BLUE Bottle Condenser Microphone

By Steve La Cerra, *EQ Magazine,* 1999, Issue #3

Beneath The Bottle's classic look lies a high-powered contemporary performer.

For the past ten years, BLUE has been quietly servicing the vintage microphone market, restoring tube mics and power supplies as well as building new power supplies and shock mounts for classic mics. Approximately four years ago, BLUE began handcrafting small quantities of high-quality microphones in the Baltic-State of Latvia. Their flagship is the Bottle, a vacuum -tube condenser mic set consisting of the 9612 preamp, 9610 power supply, one capsule (BLUE recommends the B6 or B7 capsule as a good "starter"), and BLUE's Champagne mic cable. Right out of the box, it's clear that The Bottle is a special microphone: the supplied flight case is a serious piece of work, with a padded, crushed-velvet lining, and separate compartments for The Bottle, three capsules, 9610, and cables (thank you!). There's no doubt this case will keep the mic safe from harm.

CRANK IT UP

BLUE sent EQ three cardioid capsules: the B6, B7, and a prototype B0. Each has a different frequency shape, and a total of eight different capsules are available. All capsules are internally shock-mounted and must be secured during transport, so the three brass thumbscrews inserted around the capsule rim must be unscrewed before use. To mount a capsule on the preamp, gently push and twist the capsule onto the pivoting bayonet mount. Our B6 and B7 capsules mounted very smoothly, but the B0 was a bit on the right side. It's a good idea to mute the mic's output when changing capsules, but if you forget to do so, only a small amount of noise is transmitted to the output.

Once securely mounted on a heavy-duty stand, we plugged the mic into the power supply using BLUE's premium Champagne mic cable. Unlike most tube mic cable, the audio conductors in the Champagne cable are a twisted pair with a separate, tinned-copper braid shield. Five additional conductors are used for control and power, and then all seven conductors are again protected from interference with a braided shield. This dedsign maintains audio purity as well as providing robust construction.

On the front panel of the 9610 are a backlit meter, I/O connectors, three LEDs a switch labeled "heater/plate", and a capsule polarization voltage trim control (–6 to +4). The finish of the components is clean, and the controls have a high-quality feel. On power-up, the plate LED lights dimly. The meter can be switched to show voltage at either the heater or plate, and you can watch it slowly ramp up from 0 to 100 percent, which takes several minutes (BLUE has intentionally life of the tube). When the voltages reach 100 percent, the respective LEDs glow brightly; when both heater and plate are at operating voltage, the "ready" LED lights, a lamp in the base of The Bottle glows full-strenght from its dimly lit startup, and audio output is unmuted. Much to our surprise, neither startup not switching of the polarization from the mic's output.

We used The Bottle in the studio on a variety of instruments, including drums, vocals, and acoustic guitars, and found the capsules to have very distinct flavors. We'd consider the B6 to be the most linear of the bunch. While its transparency was appreciated on some instruments like acoustic guitar, it wasn't necessarily flattering on male vocals. Our favorite for male vocal — and in general — was the B0, a smooth-sounding capsule with an open top end and a very subtle low-mid bump that flattered a thin-sounding tenor. The

B7 yielded the darkest sound, with less high-frequency harmonic content and a more closed-in top. It sounded thick on acoustic guitar and produced a "retro" sound for vocal. We liked this capsule for room mic on the drum kit, and it tamed shrill-sounding instruments, such as certain female voices.

On a male crooner with a huge dynamic range, The Buttle easilly captured dynamics without a problem. As he sang louder and louder, we were expecting The Bottle to crap (technical term for running out of headroom), but it never did. This is probably a result of the power supply's ability to maintain the necessary voltages to the microphone.

Taking a cue from BLUE about The Bottle's high-SPL capability, we placed the mic directly in front of a kick drum for a hard-rock session. We were reluctant to hang The Bottle upside-down from a studio boom, but the body is so big that this was the only way to get the capsule low enough (using a low stand resulted in the capsule sitting higher than the drum). We didn't care much for the tone it produced (with a B7), though it easily handled the SPL. Initially, we left the polarization trim at "0", but our mic preamp overloaded, so we mowed the control down to –4 (which was fine).