

RIBBON MICS COMPARED

► microphones, as some of the Golden Age ones are. This is reflected in the originality of the Sigma's design, its novel shock-mounting cradle and, of course, in the price difference between GA's mics and the Sigma (which, I might add, is still extremely cheap for a good mic). Sontronics have quality assurance labs in both the UK and in China, and there has obviously been a lot of love put into the creation of the microphone, as it looks amazing. It arrives beautifully packaged in a custom briefcase (I won't describe the velvety interior in case you get over-excited...) and comes with a novel shock-mounting system, which seems very effective and holds the mic securely in any orientation. In fact, the whole package just screamed retro cool to us — and this was before we even plugged it in...

Trevor claims that the Sigma came about from his desire to create a mic that was capable of reproducing a sonic imprint reminiscent of the smooth jazz tones of the swing era, his priority being to create an ultra-smooth high-frequency roll-off which



The Sontronics Sigma, boasting retro looks and a novel shockmounting system.

would capture the feeling of records by people like Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong and other artists from that era. Unusually, the Sigma is phantom-powered and its output is actively balanced, which means, unlike most transformer-based ribbon microphones, that it does not suffer from impedance mismatching problems and low output sensitivity. In other words, it's loud! It has a three-year limited warranty, and Sontronics will replace broken ribbons for £50 a pop (pun intended, sorry...) in the UK.

SE Electronics R1

The R1 is a new design and the only ribbon in SE's range of mics, but rather than being a tweaked, rebadged 'generic' Chinese mic, the R1 is built from scratch in SE's own Shanghai factory. The company say all their mics are hand-made, and the visibly high standard of workmanship supports this claim. The mic comes supplied in a smart



SE Electronics' R1.

aluminium flightcase with a long 15m XLR cable. Generously, SE's five-year warranty includes three ribbon replacements. The accompanying cradle, while appreciated, is unusual in that the microphone at first seems to merely sit on top of it, supported at the sides, rather than being clamped or held in any way. At first, we took this to mean that the microphone can't be used upside down as supplied, but close inspection revealed a metal collar at the base of the microphone, which can be unscrewed and then reattached once the mic has been passed through the hole in the suspension, securing it. This isn't at all obvious at first, so you can think of the mic as coming with a bonus built-in 3D puzzle...

If you want to learn more about the R1, you can read a full review by Hugh Robjohns in *SOS* August 2006.

Blue Woodpecker

US-based company Blue are unusual, in that they source parts for their microphones from a variety of places, which change according to the model but include the US, the former Soviet Union and, at times, China. They have a manufacturing facility in Riga, Latvia, from where one of the founders (and the technical brains behind the designs) Martins Saulespurns hails, but the microphones are assembled in both Riga and California, where they have their headquarters.

The Woodpecker is Blue's only ribbon, and boy does it make an impression, especially in its gold-coloured cat's cradle. If Mr T started a mic company, I think his products might look something like this...

The mic itself is an active (phantom powered) ribbon featuring class-A electronics, and Blue advertise it as being a



The Blue Woodpecker: bags of 'bling'.

good, no-noise all-rounder with "a focused mid-range, ultra-smooth top end and outstanding bass response". Skipper Wise (the company's other founder) told me their goal in making the Woodpecker was to create a ribbon with an extended HF response, making it rather more useful than many of the ribbons he's grown up with. The Woodpecker comes nicely packaged in a fairly restrained wooden box which belies the 'woah' factor you get upon opening it and seeing the mic, accompanied by the aforementioned suspension. Build quality seems superb, and the mic itself has a real wood veneer on its body (although you'll have to don shades to see it).

The Woodpecker comes with a three-year warranty, but this apparently doesn't cover ribbon breakages (other than those originating from manufacturing defects). However, I am assured by Blue that breakages should be rare, especially since the mic is phantom powered, and one of the leading ways of destroying a ribbon — hitting the 48V switch — is therefore inherently avoided in the design. Should a ribbon go for some reason, Blue estimate that replacing it will cost in the order of \$150.

Beyerdynamic M160

Dating back to 1924, German firm Beyerdynamic are the oldest company to provide mics for test. Their current ribbon offerings demonstrate this heritage and offer some unusual features. For example, as well as a figure-of-eight ribbon (the M130), Beyer manufacture two end-fire hypercardioid ribbons, the M160 and the broadcast-orientated M260. They suggest the M130 and M160 as a good combination for mid/side recording (in fact, the