

Spirit Live 324 Digital Mixing Console



BY MARK AMUNDSON

Not too long ago, I had a chance to survey various digital mixing consoles for a buyer's guide. Of those consoles, I was especially impressed with the Spirit consoles; as they seemed to have a reasonable quantity of analog inputs and features more in tune to live mixing. Thus, I was pleased to be receiving the Spirit Live 324 Digital Console for this road test review.

The Gear

The Live 324 console is a full-size mixing desk, jam-packed with every possible feature anyone in the live sound business could want. This British-built console has dimensions of 6.3" x 28.2" x 21.1", with a black console face and dark blue trim with gray and light blue legends. The console is laid out with 16 channel strips with XLR/TS inputs, insert jack, sensitivity (gain) control, 100 Hz high-pass-filter button, 100mm motorized faders for recall capability and a common "E-strip." The rest of the board contains areas for master jack-field, dual 16-segment LED meter bar, cue control, digital parameter control, select/assign buttons, FX returns, stereo inputs and a single 100mm fader master mix level control.

The 16 channel strips are actually used more than once. In fact, they are multiplexed four ways to handle 16 bank A analog inputs, 16 bank B digital inputs, 15 master buss levels and MIDI controller levels. Since the shared E-strip contains all the equalization and sends, the user has to select the bank A or bank B button and then use the channel's SELECT button to display the channel-specific E-strip settings and then adjust the appropriate strip knob. All this multiplexing eliminates dozens of redundant knobs like analog mixing consoles, but it does require the user to pay more attention to the overall board indicators.

Within the E-strip's 16 digital rotary knobs, nine knobs are dedicated to a fully parametric three-band equalization section. Not only do you get a frequency knob and an amplitude cut/boost knob, but an additional shape knob permits filter quality factor (Q) shaping from shelving on the high and low bands or 0.3 to 2.8 (wide to narrow Q) selection for bandpass peaking/notching. The remaining seven knobs on the E-strip are for the pan control, four auxiliary sends and two multi-effects sends to the two built-in Lexicon multi-effects processors.

The master section of this board is

where this Live 324 console really shows off the flexibility of digital control. There are four mute group buttons to allow selective channel muting flexibility. Normally found on large touring or recording consoles, these mute buttons are perfect for multi-act performances, theatre groups or corporate presentations with a lot of wireless mics that need to be muted when the performers are off-stage. Another professional feature of the console is the four matrix outputs besides the normal stereo outputs. The matrix outputs are typically used for special additional speaker feeds in large concert halls such as side or front fill speakers or for church-type uses where outer hall or cry-room mixes are requested.

As per the Live 324 designation, the mixing console has the standard 32 inputs (16 analog, 16 digital) that are mixed into four sub-groups that can then be sent to the stereo mix, matrix and two floating outputs. Each output is digitally routed and has an XLR jack for balanced interconnects. As each mix is built-up, they can be saved using the cue control section of the console. Each

PROS

- Built-in Signal Processing
- Extensive Signal Metering (Channels and Mixes)
- Recall and Cueing

CONS

- Price
- Learning Curve

SOUNDCHECK

- 16 XLR analog channel inputs
- 16 channel TDIF digital inputs
- 24-bit, 128x Oversampling Processing Power
- Two Lexicon Multi-Effects Processors, two Dynamics Processors
- Price: \$4,799.95

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cue is saved as a digital "snapshot" and can be recalled manually or with MIDI control.

To round out the features, two Lexicon digital multi-effects processors are included to provide reverb, delay, chorus or flange processing. Each effects processor has 112 patch selections and stereo outputs. After listening carefully to the sounds of the effects, I wish Lexicon had packaged the effects separately so us non-digital console users could enjoy the quality of the effects and the easy-to-use method to customize them. Two dynamics processors are also included in the Live 324 console as well, with each assignable to any channel, effects return, stereo input or main mix output. The dynamics processors are configurable to functions such as Gate, Compressor, Compressor/Gate, Limiter or Limiter/Gate. Another nice feature is that the metering of the assigned dynamics processor channel shows the gain reduction when used.

The Gig

Getting used to a console like this with so many features is a pretty overwhelming task. The channel multi-tasking and the E-strip controls came to me fairly quickly. The tougher part was learning the master section and getting used to the methods of assigning chan-

nels to sub-groups, groups to the master mix and assignments to the matrix outputs. The one thing that saved me from user guide overload was the laminated quick start guide. This provided quick keystroke notes with which to re-inform myself of the correct button pushes.

To kind of ease myself into the uncertainty of working with a digital mixing console under time pressure, I took the Spirit Live 324 to a rehearsal and dry ran the unit as though I was in a paid performance. My fears were pretty much put to rest and I felt ready to go for the gig "Full Monty." Also, the band members liked the patches of Lexicon effects, which meant less rack-mount processing to schlep around.

The gig was at a modest-sized club with seating and dancing for about 200. With my rehearsal confidence up and mentally prepared for just about any mixing peril, I started the gig and got everything under control well ahead of time. Using the quick start guide card as my cheater's guide, the setup went quickly and I was ready for downbeat. As the show commenced, I found that I was not really doing anything different than with my analog mixing console. If anything, having compressors and effects on-board kept my attention at the stage and the console, not having to divert attention to a processing rack. And of course, tearing down with the Live 324 digital console is much simpler without dealing with outboard processing and its requisite cabling.

Conclusions

The Spirit Live 324 digital mixing console proved to be worthy of live performance usage and sports plenty enough features for giggers. The 16 analog inputs are enough for most bands, and the additional 16 channels of digital inputs should be plenty for the technomusic types who do everything in ones and zeros. While it may take longer for analog-mixer curmudgeons like myself to get acquainted with the operation of the Live 324 console, the large amount of professional features means that it will have plenty of utility for all kinds of performances, including theatrical plays, religious services and corporate presentations. When I look for a downside to all this digital technology, it may be that the Spirit Live 324 aimed for the widest variety of applications, especially since digital consoles still cost more than most giggers are willing to spend. To be more aimed at concert/club gigs, I maybe would have changed to 24 or more analog channels, dropped the mute groups and some of the matrix outputs plus the cue controls. Of course, I am selfish.

Overall, the Spirit Live 324 digital mixing console is a full-featured console that showcases the benefits of digital signal processing technology. If you need all the bells and whistles in a portable format, this is your baby.

