

Neve 8816

While the analogue versus digital summing debate carries on, more manufacturers are lining up to supply you with a box that takes your DAW's individual analogue outputs and creates a stereo mix the old fashioned way. **JON THORNTON** discovers a 16:2 summing mixer that does an awful lot more than just that.



MANY OF THE MORE recent summing mixer offerings have added a variety of additional features to tempt you and your DAW and these range from bus compression to monitoring control. However, what most have in common is that they attempt to provide some of the most useful monitoring and routing functions of a traditional console in the era of in-the-box tracking and mixing.

It should come as no surprise then, that the old guard has brought its own offering to the table. Equally unsurprising is the fact that if it was going to do it, it would be in a typically bullet-proof and uncompromising way. So much so, that referring to Neve's 8816 as a simple summing mixer really doesn't do it justice.

Of course, this is its core function and much of the front-panel of this 2u rackmount is taken up with level, pan and mute or solo (in-place) controls for 16 channels of audio. Inputs are at line level, and interfacing for these is via two 25-pin D-Sub connectors on the rear panel. Three further D-Subs connectors make provision for a selection of insert points, 2-track returns, main mix bus output, monitor and cue outputs — at which point you begin to see just how flexible this unit is.

The main mix bus topology features electronically balanced inputs and transformer balanced outputs, and simply as a 16:2 mixer you have to acknowledge that it sounds great — quiet, smooth and imparting a certain 'chunkiness' to the sound that is hard to really put into words (*Chunkiness is good though. Ed*). The main mix output has its own master level control, and metering is courtesy of a pair of meters that sport a pseudo PPM characteristic. The slightly unusual scale shows a nominal 0VU (+4dBu) line-up point, and points for +18dBu and +22dBu depending on how 0dBFS is referenced in your particular set-up.

A separate monitor output is provided that feeds two pairs of balanced jack speaker outputs on the rear panel. A switch located between the meters selects either main or alternate loudspeakers and pressing

the monitor level pot switches between available monitoring sources. These are the main mix bus, a 2-track return, input channels 1 and 2 only (pre-fade), and something Neve terms 'iMon', which is a 3.5mm jack socket on the front panel for connecting an MP3 player to. (*We live in strange times. Ed*). It's also possible to mix the main bus output with any of these three additional sources for monitoring purposes.

A headphone socket on the front panel together with a parallel socket on the rear panel can also pick up the monitor output if so switched. If not, the headphones are fed by a cue bus. Channels 1 to 14 each have an illuminated pushbutton, which, when pressed, sends that signal (pre-fader and pan) to the cue bus. Channels 15 and 16 are configured as a stereo signal feeding the cue output and an overall level control for cue sends 1 to 14 allows these to be balanced against channels 15 and 16. The 2-track return signal can also be fed into the cue output, with its own level control. Pushing the headphone level pot dims the selected sources and inserts talkback onto the cue from a small front panel microphone. On the pre-production version supplied, cue selection for the first 14 channels was exclusive — in other words only one channel at a time could be selected to cue together with channels 15 and 16. Production versions will allow multiple cue selections. It's perhaps not the most flexible cue system in the world, but in applications with single overdubs against a stereo backing track already sub-mixed from a DAW, it works well enough.

With a nod towards the 8816 being the final analogue summing device in some mastering applications, Neve has also provided some very flexible options on the main mix bus. A stereo width control allows the main bus to be narrowed or made 'super-wide' by playing around with sum and difference levels. A switchable insert point is provided across the main outputs and this can be further switched between a conventional stereo insert or two insert points carrying the sum and difference equivalents of the main output for separate

processing. These are then converted back to AB stereo on return to the unit. Further controls allow the mix insert return to be blended back with the unprocessed mix output for those wanting to explore a bit of parallel compression.

There are other little touches and instances of attention to detail that will appeal to traditionalists — the provision of a socket for a remote talkback switch; a trim pot to adjust the talkback mic gain and a very high quality digital output option featuring PCM and DSD outputs. But the 8816 has two further tricks up its sleeve if further convincing is necessary.

The first is a very simple and intuitive recall system that requires a small program to be run on PC or Mac. USB connection between computer and the device allows snapshots of all rotary controls to be taken and then manually reinstated in a manner that will be familiar to anyone who's used this sort of system on a larger analogue board. Switches are all automatically reinstated to their snapshot status, and multiple units — including a pick and mix of some of Neve's other recent outboard offerings — can be addressed by the software.

The second and final trick is the provision of a remote fader pack option, the 8804, which when connected allows level, mute and solo control of each of the 16 channels, together with master faders for the left and right buses. Connection to the main unit is via a thick umbilical (all analogue signal path here), and requires a selection of links on the main unit's PCB to be reset. The reason for this is that the addition of the remote fader unit also provides you with individual channel outputs (post-fader) for each of the 16 channels, and repurposes the rotary level control on the main unit to be an additional auxiliary send. The fader pack sports its own USB connection for recall purposes (the software sees it as a separate unit), and its construction is clearly aimed at installation in a desk surface.

Add all of this together, and you find a system of tremendous flexibility and sonic character. Yes, there are a couple of things that aren't quite right. The layout makes it hard to see some switch statuses unless you're viewing it absolutely straight on; some of the terms used for switch legending aren't terribly intuitive until you read the manual and try them out (try and guess what INS MIX actually means); and for some curious reason the illuminated switches on the remote fader pack won't illuminate unless the USB cable is connected to a computer. And of course there is the price (8816 UK£1850 + VAT; 8804 UK£995 + VAT).

Once speeded up with the digital card and the remote faders, you could be buying a respectable small format mixer with most of the functionality and the addition of mic preamplifiers for less than the Neve solution's asking price. But for some applications, the 8816 is really all that's necessary and there's 'that' sound to consider. There's no doubt about — in terms of summing mixers, this is currently the one to beat for functionality and sound. ■

PROS

Terrific sounding summing mixer; recall software works very well; plenty of flexibility and nice touches with additional functions; expandability.

CONS

Some confusing terminology; less money could buy most of the functionality and mic preamplifiers; USB connection needed to power lights on fader pack.

Contact

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