Fostex FR-2 LE

Fostex's contender for the entry-level CF compact field recorder stakes finds NEIL HILLMAN travellin' Lite and prepared to trade donuts.

IT'S HARD TO know whether this current proliferation of new-generation small CF recorders is actually a good or bad thing. On the one hand, these cheap machines seem to be built to withstand little more than an undemanding domestic life, a situation compounded by their poor hardware driven by inflexible consumer software. Yet on the other hand, these devices house 96kHz, 24-bit capabilities that we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss. While professional camera manufacturers have found that a modestly-priced entry level product to their more substantial 'real' professional range does no harm at all to their image or market share, do these audio equivalents actually have the right to be considered as serious tools of the trade?

Fostex recently launched its FR-2 LE, a baby brother to the bigger, rather more capable FR-2, to meet the low-price competition from Tascam's HD-P2, Marantz's PMD 660, Edirol's RO9, Zoom's H4 and interestingly, from video editing specialists Avid, the Microtrack 24/96.

The Fostex FR2-LE (UK£339+VAT) is a two-channel device that records uncompressed BWF format .WAV's at 44.1kHz/16, 44.1kHz/24, 48kHz/16, 48kHz/24, 88.2kHz/24, 96kHz/24; and compressed MP3 files at 192kbps. It's a FAT 32 file arrangement, with maximum file size menu selected between 2Gb or 4Gb, with a total recording time dependent on the Type 2 CompactFlash card fitted and the sample rate chosen: but typically, a 1Gb card will record between 96 minutes at 44.1kHz/16 and 30 minutes at 96kHz/24; a whopping 670 minutes is achieved in 192kbps MP3.

The neat Combo XLR/¼-inch jack inputs on the left side of the machine enable mic and line level inputs, with the -10 to +2dBV line inputs on the jacks offering a 10kOhm input impedance. The XLRs offer 6kOhm, a nominal input level between -50 and -10dBu and, encouragingly, 48V phantom power is available. The mic amps are in fact surprisingly crisp, powering my Sennheiser 416 and Pearl MS-8 CL microphones perfectly adequately. A 12V dual concentric DC input and a 3.5mm input socket for the remote transport controller complete this panel.

Come to the front face though, and you're under no misapprehension about the low cost of this device. Tiny, ungraduated, black rotary pots camouflage themselves perfectly against a black panel, standing defiantly proud and unprotected from unwitting adjustment. Above them, and the similarly designed Monitor pot, a rattling, fragile flap ascends on beautiful foolish arms to reveal the card slot. Alongside, a 1970's Dictaphone joke-scale shows mic peaks. Two keys taken straight from the Fostex parts bin hint at the family connection: these 'Rec STBY' and 'Rec' buttons sit alongside a large dual concentric LR level rotary control, again demonstrating Chameleon-like graduations.

The right hand side face has a series B USB 2.0 connector that marries the device to a PC — there's no Mac option yet — and it's mounted above the phono monitor-out sockets. The push-and-hold power switch is above the 3.5mm headphone socket. A 300mWatt built-in speaker has its grille in the bottom face, and is disabled by the insertion of the headphones. This also, frustratingly, disables the monitor phonos so the opportunity to feed another device while listening on headphones is lost.

The top face is a busy office, housing the internal left and right microphones and carrying the transport controls Play, Stop, Fast Forward and Rewind, as well as the menu soft-keys for machine set-up and file handling. A cramped but easily readable backlit LCD display carries almost all the information needed: File number; a large Absolute Time/Programme Time/Real Time display; a transport-state symbol: square for stop, circle for record, arrow for play, double arrow for REW or FWD; four set-up flags for ALC: on/off, HPF: on/off, P48: on/off, Source: internal mic high-gain/internal mic low-gain/ connectors; file type of the recording; a battery bargraph; the real-time clock and date and the more useable 8-segment horizontal level meters. Above the meters are the current recording file name and the recording time remaining on the card.

So, having used the device for stereo wild tracks and podcast interviews, would I buy an FR2-LE? Well try and prise this one out of my flightcase, if you can. Oh alright, maybe there are even more things that I ought to be sniffy about — the fact that there are no digital I-Os, no timecode capability and no MS decoding; but quite frankly that would be inappropriate to the point of simply being silly. The Fostex FR2-LE's Fisher-Price build quality belies its inherent capability: 10 years ago, we location recordists would have been prepared to miss a month's worth of coffee and donuts to have had the convenience of a wild-track and back-up recorder like this. One that offered the convenience and speed of digital file handling, on cheap, robust media, with mic amps as quiet as these; and all at a price that can be recovered in just over a day's work. A decade ago DAT was still very much alive on location, and any small back-up machine a recordist carried on to the set was likely to be either an unloved, power-hungry, consumer DAT device, bereft of any semblance of pro-controls or connectors, or a lossy MiniDisc format that never really fulfilled its huge initial promise, leaving the rather more worthy HiMD MiniDisc with too much ground to make up in recovering market-share.

So instead here we are — spoilt for choice by these cheap and cheerful, feature-rich, small and light, highly capable, entry-level machines; of which the Fostex FR2-LE is, probably, the pick of the bunch. Just don't drop it.

PROS High spec for such a low price.

CONS Questionable build quality and not the cheapest of these budget recorders, even though it feels like it when compared particularly to the Marantz and Tascam models.

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