

DIY Record Mogul

The Belkin TuneStudio

JUDY GARLAND/MICKEY Rooney fans might remember *Babes On Broadway* and how at one point they pipe up, "Hey gang, let's put on a show!" Obviously that was a fantasy, but for recording do-it-yourselfers, Belkin's latest iPod/computer mixing board, the TuneStudio, can put you into the recording business so quickly and easily even Judy and Mickey would be envious.

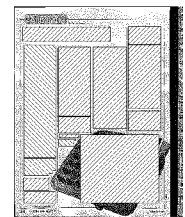
The TuneStudio weighs less than three pounds, measures about 10" x 12" x 3" and includes two mic pre-amp inputs that can be configured for optional phantom power via a pair of balanced XLR inputs or with unpowered microphones through unbalanced 1/4" phone jacks. You can use almost any microphone, from a lowly \$19 plastic clip-on all the way up to a studio-quality condenser or ribbon. The TuneStudio also offers four line-level inputs via a pair of 1/4" phone jacks (balanced or unbalanced) and two RCA unbalanced inputs. You can employ a maximum of six separate input channels (two mono microphone inputs and two stereo pairs). Each channel has separate controls for level, right/left pan, and 80Hz, 2.5kHz, and 12kHz equalizer settings. The EQ knobs deliver + or - 12 db of range. The TuneStudio also includes a compressor with between 3 and 12 dB of attenuation, as well as a headphone jack with its own output level control, a USB level input control (if you want to bring in music from a computer source,) and an iPod playback level knob (in case you wish to listen to music from your iPod through the mixer). The TuneStudio also has a

set of stereo 1/2" phone jack balanced or unbalanced analog outputs with a separate level control for monitoring your mix through speakers. Finally, there's a master level knob to control the input level for recording onto an iPod.

Two Mixing Boards in One

The TuneStudio will record onto any full-size iPod that offers 44.1K memo recording. The list includes the 30-, 60-, or 80-gig iPod video, and 80- or 160-gig iPod Classic models. It will not work with earlier units such as the iPod photo or the miniature iPods. The TuneStudio serves as both a two-channel mixer and an analog to digital converter that delivers the stereo mix to your iPod. All you need is a pair of microphones, an iPod, and a source of AC power and you have a complete on-location two-channel recording rig!

Making recordings with the TuneStudio is so intuitive anyone who has used a conventional recorder should have no problems. For newbies, Belkin supplies a well-organized book. I tested the TuneStudio at one of my live orchestra recording sessions. I used my usual recording chain, which consists of a pair of Schoeps Collette microphones hooked up to a Grace Lunatec V3 mic preamp. I connected the line-level feed from the Grace to the TuneStudio via a pair of RCA cables. Once I placed my iPod in the TuneStudio's cradle and turned it on, the iPod switched to memo-recording mode. After setting the recording levels via the Input and Master level controls, I was ready to record. The TuneStudio's easy-to-read LED level



meters made it easy to set them.

When I compared CDs made from the TuneStudio recordings to those I created using my higher-resolution recorders (down-sampled to 44.1 for the CDs), I could hear very little difference. The CDs made from the high-definition record-

ers, a Marantz PD-671 at 96/24 and

Korg MR-1000

using DSD, had

a noticeably better dynamic contrast and more depth, but the iPod matched them both for inner detail and harmonic balance. The TuneStudio's A/D converters proved far better than I would've expected from such a moderately priced mixer.

The TuneStudio can also function as a USB mixing board to record onto your computer. I used it successfully to record onto my MacPro with both Spark ME and Audacity 1.2 digital recording programs (it would not work with Audacity 1.3). Although it combines all of its inputs to a two-channel stereo mix, with the multi-channel Audacity recording program, you can record and combine multiple takes to build as many tracks as you wish. I imported a live multi-channel mix done originally on a Presonus board and Cubase recording program into Audacity and added guitar and mando tracks with no problems. The microphone preamps in the TuneStudio are good enough that if your microphones are decent and placed well, the results can be surprising. I did compare the TuneStudio mic preamps with my Grace Lunatec mic preamps and the Lunatec *did* sound better. But unless you do direct A/B tests where you drive the preamps to their upper limits, you'll be hard-pressed to hear the TuneStudio's preamp shortcomings. I found the Audio Technica AT825 stereo microphone worked especially well with the TuneStudio's preamps. The microphone's X/Y

pattern delivered a very accurate and phase-correct stereo image I could place anywhere in the multi-channel mix.

An Acoustic Musician's Dream

Given its range of features and level of performance, the TuneStudio is a bargain at its suggested list price of \$399. Do a little bit of web surfing and you'll find its street price closer to \$199, making it ridiculously cheap. Since the TuneStudio is equally at home mated to an iPod or USB-supported computer, it could be the only mixer you'll need. Imagine making live on-location recordings with your iPod, then porting them onto your computer where you can add as many extra tracks as you wish (if you've got the right software). For an acoustic band or singer/songwriter, the TuneStudio opens the possibility of making your own demo recordings with less aggravation, higher quality, and lower cost.

Steven Stone is a contributing editor to Stereophile's Guide to Home Theater. He has also written for Stereophile, The Absolute Sound, Creem, and Spin magazines. For relaxation, he plays and collects guitars and mandolins. His e-mail address is ssstone8807@aol.com.

Vintage Guitar

Date:
Location:
Circulation (DMA):
Type (Frequency):
Page:
Keyword:

Friday, August 01, 2008
BISMARCK, ND
23,000 (N/A)
Magazine (M)
84
Belkin

