



CME/WAVE IDEA

Bitstream 3X

It's got more knobs than an antique furniture shop, but how well does this new controller integrate with the latest music software?

► SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

PC: Win XP SP2 for MIDI over USB
Mac: Mac OS X

► TEST MACHINE

PC: Pentium 4 3.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, Windows XP, Propellerhead Reason 3, Ableton Live 5/6, Steinberg Cubase 4

The Bitstream 3X is a control surface that offers a little bit of everything. It's unusual in that it appears to have been designed as much for traditional MIDI users as it has for computer musicians – in fact, it even comes with a power supply, which is quite a throwback in these days of powered USB connections. Thankfully, the unit can be USB-powered too, so you don't need the wall wart unless you're using it without your computer.

The lion's share of the 3X's top panel is filled with knobs and faders.

These are arranged in standard mixing desk style – you get a row of eight faders with a set of four knobs sitting above each one. To the right of these controls things get a little more interesting; towards the top of the panel there's an LCD display reminiscent of those found on workstation keyboards. It's not particularly big, but it does display a fair amount of information and is certainly a useful feature.

To the left of the display there's a rotary encoder, while to the right sits a small but workable ribbon controller.

Below these you'll find a two-axis joystick, the highly unusual Automation section (check out the *Automated for the people* boxout for more on that), a row of mute buttons and a dinky little crossfader.

Let's get physical

The Bitstream's back panel features MIDI In, Thru and two Outs, a footswitch connector, an expansion port (Wave Idea say that they plan to release extra interfaces in the future), and even a Sync 24 connector for connecting the unit to pre-MIDI

equipment such as Roland's TR-808 and TB-303 boxes.

Impressively, the controller currently comes supplied with its very own flight case. This is a nice touch, though the case does seem rather large when you consider how modestly-sized the hardware itself is. Still, thanks to some foam padding, the Bitstream, its power supply and a USB cable can all fit in snugly, and the case will be a godsend for people who gig regularly or move about a lot. It will only be included with the first 999 units, though, so if you want one, get on the case (as it were).

At first glance, the Bitstream looks pretty cool. The sexy black exterior and uniform grey controls give it a 'military chic' vibe, while the rows of knobs and buttons are reassuringly high-tech. Unfortunately, closer inspection reveals that the build quality is less than rock solid – on our review unit, the niggles ranged from the subtle (the faders all pointing at slightly different angles) to the ridiculous (two of the foot stands were shorter than



Bits and PCs

The Bitstream can be programmed from the front panel using its buttons and rotary encoder, but if you're using it with a computer, it's easier to set it up using the included software instead. This is cross-platform and enables each of the controls to be set up as a CC or Note On.

If you can't be bothered with all this configuration nonsense, you'll be pleased to hear that the software

the unit up to work with Ableton Live 5 and found that the instructional PDF on the website missed out some important information that we later located on the Wave Idea forum.

Reason users, however, can rejoice – the Bitstream features a special Reason mode that intelligently maps your Reason modules, which we're happy to report works very well indeed. This could make the 3X a potential prospect if you use Propellerhead's software, but we're not convinced that this functionality sufficiently justifies the sub-par construction.

▲ Wonky faders and dodgy controls aside, the Bitstream does at least look kinda funky

“IMPRESSIVELY, THE CONTROLLER CURRENTLY COMES SUPPLIED WITH ITS VERY OWN FLIGHT CASE”

the others, so we had to make a paper wedge to stop the unit rocking during use!)

For a piece of supposedly professional equipment that costs £300, this is nowhere near good enough. There were other problems, too: a stop button that (perhaps appropriately) stopped working reliably after a couple of hours use and a rather naff joystick that gave us a little glimpse into the Bitstream's guts when it was moved to the extremes of its range of movement.

comes pre-packed with a bunch of settings for classic hardware and software. However, there's a heavy bias towards old hardware, so if you want to control your more up-to-date software, you're better off using the 3X in Mackie Control emulation mode. Downloading the Mackie Emulation user libraries from the Wave Idea website gives you thousands of presets, but we found actually getting the Mackie Emulation mode to work properly to be a tricky task indeed.

We had further woes trying to set

Couldn't give a 3X?

Ultimately, this is a controller that doesn't quite live up to its potential. It does have some cool features and the Reason integration is great, but that suspect build quality is a real problem and the documentation could be better – as mentioned, there were omissions in the Live 5 PDF we downloaded from the website, and many of the page numbers in the printed manual's index are incorrect. Admittedly, this isn't a huge issue, but it's another example of the product failing to deliver the kind of experience that a £300 gadget should. With luck, there'll be a 'Mk II' version that improves matters, but at the moment, there are far better control surfaces on the market. **cm**

▶ ALTERNATIVELY

Novation ReMOTE SL
cm105 » 8/10 » £229
Fewer bells and whistles than the Bitstream, but the 'Soft Label' support is a definite plus

Mackie Control Universal
cm55 » 8/10 » £999
Much more expensive, but a far sexier product. Better for studio use than the live-centric Bitstream

VERDICT

FOR

- + Feature-packed
- + Decent Reason integration
- + Clever Automation modes
- + Useful for live performers

AGAINST

- Poor build quality
- Overpriced
- Documentation could be better

First impressions are good, but less-than-perfect integration with the latest software and poor construction let the Bitstream down

RATING



Automated for the people

The Bitstream 3X's most unusual feature is undoubtedly its Automation section. This features three different automation modes that can be used separately or simultaneously.

First up is the LFO mode. This features sine, square, triangle and noise shapes that can be assigned to a MIDI CC (with adjustable offset, range, and frequency). It's fairly simple to set up, but unfortunately, rather than having fine control of the LFO's frequency, only eight different speeds are available (these are bound to either the internal or external clock tempo). What this means is that smooth LFO speed changes

and high-speed effects are impossible, making the LFO less impressive than it could have been.

More sophisticated is the arpeggiator, which takes a MIDI input – from either the MIDI connectors or via USB – and uses a range of built-in arpeggiator patterns to modify it. The Motion Sampler mode is even more clever: up to eight tracks of your own knob movements can be recorded and played back at a time. Pretty impressive, but like the rest of the modes, it's best suited to live applications – especially as they can all be modified in real time.