

LogiTALKER voice keyer - review by Andrew Barron ZL3DW

Call me lazy, but when I call CQ on SSB I tend to give up fairly quickly if the band is quiet and I don't get a response after three or four calls. I also love to work contests but being a 100W station, I usually work in the "search and pounce" mode working up and down the bands working the big gun contest stations and hoping for a rare DX contact. Nearly all of the big contest stations use voice keyers because operating for hours at a time can really hurt your voice. In fact a lot of the latest 'elite' class transceivers used by the serious contesters have voice keyers built in. A few stations run their keyers on such short repeat times or in QSK mode that they can't hear you come back to their call which is exceptionally frustrating. Anyway in spite of a few contest 'Lids' I was keen to get a voice keyer too, so that I could call CQ in contests and on those quiet bands.

I tried a couple of software based voice keyer programs like GCVoice Keyer (Freeware) which sends pre-recorded audio files stored on your PC over the same rig interface as used for digital modes like PSK and RTTY, but my rig never modulated properly, the audio was thin and it meant running another program at the same time as the contest logging program. It is worth a try, since the software is free, but I was never happy with the results. I never attempted to use GCVoice keyer in a contest. So then I looked at hardware voice keyers and it seems that the main contenders are the LogiTALKER from Idiom Press <<http://www.idiompress.com/logitalker.php>> and the MFJ-434B from MFJ. Of the two the LogiTALKER is cheaper and has slightly better reviews <<http://www.eham.net/reviews/detail/8980>>, so I ordered one, (more on that later).

The unit is a stand-alone voice keyer that goes between your microphone and your radio. It uses your regular microphone to record up to four messages, to be played back at the touch of a button. It's a simple, easy-to-use, way to save your voice in a contest! One message can be set to auto-repeat, which is perfect for "running CQ" contest stations, or for calling CQ automatically as a band opens. You can record two 16 second messages with a sampling rate of 8kHz or four 10 second messages with a sampling rate of 6.4kHz.

It works with just about any microphone, dynamic or condenser, which has an eight-pin round plug or an eight-pin modular plug. It can be reconfigured for a different brand of radio by reconfiguring jumpers, so your LogiTALKER isn't tied to just one radio. You do need to buy or make a cable to go from the box to the radio. The price for the keyer is US\$120 as a kit, or US\$150 assembled and tested. I went for the fully assembled version and paid a bit extra for the cable but the reviews say the kit is easy to assemble and no major problems were experienced apart from one ham reporting that an incorrect value resistor had been supplied. The price of the cable was \$17.95 but that is mostly due to the expensive 8 pin connector. The price for the MCM cable used in FT-897 and other modern radios is only \$4.

The LogiTALKER was invented by Allen Baker KG4JJH <<http://www.kg4jjh.com/>>, who wanted a compact and simple device to save his voice in contests. The result was his design that he called the Vocal Keyer <<http://www.kg4jjh.com/vocalkeyer.html>>, which was featured in an article in the June 2009 issue of QST. With the addition of a few features and a custom enclosure, the Vocal Keyer became the LogiTALKER. The keyer is based on an integrated circuit, the HK828, which provides high quality single-chip recording and playback. The HK828 integrates many of the components necessary for a voice keyer,

including an oscillator, microphone preamp, automatic gain control, antialiasing filter, smoothing filter, speaker amplifier, and non-volatile memory.

What I like about this product is that it works exactly as promised. I recorded my messages and used the keyer in a recent contest, it was brilliant! Now, I can't imagine calling CQ in a contest pile up without it. It is also very handy when you are trying to work a dxpedition and having trouble breaking through the pile up as well. I just recorded my callsign and nothing else for memory slot 4. I am sure it would be equally good if you were operating a DXpedition station.

When you first get the unit, you have to set some push on links inside the box to setup the microphone connections for your rig. I was lucky because it came already set for my Yaesu FT-847 so I only had to check they were correct. Recording is very easy and it is simple to do it over if you get it wrong. The mic is very sensitive when recording and I had to speak a bit further away than normal, especially as I wanted to make the recording sound urgent the way it sounds during a contest. The unit retains the messages in its non volatile memory with the power off, so I just connected it to the rig power supply. All functions on your mic work completely normally and will stop a message during playback if you push the PTT. The recorded audio quality is pretty close to normal with maybe a little background noise. I had to record the messages with the rig and my PC turned off as you could hear the fan noise on playback. There is a small speaker so you can hear the playback, but is nearly useless and sounds like a strangled cat; I found that the best way to hear the real audio is to turn on the monitor function on your rig.

Overall for me this was a great investment and I give the unit an 8 out of 10, it would be a 10 out of 10, except for the difficulty I had in the ordering process. I ordered and paid online using a credit card and immediately received an automatic order confirmation via email. But after almost a month I had no confirmation on shipping from the vendor and no debit on the card so I wondered if something had gone wrong. I emailed the vendor twice to check if they had shipped my order and got no response at all, so I emailed Allen Baker who has no connection to the company but did invent the prototype, and asked if it was still possible to buy that version, but it is no longer available. Allen was very helpful and responded immediately to my two emails and he even emailed the boss at Idiom Press on my behalf. But unfortunately I still got no reply from them. So I ordered again, and again no response from the supplier. Rather discouraged I decided to look at buying the MFJ product or building my own using the same chip which is available elsewhere as a bare board voice recorder kitset. Then about three weeks later I got an email from Rob W7GH at Idiom Press saying that the unit would be available in less than a week and a week later I got one saying it had shipped. There was no charge on my card until it shipped. It duly arrived and is fantastic. I thought I would be nice and email the supplier saying that it had arrived and works great... no reply.

So overall it is a great product for the serious DXer or contester and I am fairly confident you will eventually get one if you order one, but it could take a month or two if they are out of stock. The kitset may ship faster as the holdup with mine may have been in waiting to have it assembled.