

BLUE Bottle Microphone

by Dr. Frederick J. Bashour, *Pro Audio Review Magazine*, April '99

One of the nice things about the BLUE mic capsules is that they were specifically designed for particular circumstances — they don't try to do everything.

Ever since I met Skipper Wise at an AES convention a couple of year ago, I had been curious to audition one of his BLUE microphones. I was quite happy when a large cardboard box containing a fancy flight case, cable, power supply, two capsule heads and a huge red microphone (\$4,500 complete) arrived for review.

Red? BLUE stands for Baltic Latvian Universal Electronics and is the brainchild of Wise, a resident of southern California and his partner, Martins Saulespuren from the Baltic State of Latvia, one of the former USSR republics. Unlike Henry Ford, who said you could get a Model A in any color as long as it was black, BLUE manufactures a complete line of vacuum tube and solid-state microphones in a wide range of colors. (Although according to Wise the majority are, in fact, blue; with one of five being red, green or yellow.) The company also produces cables and accessories for other brands of mics, as well as tube heads. In fact, BLUE makes every single part used in its microphones, including the screws!

FEATURES

The BLUE Bottle microphone is huge — would you believe 14.75" long? It weighs 4lb and, were it not such a special and delicate instrument, could easily qualify as the murder weapon in a Perry Mason thriller. The 9610 power supply is even larger and heavier. Prior to powering the mic up, I got out a screwdriver to figure out what the heck was in this thing. Wow! If you've ever seen the inside of one of those killer \$6,000 audiophile preamps, with their seemingly compulsive overkill neatness and super-duper quality parts, you'd feel right at home looking at the innards of the Bottle mic. Compared to a standard store-bought Neumann or AKG mic — even the vintage ones — there was no resemblance. We're talking the difference between Chevy and Rolls here! Never before have I seen such a beautifully built microphone and power supply — and PAR readers should know that I've seen quite a few expensive mics in my day.

Circuitwise, the Bottle mic features a choice of one of eight capsules, completely hand-built and individually voiced (in Riga, Latvia), an EF86 pentode (used in triode mode) and a humongous, custom-built out-put transformer can, which is more than 2" in both diameter and height. The other passive parts look like the ones used in expensive audiophile electronics.

The power supply that came with my review mic is one of five models manufactured by BLUE. This one was designed for a single mic, with a cool meter, but no pattern selector switch. So then, what's that nine-position rotary switch for? Well, one of its several unique features is a B+ voltage control. Although optimized for 60V, one can step it up to 90V or down to a minimum of 34V. BLUE maintains that this feature is useful for matching the sensitivity requirement of different program material; it also changes the sound of the mic from most aggressive (at the higher voltages) to mellow and laid-back (at the lower ones).

The power supply also features a soft start circuit that ramps up the tube's heater voltage

and B+ separately. First it turns on the heater. After approximately 80 seconds — when the cathode is fully heated — the plate voltage is gradually applied and the microphone output is muted. After about three (long) minutes, when the mute has settled into its correct operating mode, the muting is disabled and audio is output from the supply. While I'm sure this makes the mic and its following mic preamp very happy, I hated the wait. BLUE manufactures eight lollypopshaped capsule heads for the Bottle mic: the B7 cardioid (single backplate, like a Neumann M7), the B6 cardioid (dual backplate, like an AKG CK 12), the B5 pressure omni, the B4 Perspex sphere pressure omni (like used on the Neumann M50), the B3 midsize cardioid and the B0 bright by itself, I have no idea what the B0 would sound like!

IN USE

I set the bottle mic up in my studio. The capsule heads supplied were the B6 and B7, so my comments will pertain only to those. The mics I used for comparison were my Stephen Paul 3 micron Neumann U47 and my Manley-sized AKG C24 stereo mic.

First, let me say that the Bottle mic did not sound like any mic. First, let me say that the Bottle mic did not sound like any microphone I own. It had the sound quality of some of them, but had a definite character of its own. Its design philosophy was different from, say, the Lawson mics, which were intended from the outset to sound in between a U47 and an M49 — and which succeed admirably in this regard.

BLUE's literature states that the company studied the frequency curves from scores of vintage, tube and solid-state microphones, from which it determined the most design of the microphones, according to the literature, was created by what BLUE terms The Popular Opinion (TPO) — the consensus of expert engineers and discriminating musicians on the type of sound that is needed in the recording process today.

And, with that philosophy in mind BLUE has succeeded admirably. Take the B7 capsule, for instance. Used close-up, it sounded bigger and brighter and even more intimate than my Stephen Paul 47 — sort of like a 47 on steroids. Back up little, however, and the sound mellowed out and became — in my opinion — rather uninteresting.

The case was just the opposite with the B6. Granted, I have a terrible singing voice. The B6's extra Telefunken ELAM-type brightness just made me sound even more terrible! My own voice works out much better with the mellower AKG usage of that capsule, as found in my C24.

But put the B6 back in the room a few feet, and everything came into focus. Piano and strings sounded really big and etched. I'd be intrigued to try a pair of these for classical recording. And I'm sure that, given a singer with a really good voice, its extra brightness would give him or her that sheen one just can't get with EQ.

Both capsules were very quiet. The B7 had higher output, so the resulting noise figure from the mic seemed subjectively very low. The B6 had a sort of extremely high-frequency hiss I could not get rid of — perhaps part of its design.

One of the really nice things about the BLUE mic capsules is that they were specifically designed for particular circumstances rather than trying to do everything. Consequently, I believe the only way to buy them is to try them out in your own studio with the type of material on which you intend to use them.

As I own five (former) Neumann M50's, and use at least two of them on each of my classical recordings, I look forward to trying out the B4, BLUE's version of these most

special of all capsules.

SUMMARY

You gotta hear this microphone! Definitely not a me-too recording instrument — in either looks or sound — it is certain to make some adventurous engineers very happy. And, when one considers its quality of material and workmanship, the asking price is actually quite a bargain!

PRODUCT POINTS

Plus:

Great sound

Extremely high standard of fit and finish

Minus:

Very large

The Score:

Definitely the fashion statement mic of the year; and it sounds as good as it looks.

AT A GLANCE

Applications:

Recording and upscale project studios

Key Features:

Interchangeable capsule heads; way cool appearance

Dr. Fred Bashour performs as a jazz pianist and church organist. A regular contributor to Pro Audio Review. Dr. Fred never seems to have enough microphones.