JLCooper CS-32 Mini Desk

Taking advantage of the unstoppable move towards hard control, long-time controller advocate JLCooper has emerged from the shadows with a slick and tiny worksurface for everyone. ROB JAMES tells us that size isn't important.

TRENDS ARE EVIDENT IN music, fashion and even children's toys. If they were truly predictable or controllable a lot of marketing people would be very happy. As it is, trends arise seemingly from nowhere and often subside almost as quickly. Glam Rock, the Ra-Ra skirt, Hot Pants, Yoyos and Pokemon cards are obvious examples. The pro audio world is not immune from this phenomenon. All of a sudden everyone starts making new mic preamps, multi-effects or digital multitracks. I used to think there was either some kind of conspiracy behind this or simple copying. Now I'm not so sure, I'm more inclined to think it is just that an idea's time has come and everybody catches the mood.

One of the current 'big things' is control surfaces for workstations. Digidesign, Steinberg, E-Magic (Mackie), Mackie, Radikal and others have control surface products and several of the current crop of compact digital mixers make much of their ability to control workstations. Against this background, JLCooper has been quietly making control surfaces for years.

The company's latest offering, is the CS-32 Mini Desk 32-channel control surface. The bare specs are impressive enough, 32 faders, 118 buttons, 6 pots and a jog/shuttle wheel plus indicators and a two-digit alpha display. At less than UK £500 this sounds like a lot of controller for the money. The big surprise is the size of the unit, which isn't (big). It is tiny, occupying the same desk space as the average mouse-mat.

Two versions are offered differing only in interface: MIDI or USB. The latter is especially useful since it takes power from a self-powered port or a powered hub, so there is just one cable. (A bus powered hub port will not do). The unit works as a generic MIDI controller with any suitably equipped application and specific support is already appearing for many applications including Pro Tools, Digital Performer, Ableton Live, Reason and Sonar.

I used the USB version with Steinberg's Nuendo. A fully featured CS-32 Nuendo profile has yet to appear but the current general Steinberg profile works wel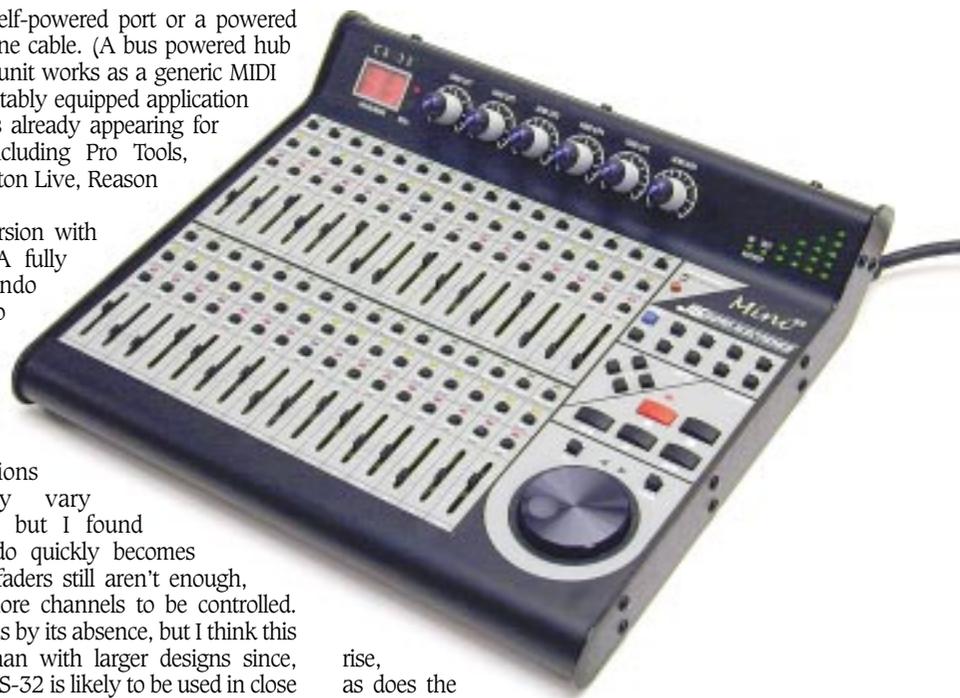l enough apart from jog/shuttle. The precise functions controlled obviously vary between applications but I found operation with Nuendo quickly becomes instinctive. If the 32 faders still aren't enough, paging enables yet more channels to be controlled. Metering is conspicuous by its absence, but I think this is less of an issue than with larger designs since, thanks to its size, the CS-32 is likely to be used in close proximity to a monitor screen or screens.

This is quite unlike any other controller currently available. Small in dimensions but not in stature. Compact controllers all too often compromise on facilities or ergonomics. JLCooper has managed to fit a huge number of controls into the available space on the CS-32 without it feeling unduly cramped, although the legends could be clearer.

On the face of it, 20mm non-motorised faders are not a very promising proposition. In practice, very fine adjustments can be made once you grow accustomed to the scale of the thing. The buttons are minuscule but easy to see and click positively when pressed. Certainly this is not a toy for the banana-fingered but, almost by prestidigitation *(Truly masterful Rob. Ed)*, JLCooper has produced a highly usable and satisfyingly tactile jewel of a tool. It is very pretty and I can't keep my fingers off it. It's solid, too. The case is made of steel and the weight this introduces prevents the CS-32 from sliding all over the desk.

I have always believed hardware control is the way to go for workstations. However, there are many circumstances when the control surface cannot hog the limelight. The considerable real estate occupied by even an 8-fader 'conventional' unit is often unacceptable. For example, in environments already crowded with other kit such as video edit suites or when used as an adjunct to a main console.

You wouldn't really want to lug them on the road with a laptop either. Conversely, 8 faders are often not enough and bank-switching faders with a large number of channels can be confusing. The same applies with buttons, especially the dangerous stuff like track arming. Although many of the alternatives come with the option of add-on fader packs, the costs rise, as does the size. Anyway, direct comparison is inappropriate, the CS-32 doesn't really belong in the same category. It defines a new breed of compact and cost-effective control devices. ■

The CS-32 is a mere 230mm wide by 210 mm deep and 45mm high at maximum. Fader strips are laid out in two rows of 16, each with a 20mm fader and three buttons and LEDs. A red button with indicator LED globally switches the function of the buttons between the default Track Select, Locate and Arm, and the alternative, Pan Select, Solo and Mute although, as with other buttons, the precise functions will depend on the host application.

The LEDs associated with the buttons either light when the buttons are pressed or can function as tallies from the host application. Nine function keys are grouped with a Shift key. Cruciform cursor keys sit just above the transport control keys and Jog and Shuttle keys lie in the logical position above the jog/shuttle wheel. This is metal with a finger detent and a smooth action for its diminutive diameter. On the 'up-stand', the two-digit red LED Value/Mode display shows cryptic messages or numeric values depending on the application.

Two Null LEDs indicate when the selected physical fader position matches the logical value and show which way the fader must be moved to match. The six knobs are labelled Send A and B, Pan and Send C, D and E, also P1 to P6. Once again the actual functions are application dependent. Two further LEDs indicate data transmission/reception.

PROS	A new angle on the perennial issue of DAW control; good value; tiny footprint.
CONS	Legends could be clearer; some application specific templates may take a while to appear; I can't wait to see a version with touch-sensitive motorised faders!
EXTRAS	The Media Control Station 3 is part of JLCooper's MCS-Pro Series and features transport buttons for Record, Play, Stop, Fast Forward and Rewind. It also has 18 physical buttons for a variety of editing functions and V/Stick navigation control.

A precision, optically-encoded jog wheel with a concentric shuttle ring allows control of audio or video with frame accuracy.

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