

TL Audio Fat Track

DAWs are great but they don't always interface that well with some of the rudimentary tasks that production demands — like monitoring. At last, a compact and integrated answer to all those who wished they'd never given away their analogue consoles. **ZENON SCHOEPE**



It happens as infrequently as it ever did but every now and then you come across a product that you feel is right. I felt the Fat Track was right from that first time I opened the press release about it and was even more encouraged when I saw an early picture. Fat Track is a pair of recording channels with EQ, a four stereo pair summing mixer and a block of monitoring functionality all packaged in to a gently slanted desktop unit.

For me, the problem with so much of the modern and eminently practical way of working is that the centrality of the DAW predictably throws up its limitations pretty quickly for those big enough to acknowledge it. Thus you need a means of getting into it, out of it and to be able to listen to what you have done in a natural and relaxed sort of way. The problem with the miniaturisation of a recording rig is that you eventually have to add some of the bits back in that your clean sweep with a new DAW threw out. Thus we get boxes that in effect represent parts of a proper mixing console. The first of these was the channel strip but it has been followed, in these more progressive times, with monitoring boxes and summing boxes and source selectors. The issue here is that if you do it properly you end up with a right load of assorted jumble dumped right back in the space you thought you'd reclaimed for pictures of the family...

And while your monitor controller is a desktop unit and the channel and summing box are rackmounts, chances are you could also have a mic pre brick with a handle on the top. At the end of it all you still have to connect it up and it won't stay connected the same way for very long. That kind of misses the point for me. We moved away from consoles for the sake of streamlined efficiency and space-saving but what has been arrived at in most cases is worse productivity than we had before. People mix with a mouse and keep it all in the box and do it all with plugs because

it's simply less bother than attempting the alternative. Call me old-fashioned but I'd rather have a desk. Or a Fat Track...

What we are presented with here is effectively two recording channels and a monitoring section that has access to four 2-track returns, each of which is on its own pot. That 4 x 2 sum alerts you to the fact that those eight inputs can be employed for summing duties but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The back panel is blank although there is space that alludes to the optional ADAT digital interface. All the connectors are on the top on stout screw-locked jack sockets and locking XLRs. TLAudio stuff is well screwed together. For the two channels you have instrument, line and mic inputs with inserts on both channels and direct outs on each channel.

The four 2-track returns are on jacks and can be switched for +/-10 operation. There are outputs for two sets of loudspeakers, an unbalanced stereo output and the main balanced XLR outputs (these do get in the way a bit) and these have balanced inserts. Then there are two sets of phones sockets (each with their own level pot), a stereo effects return (channels have an FX send), an FX send and a Tape Out.

Channels have switches for Phantom, Mic/Line selection, a 30dB pad, phase reverse and 90Hz roll off. There are centre detented Pan and Gain pots, the aforementioned FX send and a rotary fader. EQ is not switch bypassable but is 3-band with shelving HF and LF (+/-15dB) and the same boost and cut over the swept 150Hz to 7kHz mid. Finally there's a Mute and a switch for the insert (nice grown up touch).

The 2-track returns have rotary faders and routing to the main bus while the main output also has a rotary and switch for its insert. The monitor section has a big knob volume control, loudspeaker Mute, switching to the Alternate monitors, and selection of the four 2-tracks with LED indication. Stereo

metering consists of some traditional TLAudio VUs and a 0, +6, +12dB traffic light LED ladder. Channels additionally have Drive (brighter is harder) LEDs and a red peak LED.

Operation is child's play and I found the scale and layout to my liking. You can track through the channels and listen to your backing either coming back in as stereo subs or as a complete mix from your workstation. Two people could happily work a Fat Track but I have a feeling it will find most homes with solitary users. You have a ridiculous amount of connectivity here and it's easy to access although when you've filled all the sockets it does begin to take on a completely different appearance and starts to feel a little cramped.

TLAudio refined its valve orientated signal paths long ago and this unit therefore displays a comfortable front end with a surprisingly characterful mic preamp and a gain structure throughout that allows you to balance things nicely in terms of drive and richness. I always adjust the inputs and output so the signal gets into the 'alive' zone before I start fiddling with anything else. In honesty I didn't use the EQ all that much, relying instead on inserted processing, but I do like its top and bottom.

From the standpoint of summing the same character traits are carried over although for me I am drawn to the Fat Track most for the number of inputs you can get into it — you have the stereo return too, of course — and how easy it is to access them. From an equipment reviewer's point of view it is ideal kit for comparisons and testing purposes. You can rely on it to provide quiet and solid performance.

I think it's significant that TLAudio has placed this box (UK£999 + VAT) at the bottom of its console portfolio. It shares the EQ with the M1 (albeit without the EQ Bypass switch) although it's actually a long way short of a traditional console. Maybe this is what 'desks' of the future will look increasingly like. However, I could see this principle refined quite a bit more with a few well-chosen bells and whistles. Better EQ, some dynamics, more returns, for example.

If you can see the limitations of the cobbled together DAW setups offered as a pick 'n' mix from a variety of sources then you are a candidate for the Fat Track. If you can't then you won't even know what you're missing. ■

PROS

Great idea; a medley of popular DAW analogue add-ons in one box; solid performance; sounds good; much more integrated than the alternatives.

CONS

Gets a little crowded when fully plugged up; no EQ bypass.

Contact

TL AUDIO, UK:
Website: www.tlaudio.co.uk