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TASCAM FireOne

Expanded DAW control adds value to this tabletop FireWire interface

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

The FireOne is the latest FireWire audio/MIDI interface and control surface from the continued collaboration of TASCAM and Frontier Design Group. It owes much of its sound, features and function to the FW models preceding it: the 1884, 1804 and 1082 (reviewed April 2004 and October 2005).

The FireOne is equal parts portable audio/MIDI interface and DAW control surface. The audio side features two channels of up to 24-bit/96 kHz audio I/O (TASCAM plans to add 192 kHz support in a firmware upgrade that should be available by the time you read this) and includes phantom power, 20 dB pad and a switchable high-impedance instrument jack.

The control surface features eight assignable function keys with a shift option, five standard transport buttons, and a large backlit and weighted shuttle/jog wheel.

DAW specs

The FireOne works in both Mac OSX (10.4) and Windows XP (SP2). Vista and XP 64 are not yet supported, but drivers are in development—Vista support is expected by November 2007. The FireOne operates in either HUI emulation mode or in a native mode, which is based on the Mackie Control protocol.

Native support is available for Ableton Live 6, Steinberg Cubase/Nuendo 3.02 and higher, Cakewalk SONAR 5 and up, Apple Logic Pro 7, MOTU Digital Performer 5, Apple Final Cut Pro, and Digidesign Pro Tools (in HUI Mode).

Build quality and layout

About the size of an average hardcover book, the FireOne is well constructed.

It is weighty for its size (2.65 pounds) due in part to a thick, heavy rubber non-skid base to keep it in place on your desktop. The buttons, jacks, knobs, switches and wheel all feel solid and professional, with the exception of the headphone knobs which were a tad wobbly.

The left side handles all I/O with four knobs across the top: input level for channels A & B, the mix between input signal and the computer's audio, and line out (master volume). Below these are buttons for each channel's phantom power and pad. Under those is the pair of aforementioned headphone volume controls.

The I/O section also contains signal and clip LEDs as well as lights for MIDI and FireWire activity.

The right side of the FireOne is the control surface and is dominated by the large 2-1/2" jog wheel. The wheel features a backlit, green glowing ring, whose backlight can follow your finger movements, sync to MIDI clock or metronome, or can simply ebb and flow in acts of trippy randomness.

Ergonomically radiating out along the top of the wheel are the transport and assignable function keys, and this section also contains a 12-step, LED stereo output meter.

Connections

Most connections are made on the rear of the unit. The FireOne is bus-powered, but a DC line-lump power cable is included for use with non-powered FireWire ports (such as 4-pin sockets and laptop PCMCIA cards).

There is a single, 6-pin FireWire jack (which means that this unit must appear at the end of a FireWire chain if at all, bandwidth permitting). Other connections on the back include MIDI in and out, a 1/4" footswitch jack, a pair of 1/4" TRS (balanced or unbalanced) line outs, and a pair of Neutrik Combo input jacks (1/4"—XLR).

On the front of the unit is the high-impedance 1/4" instrument input for direct connection of a guitar or bass (switchable from rear input B) and a pair of headphone output jacks.

In use

Installation on my Windows laptop was smooth. I spent a few months with the FireOne using it in Nuendo, where it excelled as a control device. Everything functioned as expected, and since every key and the wheel can be shifted and/or reassigned, depending on the flexibility of your DAW there is little the FireOne cannot control.

Although it offered no controller functions I also ran the FireOne as an audio interface with iTunes, ACID, WaveLab and Sound Forge. In each instance the FireOne did its job well and sounded great.

The mic preamps and converters were clean and uncolored, but not sterile—better than I expected for a device in this price range. I found the unit to have more than ample gain for condenser mics, but using a dynamic mic such as a Shure SM57 or 58 required higher input levels (knob at about 3 o'clock). Although this was not a problem, I did hear a buzz when the gain was cranked up all the way, a situation you hopefully won't run into unless you're using a really anemic mic.

The clip and signal lights were bright and accurate, and at this price point the 12-step stereo output meter (missing in many competing units) is a nice touch.

Of course the real star of the FireOne is its jog wheel, which is smooth, evenly weighted and accurate. It makes the jog wheel on my FW-1884 feel like a toy. I also liked the backlight features on the jog wheel, especially when acting as a visual metronome.



Software control

All internal settings, such as buffer size, clock source, DAW control mode, and backlight mode, are made in a sparse software control panel. Almost all of these functions are self-explanatory, and the only one that requires more detail is Input Mon Mono.

In their default state, Inputs A and B are hard-panned left/right and cannot be moved. The Input Mon Mono feature switches the monitoring of these signals to center-panned mono, so when tracking a mono source like guitar you hear it in both ears.

For video?

After seeing a NAMM demo describing the FireOne as a video controller, I was curious. My friend Jeff Johnston at JA Digital Media was kind enough to try out the FireOne in his edit suite on a Mac G5 equipped with Final Cut Pro. Again, everything installed and functioned as advertised; using the jog wheel to scroll and scrub was again a breeze.

Jeff did say that it would take some time getting used to the jog wheel to do precise

single-frame advancement, and to feel comfortable with the button layout (which he felt was a tight fit for a user with large hands). But overall he was impressed; he especially enjoyed, as he put it, "Adding an audio interface to an affordable control surface to do quick voiceovers and music overdubs without extra hardware". This unit could have a big future in both pro and project video suites.

Conclusions

At \$300 street TASCAM has another winner. The FireOne is TASCAM's smallest and fullest featured control surface to date and the quality found in its bigger units was not sacrificed in achieving this goal. When tested side by side with my FW-1884 I noticed virtually no difference in audio quality or basic functionality.

The main thing I miss in a control surface like this is, of course, faders. But since both TASCAM

and Frontier have already conquered that hill, the FireOne is an interesting development in control surface design. The good news is that the FireOne plays well with others, and using it with your existing fader unit should be easy to do, giving you the best of both worlds.

I would love to see a standalone version of this controller minus audio, or a version adding a fader... but for now, the FireOne plus a compact fader device such as Frontier's AlphaTrack or the Presonus FaderPort could be a compact, powerhouse combination only dreamed of just months ago.

Price: \$399

More from: TASCAM, 7733 Telegraph Road, Montebello, CA 90640. 323/726-0303, www.tascam.com.

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