Tape Op GEAR ReV

Lynx
Hilo A/D D/A converter

After years of reviewing gear, I have come to the conclusion that A/B comparisons are not able to tell me what I want to know about a piece of equipment. While I understand the value of A/B comparisons — and have used them for years as a basis for my evaluations — I have come to believe that an immersive experience is the way to real insight into the performance and general nature of a product.

For these reasons, I took the next-generation Lynx *Hilo* converter with me to Buffalo, NY and made a record with the amazing abstract expressionist of solo piano improvisation, Boyd Lee Dunlop (www.boydleedunlop.com) — age 86, and older brother of legendary drummer Frankie Dunlop.

Three days with one very intense musician, one gorgeous-sounding vintage Steinway, and three dutiful mics: a Royer R-121 (*Tape Op* #19) on the treble bridge, a Neumann M 49 on the bass, and a second M 49 in figure-eight in the room, which I duplicated panned hard L/R and flipped phase on one channel to create a kind of fake mid-side that had a great widening effect. The close mics went through a Neve 1073 pair to a stereo Tube-Tech LCA 2B compressor to the *Hilo*'s analog inputs, while the room mic went through a Groove Tubes VIPRE (#45) and into one channel of a Digidesign 192 I/O converter.

On the digital side, sampling rate was 24-bit, 96 kHz, and I clocked the whole Digidesign 192 I/O system to the *Hilo*'s internal clock via BNC word clock ports. The *Hilo*'s S/PDIF outputs fed the 192 I/O's S/PDIF inputs. In essence, I turned the Digidesign system into what was mostly a Lynx *Hilo* system, and I was able to accomplish all of this without a single hiccup in about two minutes.

So, before I dump a bunch of features on you, let's look at what the *Hilo* did for me in this scenario: I got a better sounding converter; I was able to improve the clocking of the entire Pro Tools system; I could calibrate the converter to my desired levels in an instant using the front-panel touchscreen (which allowed me to push the analog gain structure as I saw fit); I saved my sampling rate and I/O settings for instant recall each day; and I had on-board analog VU or horizontal LED-style metering, which allowed me to turn off the computer monitor. Moreover, all of this functionality fit in my little hipster backpack like a book.

And then we tracked many hours of solo piano for three days straight.

Within the never-ending debate about whether converters and/or clocks have an audible impact on sound, I am brashly on the side that says they do. And over the course of three days of tracking, I was very happy with how the *Hilo*'s conversion and clocking removed the somewhat annoying tonality of the Digidesign 192 I/O converters, especially in

this scenario where every nuance was so exposed. As I've said in other reviews, these differences are subtle, but for me, every single subtle difference contributes to the final sound of an album, and I'll do whatever it takes to rack up these small sonic victories.

So in terms of sound, the *Hilo* is an amazing converter — open, clean, and as quiet as I've ever heard. Like a great camera lens, the *Hilo* brings a realism and clarity to the image that can make a portrait like that I was taking of Boyd really vivid and powerful. Even after three intense and draining days, I was completely happy to slouch in the chair at the console and just soak up the sonic image coming back at me via the *Hilo*. This was me doing immersive, passive listening, and I loved what I heard.

Using the *Hilo* couldn't be easier, and this is rare for converters that often have cryptic front-panel interfaces requiring me to hold down multiple buttons for certain periods of time and other awkward and forgettable commands. With the *Hilo*, everything is done via a bright and colorful touchscreen. I literally didn't need the manual to find my way to all the features I needed.

This screen, as I mentioned, also defaults back to your chosen metering style when you're not clicking through settings. The VU meters look like they're from a vintage dbx 160 (the pinnacle of VUs in my opinion), and the horizontal LED-style meters are equally as familiar and easy to read. The VUs can be set to monitor either input or output, and the LED-style display both simultaneously. There is also a multi-channel metering display that gives you an instant look at all I/Os simultaneously, and there can be a lot going on at once if you so desire.

This touchscreen interface also allows Lynx to add features endlessly through firmware upgrades, so a *Hilo* user today isn't going to be left in the dust when the inevitable interface innovations arrive. Lynx should expect to win design awards for the *Hilo* because of the touchscreen.

I/O is seemingly endless in the *Hilo*. Inputs include balanced analog on XLR, and you can choose among eight preset trim settings. At the pro level you get +18 dBu, +20, +22, and +24; and at the consumer level you get +0 dBV, +2, +4, and +6. The same trim settings are available on the XLR analog line outputs. You can also tweak each of these up or down by 0.5 dB with internal trim pots. For monitoring, there are also balanced TRS stereo monitor outputs on the rear and an excellent sounding, high-grade headphone amp with a 1/4" jack on the front panel. Both are controlled by a nice, large knob on the front panel. Pushing that knob switches between the monitor level and the headphone level. Digital routing covers all the bases — S/PDIF, AES/EBU, ADAT Optical — and the included Lynx LT-USB card provides up to 16 I/O channels at sample rates up to 96 kHz, or 8 channels up to 192 kHz. Presumably, cards for other porting formats like Thunderbolt will be coming as new technologies establish themselves.

As you might guess, all these features allow you to use the *Hilo* as an all-in-one audio interface to your DAW, as well as a powerful audio router. Control of all this I/O is done via the touchscreen in a very intuitive 32x32 channel matrix. You can assign any input to any output, and you can set relative input and output levels for each port. Operating the matrix took me less than 30 seconds to figure out, showing off what a smart idea a touchscreen is for a feature-rich device like this.

Once you've set up your I/O routing and chosen your sample rate, bit depth, and clock source, you can save these settings as one of six "scenes." I figured this out without the manual in about 10 seconds — no exaggeration — so that when I

walked into the studio in Buffalo, I was ready to go at the touch of a (virtual) button.

You can also use the *Hilo* as a sample rate converter, taking any input and converting it to the desired sampling rate at output. The *Hilo* really can cover just about any conversion task you throw at it.

So at the end of the three days, I happily threw the *Hilo* and a hard drive back into my backpack and headed to the airport with an album in hand, realizing that I'd just totally re-clocked and re-routed the digital side of a Pro Tools–based recording studio so effortlessly that we really didn't think about it. Given the number of features packed into the relatively small box — and how easily I manipulated them to my needs — plus the great, clear, open sound of the unit, I think the *Hilo* really is a new-generation converter. At $2499 street, this is an investment totally worth considering, especially as we careen into what is clearly going to be a new era of converter technology based around new ports like Thunderbolt and an increasing need for flexibility as the hegemony of certain digital systems (hopefully) gives way to new and better ones. *($2499 street; www.lynxstudio.com)*
–Allen Farmelo, www.farmelorecording.com