

# Digital Consoles

by Ken Friesen

**S**o you can't avoid it. The question's been asked: "How are you on digital consoles?"

Unless you are insulated by a clientele that allows you to carry your own analog console and processing everywhere you go, you'd have to be living under a rock not to come across digital desks. Luckily, digital mixing consoles are not the enemy. They are a matured technology. Fear not. There's still enough flicker factor to impress the locals, even if it isn't seven feet long, and it still looks like mission control to the ladies walking by.

You will know you are looking at a digital console by the absence of outboard processing racks. All mic preamps, internal patching, equalization, filters, compression, gates, reverb, and effects are contained in within the desk. Digital consoles generally have a smaller footprint than their analog counterparts, so all this makes for fewer seat kills and therefore more potential income for the promoter. They'll like that.

The good news is that all of your favourite functions are in there someplace. The bad news is you don't know where to find them. If you have advanced the gig properly you will have known this moment was coming. If you know the type of console it will be prior to the show, you can do your homework by downloading the manual and/or the operating software off the Internet. Read it. The last manual I read for a live analog mixing desk was for a Yamaha PM3000 in 1988. I've read the manual on most of the digital consoles I've worked on, in whole or in part. It's better investing some time in advance to cut down the amount of flailing you'll be doing in front of your client.

As part of the setup you will need to do the soft patch assignment of all your inputs and outputs to the appropriate analog interface, as well as your usual console setup. All this takes programming time. You know, like light guys. Most of the important menus will be sensibly grouped and there will be some you should ignore. Depending on the desk you are using, you may even be able to carry in your show on a pre-loaded disk or memory stick if you want a head start.

The tricky thing about these desks is that the pots, switches, and faders are assignable. This means they are not dedicated to a single purpose, but can control any number of mix parameters. You are handling a control surface only. This is significantly different than the old analog way, where each button does only one thing and the signal passes through it. All the digital signal processing is taking place in the bowels of a computer hidden somewhere inside. You can switch pages to change what the control surface is doing. For instance, on one "page" or "layer" the fader on the far left will be channel 1 and on another layer it will be channel 49, or the row of dials across the inputs can be pan or an aux send. Add to this the soft patch of assignments that allows you to put any physical input to any channel and anything goes! This causes an extra layer of thinking when you're under the gun and requires constant vigilance.



The best way to avoid having a digital console feel "pagey" is to use your new best friend: the dedicated centre channel. This is just what the name implies. There are specific controls for specific parameters, so the only thing that changes is which input/output is being affected. You can simply select the channel you need to work on and there it is, right in front of you with every control available. Just be careful, because even here that aux send might be a group master.

Once you have your sound check done (or any other time you make a change you'd like to keep) you will need to find the save function. Snapshot recall is one of the major advantages to a digital console, allowing several acts to use the same desk. With any luck at all there will be a competent systems tech present who can help you with this and any other questions you might have. Treat them with respect and don't be too proud to ask – you might learn something.

Digital consoles are more complicated than their analog counterparts because they are capable of more functions in a smaller size and weight. This means the learning curve can be steep and often an intuitive analog system can still be the best answer. Digital mixing, however, is here to stay and getting stronger everyday. If you want to work in audio in the 21st century, you're going to have to learn to live with it.

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