

Fostex DV824

By luck or by design, the number 8 is big in the world of audio post and has been adopted as a means of carrying track data between production stages. How you choose to carry it is another matter but digital tape has now finally been laid to rest in the wake of the arrival of this latest advance from Fostex. **NEIL HILLMAN** finds himself largely satisfied on pretty much all counts.



BACK IN 2003, after Fostex had introduced its DV40 4-track DVD Master Recorder, the hugely complimentary Resolution review (V2.1) carried this rider: it's great, it's a huge step forward over DAT, but when can we have 8 channels to enable us to replace our obligatory DA-78/88/98s, please? This logical progression from 4 to 8 tracks seemed to be an obvious development for the DV40, given the need from the audio post community for continuing the long established procedure of supplying 8-tracks of audio with any syndicated television programme on a DA-88 tape; or the similarly well-established procedure of supplying 8-track tapes containing 5.1 stems for film and DVD production.

TV work generally breaks programme components down to a so-called 'DA-88 mix'; a typical layout looking something like Tracks 1&2: Main Stereo mix (or the main Dolby Surround LtRt mix), Tracks 3&4: Clean Stereo Effects; Tracks 5&6: Clean mono Sync (on 5), Clean Commentary (on 6); Tracks 7&8: Clean Music. In a 5.1 environment this DA-88 process can archive the 6 stem tracks, with a 'guide' Dolby Surround LtRt mix parked on the first 2 tracks.

So while this is all pretty efficient as a storage or delivery medium, at the other end of the remixing process, the linear importing of this stuff is frustratingly time-consuming; real-time is not really an acceptably-efficient transfer speed now. In fact, from time to time — when we find ourselves playing buzzword-bingo with our client's production managers — their use of phrases like 'reversioning pipe-line' and 're-editing

work-flow' certainly help our long, winter evenings to fly by. Oh yes, I know we're a crazy, zany, mad-cap bunch in audio post, but there is a more serious point to this: for a client, where time is money spent on postproduction, unless you're very careful in pricing a job, their expectation is for these sizeable transfer times to be absorbed at your own cost. Which is why, for me, the Fostex DV824 (UK£2199 + VAT) is the most significant audio postproduction product of 2005. It's almost taken care of everything on my wish-list.

I say almost, because of two teeny-weeny yet fundamental shortcomings. First, due to the linear process of DVD as opposed to the random nature of hard-disk, the time-saving ability to ftp the Broadcast Wave .WAV files off supplied field recording disks and into a DAW, works only in one direction — from the 824; and in this lazy, IT-based world we now exist in, I would really, really like the option to just drop-and-drag finished mixes the other way, straight back on to the DV824. Second, you can't overdub. In fairness, the first you can't do with tape either — but with an optional hard disk fitted to the Fostex you can at least write in multiple media recording modes including CD-R, CD-RW, DVD-R and DVD-RW, copying to the DV824 via that internal hard disk; but with the second gripe, of course with tape, you can easily overdub.

With the introduction of the DV824, Fostex would seem to have now completed its DVD-based audio production chain family and let's face it, it is no stranger to digital audio. It invented the timecode

DAT 15 years ago, introducing timecode capable location versions too. The successor to these fondly-remembered location PD2 and PD4 models — the PD6 — introduced the DVD format to feature film location recording, and quickly established itself as a digital, versatile, disc-based platform: sales have already exceeded the magic 500 number.

Fostex has been robust in championing the DVD-RAM format as the natural successor to DAT, and its reasoning is sound enough: DVD-RAM has a proven durability — 100,000 rewrites are assured; the cartridge-held disc offers better protection from the bumps and grinds that could cause external damage to the disc itself; it offers good editing facilities and built-in error correction capabilities; and with the real-time, error-free recording afforded by Fostex's Verify/Write technology, the Film industry has taken to it. Now, with the introduction of the DV824, television studios and postproduction houses will also be taking note, while location drama recordists will welcome the extra capacity and flexibility afforded by the device.

It's a sophisticated beast, yet not complicated. The DV824 can record up to 8 channels of simultaneous audio, in a plethora of permutations: as well as mono and stereo track modes, the device offers 4, 5, 6, and 8 track modes, with the capability to handle 8-track simultaneous recordings at 24-bit/48kHz, and 4-track simultaneous recording at 24-bit/96kHz. This new Fostex continues to use Type-2, one sided discs, offering a capacity of 4.7Gb (typically 96 minutes of 8-track at 48kHz/16-bit, or 64 minutes of 8-track at

48kHz/24-bit). As with all Fostex DVD products, the discs are formatted in accordance with the Universal Disc Format (UDF), and data on the DV824 is stored in uncompressed Broadcast Wave (.WAV) format interleaved files. This means that the discs may be read by any of the main computer operating systems, including Windows, Mac and Linux; making for easy transfer to external editing systems.

That optional 40Gb or 80Gb hard disk enables dual-disk recording, as well as offering an auto back-up facility. Further options can also be found on the timecode/Sync card, which allows for internal and external timecode to be generated and integrated into the recording process, and includes a biphasic input for synchronising the DV824 to a film projector.

The slim 2U device externally breaks-down into two major sections: front and rear. All connectivity is accessed through the rear panel: its eight +4dBu, balanced XLR-3 analogue inputs sit in a row above the eight analogue output XLR connectors, and its digital I-O is via a D-sub 25-pin with pin connections conforming to those found on Yamaha kit. This connector handles AES-EBU and SPDIF. The unit may be controlled remotely through a mini-DIN 8-pin connector, or through a conventional video-controller RS-422. A second 'through' 9-pin echoes the signals received at the master 9-pin connector, enabling multiple units to be controlled.

A 100ohm slider switches terminates the 9-pin connector, while a second, similar switch terminates the Word In signal. Two BNC connectors carry the Word clock I-Os while an RJ45 socket is used for the Ethernet port. This enables the DV824 to be connected to an Ether network conforming to 100/10 base-T. Accordingly, two lights illuminate the port's status: the Link lights when recognising the network, and the 'TX/RX' lights when receiving or sending data. Power is supplied to the unit from an AC adaptor.

The front panel is an altogether busier place, as a whistle-stop tour will confirm. The first three eye-catching features are the disk loading-drawer on the left hand side above the power On/Off switch, this disk tray is operated by a key adjacent to the tray; the eight 18-bar level meters, showing the recording or playback levels of tracks; and a 132 x 64 dot-matrix LCD. The large, 7-segment time-display is located below this LCD, with the time displayed selected through the use of a Time Select/Contrast key, which



cycles through Absolute, TC In, Generator and LTC. Like many of the front panel buttons, it has a shifted and un-shifted function. A column of small indicator lamps on the right hand side of the display panel show which mode is selected, including Drop-Frame. A USB keyboard port is useful for quickly naming files and there's also a Phones section with a 1/4-inch headphone socket, volume pot and switchable matrix combination allowing a variety of sources to be selected, including mono mix, stereo mix, stereo tracks and soloed tracks.

Sandwiched between the edge of the disk tray and the level meters are two indicators related to disk access, indicating the condition of the currently selected drive. With the optional hard disk installed and selected, the HD light is lit; when the DVD drive is selected, the DVD light is lit. These tri-state lamps show green when a drive is selected, orange when reading data and red when writing.

Below the level meters, time display and display panel are the familiar five transport buttons.

A three-by-four layout of buttons on the right hand side of the central display area takes care of various direct data entry/'shifted' functions. These cover functions such as alphanumeric entry, File Select, Drive Partition, Pre Record Slate Tone, List Play, Edit EDL, Chase, Time Select, Contrast, All Input, Safe: Ready, Mark:Cue, Locate, Edit Time and Clear, among

others. These buttons work in conjunction with the Skip/Cursor left/right keys on the bottom right hand of the front panel, the Shift key, and the Menu dial/Enter:Yes dual function turn-to-select, push-to-accept knob.

The DV824 neatly completes the Fostex suite of DVD-RAM products, and justifiably sits at the top of its family tree. Anyone familiar with the ubiquitous DA-88 will quickly feel at home using the DV824, and barring my petty gripes about the small inflexibility inherent with using DVD rather than tape, I am sure that the DV824 will soon become a familiar fixture in postproduction studios. ■

PROS Almost everything you could want from an audio postproduction master recorder is here.

CONS Readily reads 'family' discs from the DV40 and PD-6, but not DEVA II; special software is needed to play DEVA IV and V.

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