

by Rob Tavaglione

Blue Woodpecker Active Ribbon Microphone

This unique microphone made of aluminum and wood is a rare bird, indeed.

Cue eerie music as Rod Serling's voiceover begins...

"You are about to enter another dimension. In this wondrous land of imagination, microphones are made of wood, ribbon transducers sound more like condensers, and they require Phantom Power. It is an area that we call the Blue Woodpecker zone."

Crossing over into different materials, Blue has introduced a new dimension of microphone. And even if the above intro is silly the featured mic deserves a serious look.

FEATURES

The Woodpecker (\$1,299) employs a hand-made aluminum ribbon (pressure-gradient design), with Class-A, discrete, custom-made electronics that require 48V phantom power. Beyond its traditional figure-eight polar pattern, Woodpecker boasts many untraditional features for a ribbon. Specs include a 20 Hz – 20

kHz frequency response, 22 dB self noise (A-weighted), 50-ohm impedance and a maximum SPL of 136 dB. A beautifully finished sleeve of wood surrounds the chassis, nicely packaged with a solid brass shock mount and cherry wood storage box.

IN USE

The Woodpecker nicely picked up a steel-string acoustic Taylor guitar, excelling at translating accurate mids and clean definition; a rolloff of 2 – 3 dB at 10 kHz making things much smoother. The active electronics provided a hot output requiring only +30 dB at the mic preamp, whereas an AEA R92 ribbon (a modern but not active ribbon counterpart) needed +55 dB. However, I could noticeably hear the high-pitched noise floor of the Woodpecker, which may limit its flexibility with extremely quiet sources.

I tried the Woodpecker on both a close-miked 12- x five-inch maple snare and a djembe hand drum with very good results. The snare sounded perfectly crisp and not at all boxy (like thru the R92) with nice, flat mids and a touch of room ambience. The djembe sounded really "in your face" with a super-defined slap, although the bottom thump was a little understated. Tambo didn't work so well, as it exhibited sizzly top and aggressive transients that were a little distorted and just too pointed. At this point, I discovered a pronounced asymmetry in the two lobes of the polar pattern, the rear being darker, almost nasal, with a rolled-off top end.

The much-anticipated vocal test yielded no surprises. If you like detail, defined consonants

and sibilance, then you will love the Woodpecker. Its lean and accurate low/mids will flatter baritones and basses without "pillow" hype or a blurring of low notes; sopranos will definitely want to look at a conventional ribbon for a kinder, gentler sound. With a tenor, I patched in some compression and aggressively EQ'd both the Woodpecker and R92 to taste, achieving polar-opposite vocal sounds that were both exceptionally good, especially with the room "air" that ribbons so nicely pick up. In this application, trying the rear lobe might be interesting; just EQ out that little mid-bump for a very smooth, creamy VO sound.

With powerful alto vocalist Leahanne Woods in the studio, I was able to try the Woodpecker with a Manley TNT mic preamp, offering a variety of preamp combinations quickly and easily. The solid-state side proved to be sonically interesting and versatile, as different impedances brought out subtle colorations of the Woodpecker; 600 ohms offered pronounced (but noisy) top/bottom, while 2,400 ohms offered flatter with less noise floor. I was delighted with newfound smoothness and needed thickness in the low/mids.

Loud guitar didn't turn out too well. A cranked 50-watt Marshall amp and a close-miked speaker (six inches from the cone) recorded distorted and brittle. The manual recommends a distance of 12 inches or more, and suggests clean sounds are captured better. I concur. Yet, despite some clipping, the ribbon was undamaged — a testament to its durability.

SUMMARY

As you can see, the Woodpecker defied my expectations in many ways. With a sharp transient response, extended high-end and unhyped bottom end, it seemed much more like a condenser than a ribbon. Although the hot output of active electronics is welcomed, the noise floor was a little more than I expected, so you may have to position the Woodpecker close to the source and watch gain structure. I must say that the Woodpecker's striking look, combined with an excellent shock mount and fine wooden box, makes for one overall sexy package. If chosen for just the right application, this mic can really shine. Your client's ears, and eyes, will definitely be impressed.

Rob Tavaglione owns Catalyst Recording in Charlotte, NC, and (at 44) is finally married!



FAST FACTS

APPLICATIONS

Studio, project studio

KEY FEATURES

Hand-made aluminum ribbon; wood chassis sleeve; Class-A, discrete, custom-made electronics; phantom powered; maximum SPL of 136 dB; included solid brass shock mount and cherry wood storage box

PRICE

\$1,299

CONTACT

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