

# Presonus Firepod

An interface with eight mic preamps, Midi and S/PDIF I/O? Brad Watts discovers where there's smoke there's Firewire.

Presonus has been waiting a while for the nuts and bolts of Firewire audio to be sorted out. The company's original foray into the protocol relied on Yamaha's mLAN system. Although the Firestation was (and no doubt still is) a very capable unit, it didn't really hit the ground running in terms of sales. Much of the problem with the Firestation could have been attributed to the fact that it used mLAN. I'd dare suggest it was more a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth. You know the story: "Oh that's not our problem, call Yamaha." Only to get the reply from Yamaha, "Oh yes we've heard of this, you should call

— I use it for testing software, and in the meantime it turns the lights on and off over my reef tank, okay?) As a minimum spec Presonus recommends a 900MHz Pentium or Celeron or a G4 800. Both platforms should have at least 256MB of RAM.

## More than just a Pod

What is greatly appreciated is the OEM version of Cubase LE for both OSX and XP that comes with the Firepod. Now I usually expect OEM software to be rubbish but this is a damn fine version of Cubase! It looks, smells and feels like version 1.05 of Cubase SX



Presonus." Plus at the time I can recall my reservations being mLAN's upper sampling frequency (it's 96k but the Firestation's was only 48k) and the raft of control panels and drivers required made the whole process very complicated. This time around Presonus has called in its own programmers and got a unit up and sailing under its own power. The results are exceedingly more palatable.

## Pieces of Eight

The Firepod! It's a cute way to describe a single rack-mount set of eight microphone preamps, an audio and Midi interface all connected to your host CPU via a single Firewire cable. The usual players get a compatibility guernsey: Windows XP and Mac OS 10.3.5. But get this. I plugged it in... the Firepod then proceeded to function perfectly! Hasn't stopped since. I *will* unplug it eventually, but not until I've finished with the mic pres, which I might add, I'm rather pleased with. Windows users will have to go through a slightly more complicated setup procedure. Never fear though as the installation is nothing more than an install wizard which worked fine on my PC. (Yes, alright, I own a PC

without the bugs – more than capable software and well worth using. So when you begin to think about it, for around the \$1,500 mark the Firepod is looking like a pretty good deal. So what else has it got on show?

## Build Quality

I've never had any complaints with the build quality of Presonus products. The sturdy steel casing should take the odd bash and all the connectors are of professional quality. There is a little movement of the Firewire ports and the pot mountings but anything that gets plugged and unplugged regularly is firmly bolted into the case. At the rear of the unit you'll find balanced TRS jacks for eight outputs plus balanced TRS jack control room outputs and a second cue mix output. The output from the first two mic pre's can be accessed directly from further TRS balanced jacks and returned via two further rear jack inputs. The preamp outputs function without being connected to a computer so the unit can double as a spare pair of pre's if need be. S/PDIF is of the coaxial variety, then there's Midi In, Out, and two Firewire ports. The unit is powered with an external AC > AC power trans-

former. The unit will run on 12-24V DC or the supplied 15V AC adaptor.

### **Connectivity**

Out the front of the shop we see the eight Neutrik combo inputs. The first two of course are capable of both mic and instrument level input. There's nothing to complain about with these preamps. I used the unit as a stand-alone set of pre's for a recent project recording vocals (the pre we usually use was being repaired). Using a Neumann TLM-103 the Firepod preamps were remarkably clean. Phantom power to the eight pre's is switchable in banks of four – a pain when switching mics about, but at this price it's a minor niggle. Then we have eight blue anodised gain pots with 54dB of gain, main control room level and headphone level. The final mixer knob switches monitoring between the inputs or the host software output bus – the bullet-proof old trick for avoiding software and CPU latency using hardware. All LEDs are blue apart from the phantom power indicators. The Firewire indicator LED glows red when the unit has no clock sync and blue when the unit has found a sync source.

### **Ergonomics**

In use I couldn't fault the unit. It functioned just as you'd expect from what is now a common style of interface. I'm recalling how all this started with the MOTU 828, the 'studio in a rack' concept, which many manufacturers have since over-designed with myriad digital readouts, meaningless metering and too many software-based functions. I much prefer Presonus' workmanlike approach: for every function a knob and for every knob a function. As mentioned, the unit seamlessly integrated into Core Audio (OSX) and thus it worked fine in Logic Pro 7 and the supplied Cubase LE. The sound quality was also very good. With specs like 107dB A/D dynamic range and 110dB from D/A (I assume 'A' weighted) you're getting great quality at the price even before you add eight preamps to the equation – which by the way offer a publicised frequency bandwidth of 10Hz through to 50kHz, plenty wide enough for the 96k sample rate possible with the Firepod.

On the whole? I thought the Firepod sounded great when compared to many of the Firewire interfaces I've heard recently, plus it returned very solid performance. Add the preamps and a copy of Cubase and I'm cheering for Presonus.



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### **Price**

• \$1,495