



Coleman Audio RED48

DAWs may require monitoring control and they may require summing.

RUSS COTTIER encounters a box that combines both elegantly with a high channel count.

Since its formation in the 80s as the brainchild of ex-MCI technician Glenn Coleman, Coleman Audio has released a catalogue of switching units, monitor controllers, metering and custom broadcast units. In light of the popularity of 16- and 32-channel summing boxes, Coleman has stepped up the game with its RED48, which you probably guessed is a 48-channel summing box that is designed to fill the void left by the mixing console you wish you still had.

The visual appearance follows the Coleman Audio format of a black 2U rackmount with a vinyl orange-peel adhesive panel cover, this time in red with black text. The aluminium knobs are robust with smooth action pots and rubber surrounds for a sturdy feel. Further controls are accessed via plastic cone and rectangular pushbuttons and there is a definite heft about the switching.

A 15-pin D socket sits on the front to link to a remote unit, alongside a 3.5mm jack socket for the included talkback mic. The front panel mounting remote cable somewhat detracts from the visuals of the unit and the remote itself is a lightweight black plastic box with square illuminated buttons for Slate, Talkback and Dim and a super smooth Penny & Giles Stereo master fader for the summed mix level.

The unit boasts many of the functions of a console centre section and is intended to replace a mid-sized mixing console. The summing mixer is a passive resistor summing system with an ACN gain stage and operates quietly with no fan, which is a definite positive in a smaller control room. Coleman Audio prides itself on the old-school passive approach wherever possible so the routing is as pure as it gets.

The functionality of the RED48 can be split into three areas: control room monitoring, communications and summing. The rear of the unit has three pairs of balanced inputs on XLRs, these or the summed mix can be selected as control room source via the four square white buttons on the front. The control room Main Level is set with the largest of the knobs, a passive stepped attenuator based on 0.05dB increments. The Dim switch located on the remote drops the control room level by approximately 20dB and the switches light up rather nicely on the remote.

Communications functionality sports a talkback mic and a cue system. Stereo cue inputs and outputs on balanced TRS socket pairs are housed on the back panel. The front offers a Source/Cue pushbutton that

allows selection of the dedicated Cue input or the control room signal for quick overdubs. The level of the cue mix is controlled by an aluminium knob with an adjacent talkback level control. Talkback can be engaged from the remote, a second switch input on the rear, or a momentary pushbutton on the front panel. Furthermore there are Slate buttons on the front panel and the remote. Slate has a dedicated 3.5mm jack output on the rear.

There are two pairs of XLR speaker outputs on the rear of the unit and an Alt Speaker switch on the front of the unit for selecting them. A headphone socket is present on the front panel with a volume control and a selection switch to allow the engineer to listen to the Cue Mix or the Control Room Source; although more than once during tracking I wanted to pull up the Cue Mix up on the monitors.

The mixing functionality of the unit offers 48 balanced analogue inputs summed down to a stereo mix. They are hard panned left and right in 24 pairs and are accessed via six DB-25 sockets. As with most summing units the panning and levels would be undertaken by the DAW. There are no inserts for these inputs but the manual suggests using a patchbay for inserts. For vocals using single-channel outboard compression I had to return into the DAW to maintain panning in a stereo pair and avoid riding levels into the compression. The lack of prefade insert is my main gripe with passive summing units. You can't help but feel that a couple of panable or centred inputs to the unit might have been a great addition.

Usefully the mix output, which terminates on two balanced XLR outputs at the back, is always present so can be used as an additional stereo cue mix or pair of mono cue mixes during full band tracking. This gives up to four mono cue mixes. The Mix has a balanced insert point in the form of two pairs of balanced TRS sockets. This can be bypassed via a button on the front panel for A/B comparison.

In terms of pushing the mix bus for extra character there is no metering present so it is all down to the ear. Coleman suggests that clipping starts around +22dB so this unit offers a good deal of headroom. Even with dense rock mixes pushed loud, I didn't feel that I was overdriving the mix bus unpleasantly. The following gain stage is clean and doesn't impart too much 'character' like some other summing boxes do.

The summing mixer debate rages on but in terms of audio quality I found the unit to offer the extra width and smoothness that you would expect from a large format console in comparison to digital summing in a DAW. However, the real power of the RED48 is unleashed during the mix process and I found mixing to feel much more like working on a console. Vocals tended to sit a little easier in the mix, the low end of the bass seemed smoother, reverb and delay returns gelled a little better and my mixes sounded wider. As with any analogue mix bus there is a little more noise than digital summing but this was almost inaudible and really didn't trouble me at all.

The RED48 offers a bridge to the functionality and sound of a mixing console without the cost of maintenance and the footprint. At UK£1,600 (+VAT) it is placed pretty centrally within the range of summing units. The unit lacks some of the bells and whistles that other boxes offer such valves, pans and volume although the RED48 does include the essential monitoring functionality and good clean summing to place it as the centrepiece of any modern DAW studio. It has a boutique feel and will appeal to professionals who remember the good old days of analogue but have since been seduced by the convenience of a DAW-based setup. ■

PROS Extensive routing features; high input channel count; clean sound.

CONS Talkback mic on 3.5mm jack; no metering; no panable channels.

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