didn't chide him about it too much, mainly because he was also somewhat giddy over the chart-topping success that he and Freddy Bastone were enjoying with their remix of Rod Stewart's "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy." Maybe revisiting Rod the Mod's disco era put him in a lascivious mood that week—who knows? Nonetheless, after wading through all the double entendres, next time I'm sure we'll send him software.)

Whoever thought the day would come when you would be paying \$3 for a cup of coffee and \$150 for a pair of jeans? Well, it's here—so it may be a sign of the times that we are all "Super-Sizing," upgrading and overcharging for the basic necessities of life.

Of course, when I was sent a super-sized volume dial called "The Big Knob" with a sticker price nearing \$350, I felt nostalgic for the good old days. After all, if there's going to be a "Big Knob" in my studio, it's going to be the one I was born with.

At first, I wasn't too excited about fiddling with the Big Knob. In all seriousness, it involved getting down on my hands and knees and begging the wire monster for a safe journey through the treacherous sea of dangling information conduits. One wrong move, one pulled wire could mean hours of trouble-shooting. Did I really need a big volume knob

in a big box on my very crowded work surface? I wasn't sure that it was worth the trouble. But, after I finally faced my fears of system failure and inadequacy (couldn't resist), I whipped out the Big Knob, and my mind was opened to a whole new world.

"The Big Knob Studio Command System" (\$329 MAP) from Woodville, Wash.-based Mackie (mackie.com) is actually a really cool pre-amp specifically designed for the needs of the modern computer-based studio. The Big Knob has all the monitor-section features you would find on any large mixing console in a professional recording studio. It can control the studio gear that's responsible for the sound that people hear in your room—or other rooms in your studio environment. It has features that allow you to switch between speakers, input sources and control headphone levels. You can even talk to your vocalist on the other side of the glass via your Big Knob's built-in microphone.

The Big Knob is one of those pieces of gear that must be used to be fully appreciated. As the name implies, this odd-shaped retro-looking box has a big volume knob smack dab in the middle of it. This is extremely useful when you are asked the most common question in a studio: "Where is the volume knob?" (Which really means, "How do I make it louder?") You will no longer have to reply, "Go to the third piece of black equipment in the left rack under the console and turn the middle knob next to the two switches—but make sure you don't hit the mono button." Now, you can save a lot of time and just point to your Big Knob.

The Big Knob has handy buttons for mute, dim and mono. No more reaching to the mixer to adjust this. No more stretching to the pre-amp to switch that. No more standing up

to switch speakers. The Big Knob puts it all there within hands reach, making studio life just a little bit more pleasurable.

The Big Knob has inputs for four different sound sources. Three of them are for components like a CD player, computer, DAT Recorder studio rig or cassette deck. The fourth input has a RIAA pre-amp for a turntable. Each input has an individual trim knob so you can adjust the levels of your sound sources. This makes it extremely useful if you want to compare two different mixes at similar levels.

Another cool feature is that you can have any or all input sources playing at once. I particularly like this feature because it allows me to listen to a CD while hunting around for sounds, or to quickly experiment with beats over a song. There are four sets of outputs so you can send your signal to a cassette deck, DAT, two-track or CD recorder.

The monitor-select section allows users to control up to three sets of speakers and to listen to them either simultaneously or individually. Each of the three stereo output pairs has a trim knob that adjusts the volume of each set of speakers. This makes matching volume levels of different speakers easy. The trim knobs also let you set listening-level limits so you can protect your speakers and ears. There is also an output with its own little volume knob for speakers in another room.

The talkback section is my personal favorite. Ever since I sold my big recording console and moved into the computer age, I have always had to rig some crazy contraption so I can speak with a vocalist in my vocal booth on the other side of the glass. The Big Knob comes through in a big way. Now, I can just press the talkback button and speak. The Big Knob has a very sensitive microphone built into the front panel, so my always-insightful comments are sent out of the two headphone output jacks that have individual level controls, plus the headphone-amp and studio-monitor outputs. Very, very useful.

Minor Issues: If I had a wish list of features I could add, it would include a master-pan control, a talkback switch that could be locked in the "on" position and the ability to switch off the RIAA Pre-amp in order to use the phono input for something other than a turntable.

Other than that, the Big Knob gets two big thumbs up. It is a welcome addition to any studio. It provides a centralized control center for the most fundamental tweaking in a production environment. Its size makes it stand out and its features are well conceived. I'm sorry, I can't help myself: In this case, big is definitely better.

If you have any questions for Making Tracks, please send them to djtimes@testa.com.