From Black to Blue

The BlueBox range marks JoeCo's first foray into the world of audio interface technology

Imagine recording in a world without fear of losing that golden take.
Simon Luckhurst finds out if JoeCo's BlueBox range lives up to its promise

ANYONE WHO'S EVER DABBLED WITH RECORDING, BE IT professional or for fun, will know that sinking feeling when halfway through an important session, the monitor you're perched in front of goes blank. If you're lucky, it happened in the studio and while regaining that magical take could be more illusive than presumed, at least you have a chance. But if failure happens during a live concert recording, it's game over. Suggest an artist that would be happy with the scenario – because *Pro Audio Asia* can't. It might be embarrassing at the time, but more importantly, it might well cost you future work. If an artist feels like they wasted time and money with nothing to show for it, why would they return?

As someone who not only understands and appreciates this scenario but has lived through it first hand, JoeCo's Francis Duggan, decided something must be done.

'I produce music and record bands in my home studio, but also live. Having used lots of different computers in the past and a variety of different DAWs such as Cubase, Ableton and Logic, it's always occurred to me that there's no protection when your workstation fails,' recalls Mr Duggan. 'I remember having a not very reliable setup some time ago, and it becoming very frustrating, very quickly when the DAW kept crashing and I didn't know why. It was embarrassing for me then, so for people in professional studios that are recording a big artist, it must be horrible. That's where the original concept came from – a professional system that can protect you against losing your recordings.

'But it's not only suitable for studios, there are a lot of people out there who record bands using a laptop and an audio interface. They have no backup and laptops have a lot of background processes running. Something happens at the gig, the laptop fails and they've lost all of their work. It seemed to be a useful idea to not only have a system that worked well in the studio but which could also be used as an audio interface in live scenarios, so you can be making a recording there, and also making a secondary backup recording.'

The idea seems obvious, yet it appeared that nobody had set to work on a solution. 'After coming up with the idea, I did lots of market research, seeing what was out there and

Francis Duggan of JoeCo

whether there were any products that currently provide this kind of functionality. I didn't come across any. So we realised that there was room for something new. A product that, as it happens, has ended up becoming an entire range because this key feature is so unique.'

Clearly there is a need. One prominent voiceover studio in

the US has already been deploying BlackBox recorders to, in effect, manually simulate the functionality BlueBox provides. 'They have a BlackBox in every single room, recording all-day long so they don't miss anything at all,' says Mr Duggan. However, the BlackBox and DAWs within that facility still operate independently. BlueBox represents a bridge between the two.

There are currently two models available in the BlueBox range, the BBWR24MP and BBWR08MP, with a third planned for release later this month. 'We launched the first two products in September. There's a third product, the BBWR24B, that's being released as we speak. Our flagship BlueBox product, the BBWR24MP, has 24 inbuilt preamps in a 1U box, which was a fairly impressive bit of design and a challenge to say the least. The third version being released now doesn't have any preamps integrated at all, and follows in the heritage of our very successful balanced BlackBox, the BBR1B.' The second BlueBox already available, the BWR08MP, offers the same functionality as the flagship unit while scaling back the number of switchable input channels to eight and providing 16 dedicated balanced inputs.

Of course given JoeCo's success with the BlackBox recorder, protection from failure is in its DNA. Having established the company in 2007 to launch the BlackBox Recorder in 2009, JoeCo understands a thing or two about reliable recording, and has built its reputation on this premise. Interfacing its systems with computer workstations, however, brings an entirely new set of challenges.

'We have a great hardware and software development team that are very experienced and have been in the industry for a long time,' explains Mr Duggan. 'They have experience with


The front panel of the flagship model, BBWR24MP

writing drivers, but from so long ago that it was before Windows even existed. Mostly, we were starting from scratch. This meant there was an incredible amount of research involved. You really have to understand what you're letting yourself in for rather than just going ahead and trying to fix problems that arise afterwards.

'So we made a detailed plan at the beginning with all of the market research, what we wanted to achieve, its target markets, and then the technical information that we need to go ahead with things, because if you don't put those things in place you bump into brick walls halfway through development, encountering things you'd never considered.'

It would be naive to underestimate this task. Asked whether BlueBox is simply a BlackBox in disguise, *Pro Audio Asia* is put firmly in its place. 'Not at all,' proclaims Mr Duggan. 'There are some big differences under the hood. We've completely redesigned our preamps and that's taken a lot of time. The internal design is really quite different and we've added some new features that the BlackBoxes do not have what so ever. For
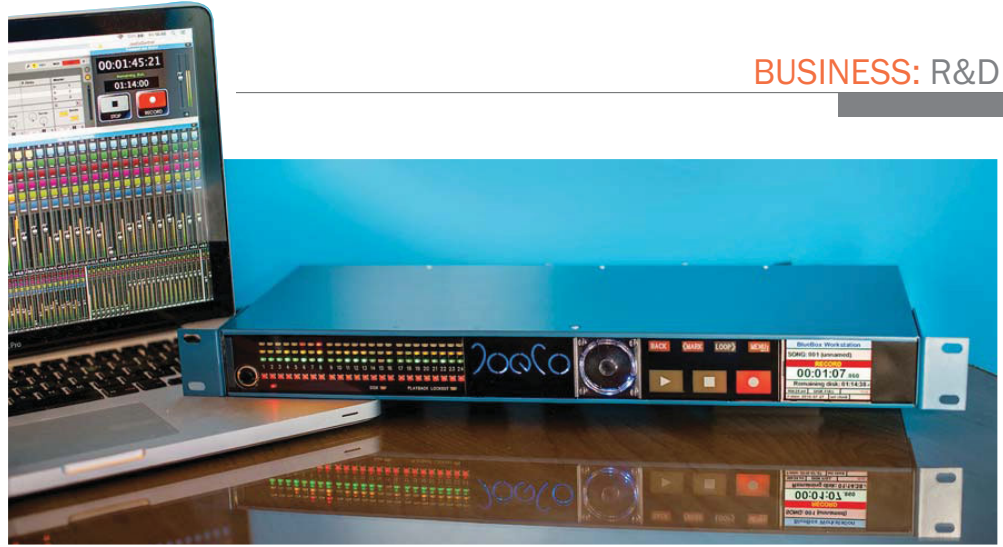
BlueBox can be used both as an audio interface and backup recorder

Rear panel connections of the BlueBox BBWR24MP

example, BlueBox has advanced monitor mixing functionality which is a pretty big thing, especially for studio usage. We've redone the majority of the electronics, changed some things that we've wanted to change for a long time in the BlackBox range to make things sound better – not that our systems didn't already sound great,' smiles Mr Duggan, 'but it's always nice to try and make improvements.

'We've also added some features that are useful for a variety of situations. It's got wireless and Bluetooth control, so you can use your iPad to operate a BlueBox even if the system's racked up somewhere. It can also be powered from a 12V battery, which is fairly unique.

'I see BlueBox as the next step in JoeCo's development, the product that pushes us to the next level.'

For Mr Duggan, who's overseen the project from day one, the devil is in the detail, yet so are the rewards. Asked which aspect of working on the project has filled him with the most pride, he says: 'I find the strategic side and the planning side of things the most invigorating. I like spec'ing all of the products and laying everything out and watching all of those ideas come

to life; it's been a very rewarding and gratifying experience to follow everything from start-to-finish. I mean, it's also been a lot of hard work, not only in the development of the product but also in marketing it, coming up with all of these new ideas and trying to apply them to as many different areas as possible. The thing with our products in the BlackBox range is that we've always tried to make them suitable for lots of different places, but studios weren't something that we ever seriously considered until now.

'Ending up with a high-quality audio interface was always the aim, as it's the thing we hadn't done before. I've used a lot of different interfaces in the past, so using BlueBox myself and it being a really great interface is just brilliant.'

Products with such a clear USP typically sell themselves. And in a world that continues to shun the hardware-only domain, BlueBox is the logical conclusion – a best of both solution.

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