

MEL LAMBERT
takes the lid off a
new SSL that seems
to be taking hold
across the industry.

Digital audio workstations are a remarkable advance... sometimes. If your model lacks a decent analogue front end, or a properly implemented multi-channel monitor section, or a full-function autolocator/transport controller, more than likely your workplace is going to be... ahem... cluttered. But riding to the rescue, as in all good Westerns, comes Solid State Logic with a very nicely implemented analogue/digital hybrid system that will go a long way to solving most if not all of your problems. And all at a bargain price.

distinct feeling that somebody at SSL's Begbroke HQ not only spends a lot of time with DAWs, but understands that modifier keys are the magic ingredient when time is money, and we have refined our chops over long hours of editing and mixing sessions. The adjective I kept returning to time and again was 'Integrated' — this beast packs a lot of power in a small package, and oozes with ergonomic thinking.

In terms of signal topology, during tracking, overdubs and remix the 24 analogue and/or playback signal paths

SSL AWS

CONSOLE/DAW CONTROLLER

Features

In essence, SSL has taken 24 channels of its fine-sounding XL9000 K Series SuperAnalogue pre-amplifiers, EQ and channel elements and mated them to a very clever logic system that makes use of standard HUI command protocols. So, if your DAW follows these edit/mix/plugin/transport commands — and most do — it's just a matter of hooking up the relevant MIDI connects, plugging in mic/line inputs to the AWS 900, outputs and returns to the workstation, monitor connects to your 5.1-channel monitor array, and we're off to the races.

Everything you'll need to run a tracking, overdub and remix session is right in front of you, within easy reach of the sweet-spot mix location; no separate controllers for the DAW. Nor a batch of outboards hidden under the console, nor fader trays parked adjacent to an analogue mixer. It's all there in the AWS 900, ready for action.

All I/O signal routing, monitoring and signal processing control is permanently available on the AWS console. SSL's SuperAnalogue technology is designed to offer bandwidth in excess of 192kHz, while 24 channels of ultra low-noise dual impedance mic pre-amps match those of the new XL Series — sweet and very smooth sounding. EQ is magic: a choice of switchable twin-curve E Series or G Series four-band parametrics, plus an assignable array of SSL dynamics sections offering gate, expander and compressor/limiting.

Also offered is the very useful G Series compressor across the stereo mix buss. Motorised faders provide not only conventional audio control but also control record/replay levels within the attached DAW. Metering is provided on all channels and main outputs — the latter with precision VUs just like a top-of-the-line SSL console.

The right-hand DAW control section is festooned with useful features, including transport controls, autolocator, programmable buttons for custom functions and everything you need under your fingers. Usefully, SSL has included dedicated buttons for the alt, option, shift, and control keys we need for contextual controls that litter command menus for such DAWs as Pro Tools, Logic and Nuendo, plus duplicate keyboard escape, undo, save and enter buttons — saves reaching for the ASCII keyboard and/or mouse.

Time and time again, I was left with the

pass through a dual mix-bus design that provides full control of input sources and DAW tracks for mixing and separate assignment to 5.1, stereo or stereo down-mix monitor outputs. For added flexibility, EQ, assignable dynamics and insert ports can be set up in any order within the signal path.

An array of eight dedicated track busses route pre/post-fader signals to DAW tracks. Two main busses handle record and mix assignments, while effects and cue/foldback sends — in stereo and mono modes — are available from all 24 channel modules, matched by four stereo effects returns. A bevy of solo modes include a very useful Solo in Front. Channel meters are complemented by a quartet of VU meters for the L/R Record and Mix, plus eight Bus Outputs.



THE REVIEWER

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TOTAL RECALL NOW IN

As mentioned in the review, SSL is bringing its Total Recall system to the AWS platform, and in fact several installations are already in place in the UK. Announced at The San Francisco AES convention, the system is to many, one of the defining features of the larger SSL range of consoles, so this will be a welcome addition for AWS.

Total Recall provides the AWS 900 with the ability to memorize the position of analogue potentiometers and switches, allowing them to be manually reset at a later point in time. This allows the console's analogue controls to be quickly reset, exactly recreating set-ups for recording or mixing.

Total Recall scans all analogue front panel rotary controls and mechanically latching switches, including the channel controls, central bus controls and external returns. All electronically latching switches, such as channel bus and dynamics routing can be automatically reset, as can the positions of the motorized faders. All AWS 900 consoles include custom potentiometers to allow the reading of positional information, plus a processor capable of handling this data.

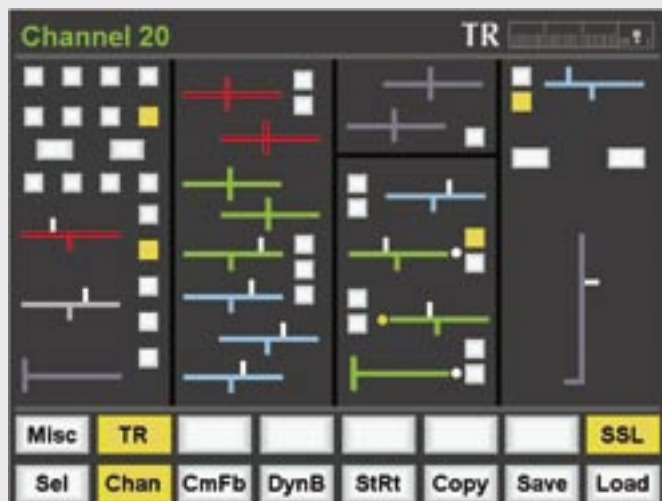
Total Recall set-ups can be stored in the host workstation as MIDI System Exclusive data, therefore providing maximum integration

and compatibility with the host platform and retaining the project and set-up data in a single file system.

"The initial market reactions to the AWS 900 have been fantastic," comments Niall Feldman, Director of Product Marketing. "The vast majority of users find it ideal for their DAW-based production requirements. The single most requested additional feature has been the availability of Total Recall for the AWS 900. The good news is that a new Total Recall option package was demonstrated at the AES show and will be available shortly."

With more than 70 systems sold since its launch earlier this year, the AWS 900 Analogue Workstation System

is SSL's fastest selling console. It combines the dual benefits of SuperAnalogue processing and sophisticated digital control to provide a complete solution to the use of Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) in professional audio applications.



- Mimicking an in-line design, the assignable rotary control and level fader on each channel strip can be swapped to adjust analogue level and/or DAW levels; the assignable control can also be set to other functions, as necessary.



While controlling playback/mix levels within the companion DAW, the 24 available faders can be bank switched to control other tracks, as necessary. (And, oh, yes, all 24 faders can be swapped to control a bank of aux levels for setting up those devilishly intricate effects-send mixes.) Console metering can also be switched to display input or DAW metering, while a central TFT colour display shows DAW status and plug-in settings, plus a variety of console data.

In Use

The workstation control section provides direct access to all major DAW mixing, editing, and automation parameters, plus plug-in settings. Setting parameters are displayed on a colour TFT display surrounded by dedicated control keys. Master and individual buttons per channel switch the fader element to either the analogue console layer or the DAW control layer.

A bank of four rotary encoders with companion pushbuttons and assign keys — plus page up/down keys — control the DAW's plug-ins and DSP functions. More controls would be nice — current reverb plug-ins, for example, feature a high parameter count — but this quartet lets you get where you are going quickly and easily. Automation, grouping, editing, and function-key selection is handled via a bank of 16 soft keys. Usefully, DAW faders can

be bank swapped in groups of 24, to bring the key channel closer to the central sweet spot.

For controlling the myriad workstation functions, one option might be to incorporate an array of assignable buttons and knobs, all of which take up acres of real estate and need the reach of an octopus. SSL has obviously spent some money on ergonomic textbooks, because the AWS solution is elegant yet purposeful. All functions are a button push away, and map to a central array of well-labelled controls.

Sure you might benefit from more controls, but at what cost of mind numbing complexity? For my money at least, I could live with the AWS 900's solution; it puts power in front of you but not at the expense of unnecessary confusion.

The built-in logic switching enables some neat tricks. The two stereo cue sends and four mono FX sends can be used for other purposes via the EFX re-assign section, which thence serves as a source for the eight busses or the channel Direct Output. In this way, Cue/FX Sends can be set to route to a pair of independent foldback sections that enable creation, for example, of a zero-latency headphone output. Two separate foldback mixers can be set up with level control, cut and AFL, and sourced from Cue STA, Cue STB, Record, Mix, external source or control room monitors. The quartet of Stereo Returns feature Level, Cut, AFL and discrete routing to foldback outputs, plus direct access to record and mix busses with pan and Width controls. So much from so little!

Within the Master Panel either of the two main stereo busses can be assigned to the master fader, and a stereo compressor inserted as necessary. Compression controls match those of a G Series console, and add a continuously

SSL AWS

► variable threshold and make-up. A handy Insert Sum enables sub-mixing via the stereo bus insert to the main busses; +10dB of useful boost can also be added to either bus.

In terms of monitoring various signals from the analogue input of DAW replay section — or combinations — the AWS 900 really shines. Two independent 5.1 mains plus two stereo 'mini' outputs are available, and can be fed from the Stereo Downmix Summing Matrix, with independent bass/LFE management. An external source selector sums, assigns and routes up to four 5.1 sources, with source selection to control room, studio LS and headphone feeds. Monitor sources include record and mix busses, track busses, four 5.1 sources and four stereo sources. Whew!

MIDI implementation seems to have been made correctly, with full Mackie HUI compatibility and fast data throughput; a MIDI IN/OUT pair is used for each group of eight DAW channels, which dedicates the full bandwidth of a 16-channel MIDI interface to carry AWS control and status data to/from the workstation.

In fact, the expanded DAW fader scale maintains better than 0.2dB of resolution in the main working area, with a smooth taper outside that region. Although the analogue section is currently non-automated, under DAW control SSL has pulled a few extra tricks that enable the plain-vanilla automation of Pro Tools, for example, to

be extended to offer a bunch of additional modes; after all, SSL knows about console automation! (A Total Recall upgrade package that scans all analogue faders, pots and switches, and stores settings on the host DAW as MIDI data for manual reset, will be available for the AWS 900 by late 2004.)

My reservations are pretty minor. I can live with 24 analogue signal paths — sufficient for most tracking sessions involving a basic rhythm section, vocal and instrumental guide tracks — but would liked to have seen more on-surface faders for DAW control.

Given that the bank switching is very fast and intuitive, I can live with the compromise. I would also like to have seen the control section in the physical centre of the console, between 12 channels east and west, but it's not much of a reach to the right-hand area. The colour scheme is okay, but it's sometimes hard to see the legends under dim lighting levels. Some orange or bright green colours might have been used, rather than the familiar, but low-contrast, SSL greys and white.

All in all, even a few minutes on the AWS 900 Analog Workstation System convinces you that there are two types of DAW users. There are users



who haven't experienced this miracle — and who blunder along with major compromises — and those that have seen the light. □

INFORMATION

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My sincere thanks to Matt Derbyshire, product executive, and Phil Wagner, senior VP of SSL's Hollywood office, for providing access to the new AWS 900 Analog Workstation System. Check it out at SSL regional offices and GC Pro outlets
www.solid-state-logic.com
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