

Fostex VF-16

Brad Watts plugs in a handy little workhorse. The RSPCA are none too impressed.

There's a hoard of hard disk multitrack machines available at the moment, but none currently packs the VF-16's healthy feature-set at such an affordable price point. It owes much of its design to the VM-200 console reviewed in Issue 6 of *AudioTechnology*.

The VF-16 is reasonably compact and weighs about 4kg. Straight out of the box it's capable of playing back 16 tracks of unadulterated 16-bit/44.1k audio. Recording-wise it's only possible to track eight simultaneous sources. Sixteen-track recording is only possible using an external ADAT A/D via the unit's 'lightpipe' interface. There's provision for a further eight virtual tracks for storage of additional takes, but the unit's polyphony is restricted to 16-channel

playback. Of the eight analogue inputs, two are present as balanced XLR plugs with global phantom power and insert points.

While a SCSI port at the rear of the unit will allow connection of external hard drives, the unit does come supplied with an internal, 8.1GB IDE drive. The VF-16

formats drives in a proprietary Fostex format to provide around three hours of mono track time per 1GB of drive space. That's about 24 minutes of

eight-track recording or about 12 minutes of 16-track recording (per 1GB).

The top of the unit is laid out in a typical 'pseudo console' style. The sixteen 60mm channel faders are grouped to the left in two banks of eight – one above the other. These are not motorised by the way (unlike the VM200). Faders are brought back to a saved mix positions with simple but effective 'null' information presented on the LCD display. The user merely moves the fader up or down until the software reflects that it's in the correct position. The only form of automation in the VF-16 is scene recall. Some 99 scenes can be stored and then recalled according to timecode. Sadly, the Midi spec doesn't permit you to send fader values. All Midi info in the VF-16 is solely for timecode and MMC commands – to keep the machine in sync with a sequencer or second multitracker.

Above the fader section are trim pots for the eight analogue inputs and all input and insert jacks. To the right of these are pots for headphones and the monitoring levels. The 'centre strip' of the VF-16 is home to the master fader and buttons for accessing EQ, pan, the external auxiliary sends, dynamics and the two internal effect units. To the

right of this centre strip are the transport controls, a jog and shuttle wheel, and the LCD display. I must point out that the VF-16 is housed in a very sturdy steel casing, unlike other manufacturers' similar units which are housed in plastic.

The two effects paths of the VF-16 are a thoughtful standard inclusion. Other units offer processing as an option. Here Fostex have included their A.S.P. or Advanced Signal Processing units as found in the VM200 digital mixer. Fostex have chosen to keep the VF-16 affordable and have (from what I recollect of the VM200) supplied the VF-16's effects as cut down versions of the VM200's effects. This has helped to keep the unit at a healthy price point and, quite frankly, I think the effects are fine for this level of recording. Effect One is pretty much dedicated to reverb, while the second effect takes care of time delay processing such as flange, chorus and delays. These are the staples of any mixing work and should return some very serviceable results. And while there is compression, it's only available on channels 13 to 16, and the master. Should you want EQ and compression on channels 13 to 16 I'm afraid you're out of luck – it's one or the other. Fortunately EQ and dynamics can be applied to the master at the same time for that final tweak before you mix down. The EQ section is entirely adequate, with full parametric three-band EQ on all channel paths – no EQ memories unfortunately.

As for editing tracks with the VF-16, all the typical editing tools are there. Cut, copy, move and paste make their presence felt, along with shuttling, scrubbing and a $\pm 6\%$ varispeed function. There's even a nifty little waveform display for the finer points of digital surgery. Bouncing tracks is possible, of course, but the 16-track limit has to be adhered to – i.e. you need to keep two tracks free to bounce to – which should keep most people happy. Alternatively you could use the ADAT or S/PDIF ports to bounce your sixteen tracks to DAT or minidisc and then back to the VF-16 for further overdubs.

On the whole I think the VF-16 is a great little workhorse recorder. It doesn't have the speaker simulators, amplifier emulators, and other bells and whistles that more expensive 16-track recorders have to offer, but it is about half the price. For the musician wanting a stable 16 tracks to record to while on the road or at home with full fader control it's an ideal unit.



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