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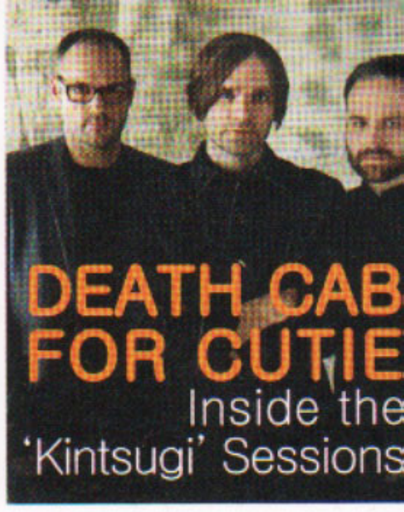

MICROPHONES FOR MUSICIANS

Essential studio tools from budget to high end

pg. 24

POWER TIPS

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MOD SQUAD

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A MUSIC PLAYER PUBLICATION

P.A.

The Musician's Guide to Studio Microphones

Get the right mic for the job, then use it everywhere

BY THE EDITORS

Selecting a mic for any recording application is a subjective decision that takes into account such intangibles as personal preferences, the demands of the voice or instrument you're recording, the musical style, and the vibe of your song. In case you were wondering why pro studios have so many different products in their mic closets, now you know: They need to be ready for whatever the music and client demands.

Home studio owners, on the other hand, need only think about their own musical needs, so their mic collection will be more personal and less extensive, though that doesn't mean it has to be overly specific: Mics that work well in one application often sound great on others. So, although the mics in this roundup are categorized by their intended purpose, most of them are equally suitable for covering other sound sources. The ability to do double or triple duty increases a mic's value if you're considering its cost-to-performance ratio.

Another thing to take into consideration when considering a mic is the environment in which you record. Some microphones capture more room tone than others, and if your space use doesn't sound that great, you'll want to consider transducers that offer more isolation. For example, using a figure-8 ribbon mic as a drum overhead in a room with a low ceiling covered in sound tiles won't give you the same results as using it in a space with a high, wood-framed ceiling.

In this article, we will examine practical mics for common home-studio applications. We'll focus on microphones that are currently in production. Unless otherwise noted, all price quotes are street price.

By sticking with a fixed pattern, you can often get a higher-quality transducer for the same amount you'd spend for a feature-laden mic. A good example is the Blue Microphones Bluebird, which has a street price of $299.99, but sounds like a more expensive mic—smooth on male and female voices (not to mention any acoustic instrument you put in front of it). Other single-pattern LDC options for vocal recording in the same price range (some of which do have a pad and low-cut switch) include the Audix CX112B ($299), the Audio-Technica AT4040 ($299), the RØDE NT1-A ($229), the sE Electronics sE2200a II C ($299), and the Shure SM27 ($299).

When price is a major consideration, budget single-pattern models worth investigating include the Sterling ST51 ($79.99), the Samson C01 ($79.99) and MTR101A ($119.99), the Blue Microphones Spark ($199.99), the AKG P220 ($134), the Audio-Technica AT2035 ($149), and the Shure PG27 ($149).

At the next price tier, you'll find the Blue Microphones Baby Bottle ($399.99), the Neumann TLM-102 ($699.95), the Shure KSM42/SG ($799), the Mojave Audio MA-301fet ($895), the Blue Dragonfly ($999), and the Sterling ST6050 FET Ocean Way Edition ($1,059.99).

Blue Microphones Bluebird

Many singers prefer the creamier sound that tube microphones impart. Price-friendly versions include the MXL 9000 ($199.95), the Sterling ST66 ($399.99), the M-Audio Sputnik ($499), the RØDE NTK ($529) and K2 ($699), the AKG P820 ($699), and the sE Electronics Z5600a II ($999). Moving above a grand, you find the Audio-Technica AT4060 ($1,449), the cardioid Mojave Audio MA-200 ($1,095) and multipattern MA-300 ($1,295), and the cardioid Telefunken CU-29 Copperhead ($1,295).

AKG P220

RIBBONS

Two recent active-ribbon mic releases that are designed with vocalists in mind are the AEA Nuvo N22 ($899), designed for close-miking (with more top-end than a passive ribbon and less low-end boost from the proximity effect), and the Cloud Microphones 44-A ($1,899), with switchable proximity-effect reduction; the Voice setting reduces low-frequency build-up when close miking. (We will examine other powered ribbon mics later in this article because they are well suited for other uses.)

Low-priced options for ribbon mics include several passive models—the MXL R144 ($99.99), the sE Electronics X1R ($199) and the Avantone Audio CR-14 ($259). Designed for the stage, though suitable for the studio, the Beyerdynamic TG V90r ($499) is a passive cardioid ribbon mic that is great for tracking live in the studio with other musicians because it provides the side and rear rejection you don't get from a figure-8 pattern. The hypercardioid pattern of the Beyerdynamic M160 ($699) provides even greater side rejection, while the mic itself has a distinctive pedigree—it was the model used to record Jimi Hendrix's voice and amp.

MXL Microphones R144

sE Electronics X1R

Avantone Audio CR-14

AEA Nuvo N22

Cloud Microphones Cloudlifter CL-4

It's worth noting that active ribbon mics have a hotter output than passive ribbons, so they work well in conjunction with inexpensive audio interfaces. Passive ribbon mics, on the other hand, require preamps with a lot of gain (as well as the appropriate impedance): Many USB interfaces, for example, only offer 55 to 60 dB of gain—not an ideal situation for the passive ribbon. If you have one of these types of interfaces, you have some options.

One is to use an external preamp designed to power passive ribbon mics, such as the 2-channel AEA Ribbon Pre ($895) which is tailor-made for this application. A less expensive option is to use the Cloud Microphones Cloudlifter CL-4 ($249), a phantom-powered device that adds 25 dB of gain to your ribbon mic before it hits your audio interface's preamp. If you have more than one ribbon mic, Cloud makes a two-channel version—the Cloudlifter CL-2 ($349)—and the CL-4 ($599), with variable impedance, as well as the 4-channel CL-8 ($999). Best of all, these AEA and Cloud products will bring out the best in your dynamic mics as well.