

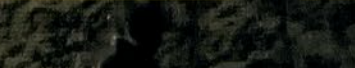
Interview: Atmos Adventures with Engineers Matt Wallace and Will Kennedy

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ESI U108 PRE USB Audio Interface

A sleek looking, solid sounding, ten-channel audio interface

REVIEW BY DAVID BLASCOE

ESI has been an under-the-radar success in the pro-audio industry since 1998, offering a host of audio and MIDI interfaces, headphones and studio monitors. Today I will be checking out their U108 PRE USB Audio Interface.

First Things First

Before diving into the functions of U108 PRE, I have a few immediate reactions and thoughts. First of all, the finish of this thing is unique! The U108 is finished in a striking brushed copper look that I have never seen on an audio interface. It certainly makes a statement and stands out from the crowd.

Then there are two other things that are surprising to me. When opening the U108 PRE, I assumed, based on its size and name, that it would be an eight-input interface, but it has ten! I wasn't expecting an extra two channels. This makes it a strong competitor in a crowded market. Also notable is that most interfaces this size have built-in rack ears should you decide to mount it into your desk or rack unit. But, the U108 does not, and no mention is made for optional rack ears. ESI is clearly playing by their own rules here. Respect.

The Devil is in the Details

So now that's out of the way, let's take a closer look. The U108 PRE is a ten-input/eight-output (technically twelve-output) 24-bit/96 kHz USB 2.0 Hi-Speed 24-bit audio interface. It has two mic/line/high-performance Hi-Z instrument inputs on a pair of combo jacks on the

front, plus a 1/4" headphone out with independent level control.

Each channel supports phantom power. This is independent on channels one and two, global in two groups of four for channels three through six and seven to ten. Each input gets its own one-to-one gain control with three-stage LED metering. There is a master input control and a master output control with four-stage metering and a mono monitoring button, which is a nice touch. And there is a master power button.

On the back are eight balanced XLR mic/line inputs and eight 1/4" TRS line outputs — well, ten actually, as there is an additional front panel engaged stereo mix output offering direct no latency monitoring of your signal. A feature I very much appreciate when tracking a multi-microphone drum session. There is also a USB socket and a barrel connector for the included external power supply.

In Use

Setup and driver installation were so simple that I almost forgot to mention them.

I experienced clean, clear and quiet tracking with the U108 PRE. I never encountered any self-noise, even with delicate sources, including some atmospheric percussion I was tracking for a client.

Simply put, this thing does its job quietly and proficiently. The knobs all have a heavy, substantial feel with just the right amount of resistance and the buttons offer excellent tactile feedback toggling them on or off. This thing feels sturdy and ready for whatever you throw at it.

The only thing worth mentioning is the beautifully shiny exterior is a bit of a fingerprint magnet! It was quickly wiped away and only viewable at certain angles, but it is still worth noting.

But Wait, There's More!

Also included is a bundled software package that includes Bigwig Studio 8-Track, a sketchpad type DAW for laying down musical ideas. Also included is inTone 2 ESI Edition, a light version of the live performance FX processor and virtual instrument host from Audifield. Amplion Free and GK Amplification 2 LE amp simulators are also included for guitarists and bassists, so you can jam along inside inTone 2 to whatever source audio you choose and record yourself.

In Conclusion

The ESI U108 PRE Interface is a bit of a dark horse in today's multi-channel interface market. It is solidly built, very attractive, and most of all, great sounding and reliable. At \$519, it is more than competitively priced, especially if you are looking to upgrade to an eight-channel interface, because this one has ten! ➡

Price: \$519

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