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Zoom H4 Handy Recorder

WHEN THE WORLD IS YOUR STUDIO, GET A RECORDER TO GO

by David Miles Huber

Occasionally, a device appears that does so many things it has to be thought of as a “Swiss Army knife”-type tool — like Zoom’s Handy Recorder H4. Weighing in at 8.75 ounces (with its two AA batteries), this palm-sized recorder includes two front-mounted, quality condenser mics (in a 90° stereo X-Y configuration) to record audio at 44.1/48/96kHz (16/24-bit), along with multiple MP3 rates, to an SD memory card. With a 2GB card, total recording time is over six hours at 44.1kHz, or 34 hours of MP3 stereo audio.

The H4 also includes two XLR/1/4" mic/line jacks with phantom power, so you can use your own favorite mics. Add 1/8" stereo line and headphone outs, plus a USB computer interface, and the result is a super-flexible, on-the-go recording system.

APPLYING THE H4

The H4 has two main operating modes. The Stereo mode records audio directly to the card, using a one-button operation. To start recording, you press the Rec button to set levels (using the side input gain L/M/H switches), then press Rec again — it’s that simple. Using the backlit, 128x64 pixel LCD display and a side jog-dial control, you can change the rate/bit/format settings easily.

In 4-Track mode, the H4 works with the jog-dial and LCD display to give you what’s probably the world’s smallest virtual mixer. This mode lets you lay down a mono or stereo set of tracks into a “project,” where you can make volume and panning changes with the virtual mixer. Once done, you can bounce the basic tracks down to a mono or stereo composite track, or import the mixdown into a new project and keep on overdubbing new tracks. You can also apply a wide range of effects (including delays, reverbs, cabinet simulation and mic modeling) to a stereo recording or 4-track project during the recording phase, but not during mixdown.


In the real world, the H4 can sample sounds out in the field, record live concerts (I record my live gigs and post them on the web as a free podcast), record business meetings, or capture those magical musical ideas that can hit at any time. However, the H4 goes a step further: It doubles as a high-quality USB audio interface for Mac or PC (it’s self-powered when plugged in), with the advantage of built-in recording mics. When you throw in the fact that it’s an SD card reader, has a built-in metronome, digital instrument tuner, and is bundled with Cubase LE (Steinberg’s entry-level DAW that doesn’t require a

copy protect dongle), the H4 really does add up to being an on-the road powerhouse.

The only real inconvenience is that the stand cradle is a little strange, as it can be used only with a camera stand (what, no additional mic stand mount?). It also requires that you use a set of supplied Velcro straps to secure the H4 to the cradle — an awkward approach that could’ve been avoided by using a form factor that would simply snap the two together.

CONCLUSIONS

In the studio, the mics sounded really good. It was interesting to listen to the mic modeling change as I switched to the warmer U87 or the full, yet brighter C414 (SM57 and MD421 models are also included). They sounded very respectable and could fit into a final mix without apologies. It was also fun to see the H4 power a U87 and then a pair of MXL V67i mics . . . all recording to an SD card off of battery! Sonically, I’ve heard better preamps, but I’ve also heard far worse; the sound had a slight digital edge to it, but is fine given the H4’s price and multi-functionality. In fact, the internal mic modeling compared favorably with the H4’s recordings using my external, large-diaphragm condensers . . . good job, Zoom.

If you’re a computer digihead like me, you’ll also love the fact that there are no moving parts — just transfer your files directly into a session and start working. Bottom line: For the on-the-move producer/musician, the H4 is a quality tool for recording your rehearsals, gigs, and podcasts. 

David Miles Huber’s music can be seen and heard at www.MySpace/51bpm.

Product type: Portable SD cartridge-based recorder with built-in stereo electret-condenser mics.

Target market: Those who can benefit from an all-in-one, on-the-go recording setup.

Strengths: Quality recording system with external mic/line inputs. Includes phantom power. Doubles as an audio interface, SD card reader, tuner, and metronome. Includes Steinberg’s Cubase LE DAW.

Limitations: Super-small display. Menus could be easier to navigate. The camera stand cradle needs a better design.

Price: \$499.99 list

Contact: www.samsontech.com

