

Fostex FR2

Alistair McGhee adds a Fostex FR2 Field Memory Recorder to his travelling toolkit and hits the road.

When you get to my age it's difficult not to start every review with, "when I were a lad", but in this case it's surely justified. When I were a lad, mobile recording was simple, Nagra for the pros and Uhers for the producers – simple, black and silver... and classic. Then there were the wilderness years of consumer DAT machines before the Portadat restored professionalism to my life. And in the interests of fair play, the Portadat is a great machine and 10 years later it's still providing sterling service. Nevertheless, times move on – DAT has receded like a tide that only just managed to wet our toes in the first place and solid state is the name of the game.

Recently, I splashed out and bought a Fostex FR2 Field Memory Recorder, which I suppose should be called an FMR2, but Japanese nomenclature works in mysterious ways. The FR2 records to either compact flash or PCMCIA hard drives. It's worth noting that there are generated heat issues with hard drives and the maximum supported sample rate is 96k against 192k for compact flash cards. The FR2 has no built-in storage and while this keeps the cost and weight down, it's a shame you can't copy from compact flash to hard drive internally so that high sample rate files could be saved onto the larger slower medium between takes or over lunch.



The Basics

The FR2 is bigger than my Portadat, but only just, and a bit lighter. It's well put together but we're talking plastic here – this baby isn't milled from a block of solid aluminium. Then again, you can have an FR2 for considerably less money than the aforementioned DAT, so the theory of 'swings and roundabouts' applies here. In the early '80s a Nagra 4 was over nine grand, from memory, in the '90s a Portadat was just over five

grand and now the FR2 is \$2,499 – this price reduction speaks volumes about what's happening in our industry today, but more specifically, clearly illustrates the economic benefits of manufacturing recorders without tape transports or moving parts.

The Fostex FR2 has two balanced mic/line inputs and a digital input on XLR (both AES and S/PDIF formats are available). There are unbalanced RCA analogue outputs and a digital output, again on XLR. You can plug a keyboard into the unit to label takes and there's a USB port for computer connection to facilitate file transfer.

The gain structure of the recorder is very simple. The analogue inputs are switchable mic (with optional phantom power) or line, and rather than offering fixed attenuation pads, the FR2 has level trims available for both mic *and* line inputs (hurray!). There's a 100Hz high-pass filter and, on the front panel, concentric level control. The FR2 is not tiny, so there should be plenty of room on the front panel for a decent sized knob but the one fitted doesn't seem big enough. Sometimes size is important.

Next, we go back to the top plate for sample rates (up to 192k), bit depth (16 or 24), stereo or mono option, pre-rec buffer and the limiter. Also on the top plate are four transport buttons: rewind, fast-forward, play, and stop. Although putting play and stop on the top plate does make the front panel less cluttered, most people will be using the FR2 in a case over their shoulder – it is, after all, a field recorder – and getting at play or stop involves a bit of a performance. Having said that, the FR2 has already started popping up as a Front of House digital recorder, a hi-res two-track direct-to-stereo machine – it has even appeared in court (as a archival device, not a defendant!). So although it's designed primarily for 'location' recording, the FR2 is by no means limited by the old-fashioned notion of what constitutes a 'location'. It can be used anywhere a DAT or even a cassette player once resided. The top panel is also home to a small speaker that can be switched off in software, which is jolly handy when the team wants to gather round to hear the audio gold that has just been laid down.

The front panel sports a sizable LCD screen, which alternatively displays functional information or the simple menu structure. I found it well laid out and quite adequate for the job, albeit a bit cramped. There's a good selection of information on the screen though the one major omission is time remaining on a file in

playback, but I'm not quite sure where you could fit it. Similarly, the menus are straightforward and only the Setup menu extends beyond one level. Navigation is via a rotary pot with 'overpress' to enter the menu mode. Alongside the display are buttons controlling cue and file navigation, the all-important light (which should have an optional setting beyond the three seconds it comes with out of the box – I think this is related to power saving, but more on that later), and Cue Mark and Delete. Finally there's Record Standby and Record, which sit above the record level control.

When the pre-record function is engaged you have a variable buffer of up to 10 seconds at 44.1 or 48k (and correspondingly less at higher sample rates), so you should never miss the opening words of the press conference again. Care does need to be exercised however, as the buffer has to be written to the disk at the end of the recording and this takes a few seconds, whereas in normal operation, the FR2 will be ready almost instantly. There are 99 cue points available per track and they can be dropped in during record.

When it comes to playback those cue points are invaluable and easily selected as the button's top level is cue. However, you need to hold down the Shift key to access the file selection functions, which is a bit of a pain, especially as the selector knob (the menu selector) does nothing in operational mode and would be potentially quicker at dialling through the files. The display is good at telling you you're at, say, cue 03 of 07, but unfortunately only tells you the number of the file you're accessing, not the total number of files on the card. One aspect of the operating system I did find a bit annoying was the concept of being at the end of the file in playback mode – if you're at the end of the file and press play, nothing happens. If I press play I want something to *play* and if it's at the end of a file it should either start again at the beginning or play the next file. Fast forward and rewind do exactly what they say on the legend and the fast forward with playback at two-times speed is very nice feature indeed – fast enough to be useful and clear enough to be audible.

Pro Points

What sets the Fostex apart from less expensive options, like say the Marantz 671, are professional features like higher sampling rates, the optional timecode card (available now but factory fitted for \$1,399) and digital I/O.

Whenever you go walkabout power is bound to be a big issue and here the Fostex has a bit of ground to make up. Battery life for the FR2 is quoted at two-and-a-half hours for a full set of eight NMH AA rechargeable batteries. I filled it full of Duracells and found it a hungry mouth to feed. At a higher price, the Nagra BB+ does better for battery life and houses a four-pin XLR input. Many people buying a professional recorder will already have a battery solution, probably based on NP1s or lead-acids and most of these



terminate in a four-pin XLR. Fostex has fitted only a domestic DC input, which doesn't offer you the security of a latching professional connector. That said, my 2.1AH lead-acid will run the Fostex for well over four hours.

On the other hand, the Fostex has some big-hitting features and despite being of lighter construction, XLR connectors do not always a professional make... The Nagra BB+ offers balanced XLRs, but the unbalanced RCAs of the Fostex are ideal for driving a domestic MiniDisc backup and add nothing to the weight of the kit.

One real issue facing all these machines is versatility of monitoring. Stereo is fine but the ability to have mono A, mono B, mono A+B is sadly missed as is any degree of M-S functionality.

FR-uity Recorder

Looking back over this review I feel I've given the FR2 a bit of a hard time, but if that's true it's because I think the recorder is a great machine that offers a cost-effective, versatile, comprehensive set of features and the minor niggles somehow seem less forgivable given how close Fostex has come to producing my ideal machine. If you're thinking about 192k recording then the FR2 is a third of the price of any alternative. It has a solid feature set and, with the few exceptions I've pointed out, the ergonomics are good. Its lightweight plastic construction is great for carrying around 'in the field' and because there are no moving parts, being built out of solid aluminium is no longer necessary or synonymous with quality. My feeling is that the FR2 is a steal – but be a good boy or girl and pay for yours. AT

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