

May 07, 2008

## Hands-on with Belkin's TuneStudio

Posted by Simon Cohen at 3:59 PM | [E-mail this post](#)



**Playing songs, watching videos, flipping through photos. The iPod does it all and does it well. But recording onto Apple's little wonder is not so easy. It doesn't even have a microphone. Fear not, ye budding musician: Belkin is coming to the rescue with its TuneStudio. So how does it fare?**

I confess, I get excited by new gadgets - even if I have no idea what they do or how to operate them. So it was with some sadness that I reluctantly handed our demo unit of Belkin's brand new TuneStudio over to one of my colleagues.

Why you ask? Well, I'm not musically inclined. Actually that's an understatement. I'm tone-deaf, I have no sense of rhythm and my 3 year-old puts me to shame on that little xylophone she has.

Clearly I have no business reviewing (or even touching) a device designed to allow musicians to easily record their tracks onto an iPod in multi-channel uncompressed audio files. So that said, here's my office-mate Tim Ashby's take on Belkin's TuneStudio...

As a guitarist and a songwriter I found myself with a dilemma. I'd invested in a pretty good home studio setup centered around a Mac desktop, some nifty recording and editing software, several pro microphones, a digital input box which converts those pro mics into good old USB to send to the computer and a snaking mess of cabling leaving me little room to put my feet.

This setup produces amazing results, but it isn't portable. If I wanted to record in a rehearsal space, at a friend's house or even in the comfort of my own living room, I can't, not without purchasing a \$1500 laptop at the very least.

Belkin's TuneStudio offered me a great solution for mobile recording and quick takes, as well as potential integration with my home studio. The TuneStudio is a 4-track mixer that records directly onto something which most of us have lying around the house: an iPod (5G, classic, 2G/3G nano). The TuneStudio will take up to four inputs at once and record onto high quality 16-bit stereo using the iPod's voice memo feature. (As I found out, it is important to make sure your iPod's voice memo feature is set to 'high' quality). Your recordings are retrieved through iTunes when you sync with your computer.

The TuneStudio has an impressive array of inputs and outputs. On the input side there are 1/4" jacks for basic podcast quality microphones and the direct input of electric guitars and basses, RCA inputs for line-in from a mixing board at a live show, a DJ's turntable or an electric keyboard and XLR jacks with phantom power for balanced and unbalanced high-end microphones. On the output side one can independently control the mix heading to an iPod, monitor headphones and monitor speakers, as well as via USB directly to a computer.



Each of the four input channels has gain, three-channel EQ, pan and level controls, including peak indicator lights. The professional looking unit also has left and right recording LEDs which bounced colourfully up and down as I strummed my guitar. If all these features sound a little fancy, it's because the TuneStudio packs in a ton of useful features into its compact body.

However, taking into account the light-weight and portability of the TuneStudio it would have been nice to see a built-in microphone, as found on many portable 4-tracks, for truly instant song sketches when cables and microphone stands are not handy. Also, from a practical level it would have been sensible to include at least two headphone sockets for when two musicians are playing, and recording, together. However, a simple headphone splitter will achieve this.

As Belkin acknowledge in their promotional literature, the iPod configuration of the TuneStudio is ideal for quick takes where no computer is available. The price for this convenience is that there is no opportunity for overdubs or track separation as might be found on slightly higher-end digital 4-tracks. The user must set all the levels and pans and EQ correctly before pressing 'record' and searing the mix onto the iPod.

For many users the TuneStudio will come into its own when they bypass the iPod and send the audio output via USB directly to their PC or Mac and record using software such as GarageBand, Audacity, ProTools, Cubase or the bundled version of Music Creator from Cakewalk. At this point, the TuneStudio has the full versatility of a 4-track with many features and inputs not generally available within its price range.

Whether recording onto an iPod, or via USB directly onto a computer, the TuneStudio produces rich, warm recordings. The built-in EQ really helped me bring out the tone of my guitar before the sound was digitized onto the iPod. This is preferential to tweaking a flat sound using software EQ in post-production. However, I did notice some hiss through both the monitor headphones and on the final recordings I made with the TuneStudio. Tweaking the input levels, EQ and compression (as I mentioned, for the price this unit has a lot of high-end features) I was able to remove some of the hiss - but I was never able to eliminate it completely. However, at its price point I doubt many would expect better sound quality than the TuneStudio delivers.

Considering its bells and whistles, I think the TuneStudio will appeal more to musicians than podcasters. Therefore, it is interesting to see Belkin, a brand best known for iPod accessories trying to slide into a market dominated by brands such as Fostex and Tascam, with a rich heritage in audio recording. *[editor's note: Belkin is releasing a forth-coming podcasting-specific solution called the Podcast Studio, which is very similar to TuneStudio, but not intended for multi-channel recording]*

For those who wish to get into home recording the TuneStudio offers an affordable entry-point. And, for those like myself, who have already invested in recording equipment it offers a great tool to use in conjunction with my existing microphones and equipment when I need to record away from my home studio. Now, if only Belkin offered a battery powered version to take out in the garden.