

Dangerous Music

D-Box

Hey kid, wanna make a record? Lord knows how you're going to do it. At home on a laptop, in some studio doing basics, probably to a computer, but maybe you're using tape. Your session changes locations from here to there, maybe even daily as you bring the studio to the musicians. You head out and record in somebody's cabin, next week you're back in some larger place doing overdubs, editing in the other room as other people are tracking. Mixing might be anywhere, on the fly, a small room for this, a larger studio for that... you can plan all you want, but you're going to be making it up as you go along, no matter what.

Modern recording is a fluid proposition, and the need for small-footprint, high-quality gear is increasing. According to Dangerous Music, that was the major impetus behind the design of the *D-Box*. It's a "greatest hits" of all their designs and components to date, wrapped up in a 1RU-height unit. You've got an 8-channel version of their summing bus technology, monitor routing with components from the Monitor ST, and a DAC that's based on the one in the Dangerous Monitor. With headphone amps and talkback, you have a very portable and extremely high-fidelity center to base any studio setup around, no matter where you are. The idea seems to have been to keep the same Dangerous attention to fidelity, have a few less features, but get the price to where people can afford it. I'd have to say that after spending time with the *D-Box*, I think it's a complete smash hit. And probably destined to be Dangerous Music's *Eagles Greatest '71-'75*—maybe even *Beatles '67-'70*.

My own studio has been in flux since day one, just like everybody else's. I've kept things as mobile as possible, as I've done a lot of "studio to go" in the past. Moving the whole thing around all the time, I've had a lot of different setups. Different mixers, different tape machines, different digital formats—all sorts of gear has come and gone. It's been a constant evolution, trying to put together a setup with a good workflow where I can make informed decisions. Monitors are the last thing between electricity and your ears, but if you have multiple pairs and switch back and forth all day, it's really all about how you're shuttling your audio around. As time has passed, the most important improvements have not surprisingly been changes at the center of my whole setup. Where it used to be a console or a mixer, it's evolved into several different input/monitor selectors. Before the new crop of summing solutions, I was mixing in the box, struggling with the difficulties of staying purely digital. Changing to a summing amp brought peace back into my home and ease into the workflow. For me, the summing bus at the center of the whole setup and that one main volume knob is where it's at. If you can get fidelity there, it spreads out everywhere.

The day the *D-Box* arrived at the studio, I was in the middle of doing some stem mixing for a band called The Long Lost, a soft and sweet sounding record for my friends Alfred and Laura Darlington. Alfred, who also records under the name Daedelus, was on tour when I had mixed the record at The Hangar, where they have a Dangerous Monitor ST. So we were finally all sitting down to make some small changes to stems that I had printed. We had been working for a while when UPS showed up. Alfred and I pulled my current input/monitor selector out, switched a few cables over to the *D-Box*, and turned it up. All of us were pretty shocked at the immediate difference. The *D-Box* soundstage was more three-dimensional and the low end much, much clearer. I could feel subs with my feet through the floor that hadn't been there before. It made such a change—and so much for the better—

that we switched back to the old switcher/router just to check again. The old setup sounded fine, but it just wasn't as open and dynamic sounding as the *D-Box*. The *D-Box* brought the depth of field back to the music that I had experienced during mixdown, but had been struggling to hear at home. After plugging in the *D-Box*, I haven't looked back.

So what do you get for your money? Conceptually, the front panel of the *D-Box* is broken up into three basic sections—communications/setup, input selection, and summing—with a volume pot at the far right. The communications section has two headphone outputs that are robust and clear as a bell. The *D-Box* uses the same headphone power amps used in the Monitor ST and the MQ. One output has enough juice to power several sets of headphones easily. There's a talkback mic, talkback level control, and a "momentoggle" talkback switch that takes a little getting used to. Hold it down, and it's momentary, muting the mic when you release it. Tap and release it, and it latches open, staying on until you tap it again. I plugged a damper pedal from some old keyboard into the back to keep it in momentary mode all the time to avoid the inevitable "talking crap in the control room" situation. The mono button is next, followed by the alternate speaker button. These last two buttons, in setup mode, also configure the input selector mode as additive or exclusive and change the analog input level from +4 dBu to -10 dBV.

The input selectors allow you to access the stereo output of the summing amp; an analog input; and two digital sources labeled "DAW" and "CD", which can take AES/EBU or S/PDIF formats via female XLR connectors on the back. I was initially confused by these inputs, wanting to hook up the RCA S/PDIF output of my Digi 002, but a call to Dangerous and an RCA-XLR adapter was the quick solution. The last section, the summing amp, is just dead simple and fantastic. There's an output level control that's at unity all the way up, -6 dB at noon, and -12 dB all the way down. According to Bob Muller at Dangerous, this input gain-staging is the same on the 2-Bus and 2-Bus LT, and has two main benefits: dropping the noise floor of your D/A converters by 6 dB, and allowing you to run your faders (and thus your D/A output levels) much hotter than you would typically be able to using the internal digital bus. It's smart, and it works. I have to say though, that even with the summing amp cranked, there's still so much headroom that I've never heard the summing bus close down, ever. It seems to be able to take everything that my Digi 002 can throw at it with ease. All eight inputs have single LEDs to show signal activity, and channels 7 and 8 have their own pan knobs with mono center detents.

Last, but not least at all, is the volume pot. Probably the thing you're going to reach for the most, and one of my favorite things on the *D-Box*. I like to listen quietly a lot of the time, and most volume pots, on everything from high-end consoles down to home stereos and boomboxes, all give out or degrade at the low end of their throw. Drives me crazy. You turn down and the image shifts, or one side gives out completely! The *D-Box* volume pot is one of the most stable and elegantly-machined components of the whole unit. It feels solid as a rock, like you could lift up on it and tip the whole rack over. Turn it down, and it stays dead stable all the way to silence. Love it.

It took me a little while to get to monitoring digitally out of Pro Tools as all of my sessions weren't configured that way. I've never been able to afford a quality DAC. When I finally hooked up the S/PDIF out and heard the DAC in the *D-Box*, it blew me away. I had already been happy with the jump in fidelity just using the analog in, but this was crazy. The low end took another step forward in clarity, reducing my "Do I need a Subwoofer?" question, and bringing out detail

in the drum machines that I've been using lately. The imaging was even better than before, and for the first time, my home space has begun to feel as solid as other rooms that I feel really comfortable mixing in. The quality of this converter was the deal closer for me. It was a real "I can't go back" moment, and I've switched all my monitoring to the DAC input, and musicians who know my room have heard the difference.

It proved its use outside of my room as well. When I was mixing a solo record for Jayhawks singer Gary Louris earlier this year, I took the *D-Box* into the studio to get around some monitoring issues that I was having. It worked like a champ, and there was happiness from everybody once they heard the DAC.

Over the next few months as the *D-Box* sat in with me everyday, I really began to appreciate having something of this caliber in arguably the most important spot in the studio. The build-quality of the *D-Box* is completely plush, and it's designed for heavy, all-day use. Dangerous didn't skimp on quality at all. The speaker switches are dead silent and have great tactile response, which is really important to me, as I'm hard on speaker switches. I cut back and forth a lot, sometimes in rhythm with the song. I make a lot of my decisions based on the transition between speakers, and the *D-Box* feels fantastic.

On the smallish downside, at home, I was used to having a remote volume control on my desktop and a dedicated cue bus for headphone mixes, but I found that this tradeoff was more than outweighed by the jump in clarity that I experienced. In the end, the features that I thought I needed had easy workarounds, but it did take a little bit of figuring out how to make it work best for my setup. That's evolution I guess. I could see that people who use subwoofers might want a dedicated button to switch one in and out of multiple speaker setups, but there are solutions for that as well.

The *D-Box* is an incredible buy for the price. You get an amazing summing amp, a central monitoring/routing hub, and a fantastic DAC for \$1399. All constructed with Dangerous Music DNA. There are boxes out there with more features for less money, but for the peace of mind that your fidelity is world-class, in a footprint that's small enough to take anywhere, this is your answer.

(\$1399 street; www.dangerousmusic.com)

—Thom Monahan <thom.mn@gmail.com>

Line 6

GearBox Plug-in Gold Bundle

This is a plug-in bundle with a hardware front-end which doubles as a copy-protect dongle. As a plug-in suite for Mac OS X or WinXP, *GearBox Gold* is a home run! But, if you only want to use the plug-ins with your existing DAW, the *TonePort DI* hardware (*Tape Op* #51) may seem superfluous to you.

Line 6's hardware and software products are well respected. Unfortunately for many DAW users, Line 6's flagship Amp Farm and Echo Farm plug-ins are only available as relatively pricey TDM versions. Now, I'm happy to report that with *GearBox Gold*, you essentially get both flagship plug-ins and whole lot more in native RTAS, VST, and AU versions for the very reasonable street price of \$500.

The interface for *GearBox* took me only a minute or two to get used to; I think Line 6 has done a fantastic job of making 216 amp and effects models accessible. Rather than load one plug-in for an echo, another one for an amp, and so on, all of the *GearBox* models reside within one GUI plug-in that's very intuitive and easy to use. The top half of the plug-in window is your amp or preamp model. This is where you select an amp, a speaker, a preamp, or turn off the amp modeling. A GUI that resembles the selected amp fills this