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PreSonus Firebox (\$499 list)

VERSION 3

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Cross-Platform FireWire Audio Interface

By [Craig Anderton](#)

Interfaces are a hot topic, and while there are plenty of exotic options, one common question I get is "Look, I just want a simple, inexpensive, cross-platform interface that's small and has some good mic pres."

I too had that question—regarding an interface for my live performance act. A few people had told me the FireBox sounded like it would do the job, but I was concerned about five things:

- Latency, as I play guitar and sing through plug-ins live
- Size and weight, because I need as portable a setup as possible
- Reliability (hey, it's a live performance!)
- Sound quality, because the internal AC97 sound chip in my laptop has *definitely* worn out its welcome
- MIDI. There are a lot of great audio-only interfaces, but I needed a real MIDI port to accept input from my venerable Peavey PC-1600x controller.

So I got a FireBox to review, and found that it more than satisfied my needs...here's why.

THE BASICS

If you're reading this, you're online. So rather than re-invent the wheel, just surf on over to www.presonus.com/firebox.html to find out all the relevant specs. But I would like to annotate those with a few comments.

First, it really does feel substantial. The case is made entirely of metal, and the side flanges add a lot to the strength. The weakest point is the front panel, as the knobs protrude. So, when packing it up, I always make sure they aren't in a position where something could shear them off. Granted, that would require a huge amount of force, but I've had airlines destroy enough things that it never hurts to put some foam between the front panel and whatever the FireBox is packed in.



The FireBox is small, stocky, and sturdy.

Second, the cross-platform thing is a big deal to me. For years, I used only Mac laptops, but switched over to Windows machines when Apple started to lag behind in terms of performance. The Intel-based laptops have allowed Apple to catch up, so I wanted to make sure I had something that I could continue to use regardless of the laptop I was using. A 6-pin FireWire port supplies the needed juice, but if you're stuck with a 4-pin port, you can use the included AC adapter for power.

Third, and this is important, the "gozindas and gozoutas" meet my needs exactly, which is one reason why I'm using it. If you need to use more than two mics, or two mics and a guitar, this is not the droid you're looking for. Sure, you could add preamps and feed the line ins, but there are other interfaces that will give

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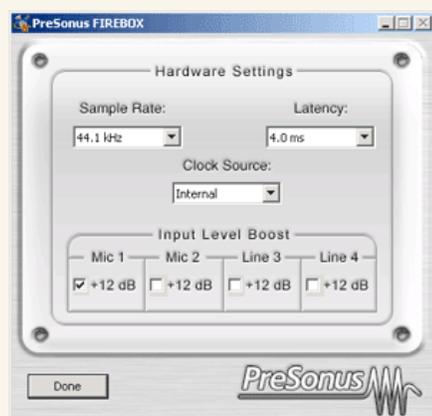
you more mic pres in the same package. Conversely, if you don't need MIDI, SPDIF I/O, or extra line outs, something like the Inspire will do the job and cost you less. As always, the most important aspect of a piece isn't whether it fits my needs, but whether it fits *yours*. Incidentally, phantom power is available, but it's applied to both mics or neither mic—you don't have a separate switch for each input.

SOUND QUALITY

I was actually very pleasantly surprised by the mic preamp quality (the mic ins are Neutrik combo jacks, so they double as high-impedance instrument inputs). I'm particularly picky about guitar direct ins; the FireBox sounds clean, and provides an ideal signal to the guitar plug-ins I insert in Ableton Live (my live performance software of choice). It turns out the mic pres are Class A, which explains a lot (maybe that's why the box runs a little warm, too), and the A/D converters are quoted at 110dB dynamic range—not surprising, given that we're dealing with 24-bit/up to 96kHz converters.

THE EXTRAS

MIDI and SPDIF I/O live on a breakout cable that connects to a DB-9 connector on the back. Frankly, breakout cables make me nervous because of their non-standard nature. If you have regular MIDI jacks and RCA phono or optical SPDIF and you lose a cable, just pick up a replacement at a music store or Radio Shack; not so with custom breakout cables. So I'll just give the same advice I give for any device that involves custom cables: Buy a spare, or at least ask the manufacturer for the pinout so you can wire up your own.



The FireBox control panel sets sample rate, latency, clock source, and input level boost.

I also appreciate the headphone output, which can reach the substantial volume levels sometimes necessary for tweaking while performing. Thankfully, it has its own level control.

LATENCY AND SOFTWARE

I use 4-6ms of latency live, as that's perfectly comfortable for playing and doesn't stress out the computer too much. I can get lower latency on my desktop, but seldom go lower than 4ms as that seems adequate for my needs and gives the computer some "breathing room."

There are three included pieces of software. A control panel lets you set latency, sample rate, and clock source, as well as apply a +12dB boost to each of the two mic and two line ins. One limitation is that you have to set sample rate manually; it doesn't "listen" to your clock. I don't find this a big deal because I usually set a sample rate and stick with it, but if someday it appears the FireBox isn't working, it's a good idea to check that the right sample rate is selected.



The Mixer allows zero-latency monitoring, as well as multiple routing options.

The second piece of software is a mixer applet for routing and zero-latency monitoring. It's pretty straightforward, with the usual level and pan controls, solo/mute, output assigns, gain link, etc.

The final piece of software is Cubase LE, which for many of you will probably be just another CD-ROM that gathers dust as you likely already have software you use. However, for those getting into computer-based recording—and the FireBox is well-suited to that application—Cubase LE represents added value.

[Computer Latency and Recording](#)
[Square One: Recording from the Ground Up](#)

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THE BOTTOM LINE

The web site includes not only the specs, but also three reviews that pretty much confirm my opinions, as well as provide some details on small differences when used with Mac OS X (I tested the FireBox with Windows XP). They're worth reading if you want additional perspectives on the FireBox's suitability for various applications.

But we all agree on the main points: The FireBox offers high sound quality in a seriously rugged package, with useful software, at a bang-for-the-buck price point (street is usually under \$300). Yes, it's been around for a while, but if you haven't checked out this box and the specs fit your needs, it's an overachiever.

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