The Peavey MuseBox: Plug-ins Without A Computer

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DAW

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Presonus
AudioBox 44VSL
Hardware and software integrate for seamless audio production

PreSonus has provided a variety of interesting innovations in computer audio over the past several years. The Inspire 1394 was the first FireWire audio interface that could be seamlessly networked to provide more ins and outs, a technology we now often take for granted; the StudioLive digital consoles (reviewed January 2011 and November 2011) provided a great platform for music recording and live band support, complete with wireless remote control from iOS devices; the Capture software allowed for quick and easy recording of multitrack audio in a live situation; and Studio One has come out of nowhere to become a serious DAW contender that plays well with pretty much all the hardware out there but offers special streamlining for users of PreSonus interfaces.

Now a lot of these technologies are finding their way into new forms. The AudioBox VSL Series is a set of three 24-bit/96 kHz USB audio interfaces that combine great-sounding hardware with a good chunk of the software integration that makes the PreSonus range so special.

There are three units in the series, named by the number of audio inputs and outputs they offer. The smallest is the 1/3-rackspace AudioBox 22VSL, a bus-powered and very affordable 2-in/2-out unit; next up is the half-rackspace AudioBox 44VSL on review today, which adds AC power, two more ins and outs, and is otherwise functionally identical to its smaller sibling. Finally there's a 1U

rackmount interface called the AudioBox 1818VSL that offers a wide range of I/O options and extra features not found on its smaller siblings, most recently including iPad-based remote control to turn it into a very portable music interface that does much of what you get with a StudioLive mixer, relying on your laptop for the DSP power that would otherwise be in the console.

The interface

The AudioBox 44VSL has four front-panel inputs on combination XLR/TRS jacks. All four inputs feature PreSonus's excellent XMAX preamps for mic signals; Inputs 1 and 2 can handle Hi-Z instrument-level inputs like guitars on their $1/4$" jacks, and Inputs 3 and 4 are for line-level inputs. A single button controls 48V phantom power for all four inputs.

The rear panel has $1/4$" jacks for L/R Mains, four independent Outputs, and a headphone out. There's also MIDI I/O, plus USB 2.0 and power. The front panel has four of PreSonus's confidence-inducing stepped gain pots for the inputs (each with its own Clip LED), as well as pots for input/VSL mix (see below), Mains level, and Phones level.

The interface comes packaged with Studio One Artist, PreSonus's DAW software that's included free with all its interfaces. For those who aren't familiar with Studio One's different versions, Artist provides unlimited track count for audio and

MIDI and comes with a nice selection of its own virtual instruments and plug-ins, plus 4 GB of audio content. For more information about Studio One, see our June 2011 issue.

There's also an installer CD with a full PDF manual to supplement the paper Quick Start Guide, and the AudioBox VSL software package that provides hardware drivers for Mac and Windows along with a special version of the Virtual StudioLive software for these interfaces. As always, you'll want to grab the newest version of the software from the PreSonus website, and don't be surprised if the very first thing your installed software does when it sees your interface is to offer to install new firmware for you so everything's up to date.

The software

As shown in the screenshots, the AudioBox version of Virtual StudioLive (VSL) gives you a complete overview of the interface and all of your signal processing options. While the heavy lifting is being done by the host computer rather than onboard DSP hardware, you still have access to a set of Fat Channel effects on every input and DAW return, as well as reverb and delay effects on two Aux buses.

Every input channel offers polarity invert, a Post button (see below), a full set of Fat Channel controls, sends to Outputs 3 and 4 and to FX buses A and B, Solo and Mute buttons, and pan and volume control. Metering is pre-fader for each channel

unless you select post-fader in the Setup menu, which also has options to tweak your buffer and latency settings, set sample rate, alter your meter ballistics, and more.

Now, what's this Fat Channel I keep going on about? Readers who are familiar with the StudioLive consoles know that the Fat Channel is PreSonus's term for the full set of built-in DSP effects that are available on the console's inputs and buses; there's a lot of power under the hood for doing really musical and effective signal processing. The AudioBox VSL software gives you the same set of effects on your inputs that you'd get on a StudioLive 16.0.2 console. That includes the following processors, each individually defeatable: a highpass filter (with tunable frequency, not just on/off), noise gate, compressor, limiter (preset to clamp all audio at 0 dBFS and prevent

Once you've created a set of levels and parameter settings that you like, just click on the + Button in the Scene tab and you've saved the entire state of the virtual mixer. You can restore it via drag-and-drop from the Browser at any time. Similarly there are Browsers for Fat Channel settings and delay/reverb settings; you can drag and drop presets from the list, and edit and save your own. This is the same workflow as provided in Studio One, and it works seamlessly with very little fuss.

In use

PreSonus makes much of the low latency of its drivers, from 6 milliseconds at 44.1 kHz sample rate down to under 3 milliseconds at 96 kHz. In my tests, the latency for audio processing was often inaudible and never a problem for a good performance.

I was struck by just how good the effects sounded and how easy it was to work with them either for monitoring or actual tracking. Anyone can stick a DSP chip inside an interface to provide a basic confidence reverb, or provide a pipeline to plug-ins of one sort or another (usually running inside the host DAW), but I haven't had this much easy success with low-latency effects on an interface in recent memory. Whether it's little things, like being able to dial in the highpass filter frequency on each channel or switch to a narrower Q on the mid eq band, or big things, like being able to save all your work with a single button click and get it back with a drag and drop, the AudioBox experience with VSL was quite rewarding.

Do I have any gripes? Aside from a personal preference for headphone jacks on

overs), and 3-band semi-parametric eq with shelving option on the high and low bands and two different Q values (broad 0.55 or more precise 2.0) on the mid.

You have the option of tracking with these effects in place if desired, or simply adding them to your monitor mix. This is not a global decision; it can be done individually for each input, simply by clicking the Post button mentioned above to send audio to your DAW post-Fat Channel. The Overview mode (Figure 1) shows miniature graphic displays for the Gate, Compressor, and EQ modules on each input and bus; double-click on any display to zoom in and be given a full set of controls for that module on that channel (as shown in Figure 2 for Input 1's eq).

My relatively old MacBook (a 2.0 GHz Core 2 Duo with 2 GB RAM running OS X 10.6.8) had no trouble at all providing the effects I asked for in addition to whatever I had set up in my DAW.

The AudioBox sounded great and worked flawlessly in all of my tests with Ableton Live, Apple Logic Pro, and of course PreSonus Studio One Professional, in which the DAW's cue mix setup integrated with the hardware to allow the same sort of low-latency monitor mix creation that's provided by AudioBox VSL. That level of integration is a relatively recent addition to the AudioBox drivers, as is one other improvement I wasn't able to test on my own: improved support for USB 3.0 ports.

the front panel rather than the rear, and an idle wish that PreSonus had a smaller version of its nifty Capture software to help with live recording, not really. Given the price point of these interfaces and the very well-integrated software they come with, PreSonus has hit a very nice sweet spot with the AudioBox VSL series. They're a great introduction to what makes working with PreSonus gear so effortlessly fun. ✏

Prices: AudioBox 22VSL, $199.95; AudioBox 44VSL (reviewed), $299.95; AudioBox 1818VSL, $499.95

More from: PreSonus, www.presonus.com