

A High-Quality Condenser Mic For Top-Dollar Vocals

By Myles Boisen, Electronic Musician Magazine, September '99

After years of working behind the scenes restoring vintage mics, Baltic Latvian Universal Electronics (BLUE) has stepped into the spotlight as a microphone manufacturer.

Although best known for its deluxe — and pricey — tube Bottle mic (a design inspired by the Leipzig 7151 and Neumann CMV 3, but with completely redesigned circuitry), the company offers three other large-diaphragm condenser mics; the Cactus, mouse, and Blueberry. Each combines exquisite, hand-built quality with unforgettable, eye-catching style.

At \$1,295, the Blueberry is BLUE's most affordable mic to date and the model most within reach of personal studio budgets. A solid-state microphone, it offers only a cardioid polar pattern and provides neither an attenuation pad nor a highpass filter.

GOT THE LOOK

You can tell that the Blueberry is something special even before you open the box. The mic's hefty wooden case is built to old-world quality standards; except for the logo on the lid, it looks like an antique jewelry box.

Inside, the Blueberry rests in regal dignity on a contoured bed of crushed blue velvet, sewn by hand onto foam padding. The microphone body is a rectangular block of powder coat-finish aluminum (you can guess the color), with a unique oval grille mounted on top inside a platinum-colored yoke. A raised brass BLUE logo and classy engraved script ("The Blueberry") decorate the front of the mic.

ACCESSORIES

The bottom of the Blueberry has a recessed XLR connector alongside a standard threaded socket for attaching the mic to a stand. I found it easiest to mount by screwing a boom arm into the mic with one hand, rather than struggling to twist the mic onto a stand with both hands while having to worry about dropping it. The recessed mount contributes to the Blueberry's sleek lines, but it is inconvenient at best: the lack of a joint or swivel makes angling the mic relative to the boom arm impossible — which in turn makes the Blueberry difficult to position on some sound sources. (BLUE has announced that a swivel mount will chip with future Blueberries.)

Fortunately, the optional S1 (\$259) and S2 (\$159) shock-mounts allow angling of the mic in any direction. The S2 was designed as a more affordable version of the S1. It attaches directly to four knurled nuts on the mic body via elastic, tension-mounted suspension loops. The S1 is a two-piece affair — essentially, it's an S2 that attaches to a rectangular section that slips around and clamps onto the mic.

Both shock-mounts are well constructed and hold the mic securely. However, the suspension loops are a bit bouncy, and although the assembly does make it possible to angle the mic in any direction, its size presents additional difficulties for getting the mic into tight places (for example, on a snare drum). But despite these reservations, I recommend that you get one or the other shock-mount, due to the limitations of the Blueberry's recessed mount and the very real possibility that it can become cross-threaded and stuck on a stand. This happened to me on the last day of testing, and it took a

nerve-racking 30 minutes of careful manipulation to free the mic — a process I would never want to repeat.

Also available is the W1 dual-mesh pop filter, which is made of metal and attaches to the S1 shock-mount. The mic's heavy-duty, dual-mesh grille proved sufficient, though, so I never needed to use the pop filter. Also optional is the BB Blueberry high-definition mic cable. The S1, W1, and BB are available as a package for \$318. You can also buy the BB cable separately for \$34.95.

GUTS AND GLORY

As with all BLUE transducers, the construction, look, and feel of the Blueberry is superlative down to the smallest detail. Of course, it's the unseen parts that are the crucial ones, and these, too, are first-rate. The preamplifier in the mic body uses Class A discrete circuitry (no integrated circuits) and a custom transformer output.

The microphone capsule exhibits tonal characteristics similar to the BLUE Bottle mic's B0 capsule — eight interchangeable capsules can be used with the Bottle — and employs a single-membrane, 6-micron diaphragm. Critical diaphragm tensioning and a unique metal formula (mostly gold, but partially aluminum) are said to be responsible for the high sensitivity and superb transient response of the capsules, which are manufactured and individually tested by BLUE.

PURPOSE IN LIFE

I got off to a bit of a false start with the Blueberry because of some misleading information contained in the product literature that comes with the mic. It describes the Blueberry as a "practical, all-around microphone capable of recording piano, drums, percussion, strings, and so on." Many tests later, though, BLUE cofounder Skipper Wise informed me that the Blueberry is actually intended primarily as a vocal mic. (To be fair, the literature does mention "the merits of [the Blueberry's] design as a vocal microphone," and it encourages the user to "experiment" with the "proximity effect of getting close to the capsule" so as to capture "what has been described to us as 'The Big Sound.'")

According to Wise, the inspiration for the Blueberry came from various BLUE users — including members of Take 6 — who requested a mic with lots of presence that would "push a voice to the front of a mix." The Blueberry, Wise explained, was designed to emulate the breathy, intimate response of certain vintage tube vocal mics found in world-class studios — specifically, the Elam M 251. In addition, the Blueberry is meant to be "worked close," as the M 251 sometimes is, with the singer positioned only two or three inches from the mic capsule.

Knowing none of this at the outset, I proceeded as if the Blueberry were an all-around, workhorse type of transducer, rather than one designed with a primary application in mind. I tested the microphone on a variety of sound sources, positioning it as I would any other large-diaphragm condenser mic.

Even using the Blueberry "incorrectly," as it were, I was usually very impressed with its sound — except for one thing: it rarely exhibited sufficient bass response for my tastes. Admittedly, I prefer mics that capture a gull, tight low end, even when positioned at a

considerable distance from the Blueberry, but once I learned how it was meant to be used, I got much better results.

CLOSE TO YOU

For the vocal tests, I began with the Blueberry positioned at a more conventional distance — about six to eight inches — from pop-ballad vocalist Jaime Ikeda. At this distance, despite the optimal signal path (from a Sytek MPX-4 mic preamp direct to analog tape), the Blueberry sounded too hard and sibilant for our purposes, and it was lacking in low end.

After speaking with Wise, I retested the Blueberry on my own voice and verified a considerable low-end boost in the one- to three-inch range. Indeed, when I was about three inches from the capsule, the Blueberry made even my murky warbling sound pretty good. Beyond that distance, however, the proximity effect dropped off considerably.

In further session trials with the band 6 Eye Columbia, the Blueberry worked its intimate magic as promised. Lead vocalist Josh Pollock sounded especially commanding at two to three inches from the mic, cutting through the dense rock mix almost as well as he had on a similarly bright (and much more expensive) tube mic, the Manley Reference Cardioid. Furthermore, female singer Tynan Northryp's harmony-vocal part had superlative presence and blended perfectly when tracked through the Blueberry at about four inches. The Blueberry also works quite nicely as a voice-over microphone. In this role, it garnered very positive comments from a sound-effects producer, as well as from the male and female vocal talent he had employed for an actionpacked video-game soundtrack.

BEAT IT, KID

Recording percussion instruments is a good way to become familiar with any microphone. Using a cowbell, two shakers (one aluminum, one plastic), and a tambourine, I put the Blueberry through its paces. Each of the instruments was recorded at a distance of 18 inches from the three mics.

Not surprisingly, the cowbell was rendered clearly. On the aluminum shaker, the Blueberry sounded metallic and sharp, and I liked its high-end response. On the plastic shaker, the microphone came across as slightly unpleasant sounding. The Blueberry, however, sounded very accurate in the tambourine, giving a pleasing, lifelike dimension to the instrument's every jangle and shake.

Used as an auxiliary microphone on an eclectic setup by percussionist Karen Stackpole, the Blueberry effortlessly documented subtleties produced by pitched stones, Tibetan singing bowls, and the tiny wires of an egg slicer. On snare drum during a jazz session, the Blueberry gave me everything I wanted to hear right off the bat, turning a mediocre-sounding metal drum into a thing of beauty.

With a ceramic dumbek, the Blueberry sounded amazingly crisp and realistic. Indeed, everyone in the control room commented on how authentically it accommodated this instrument. It did not, however, capture as much tone from the drum as I would have liked. We also tried the Blueberry on a clay udu drum. The sound lacked essential lows, though, and was too "slappy" for my tastes.

Based on the Blueberry's performance in these sessions, I could imagine it giving a stellar showing as an overhead mic for a drum set. Unfortunately, I had only one Blueberry at my disposal for most of the review period, and this application typically requires two matched mics.

The percussion tests helped reveal another thing that sets the Blueberry apart from most other large-diaphragm mics I've heard: its outstanding transient response. (The term transient describes the spiky, initial attack of a percussive sound such as a hand clap or wood block, which is transduced as a rapidly rising voltage.) The Blueberry is dynamically a very fast mic, capable of following extremely rapid changes in sound pressure with accuracy. In fact, this microphone's dynamic response rivals that of the best ribbon mics and small-diaphragm condensers.

LEFT AND RIGHT

The manufacturer, concerned about my assessment of the first mic, sent along a second Blueberry, which arrived toward the end of the evaluation process. Curiously, though, my independent tests and those of EM associate editor Brian Knave revealed the second mic to be slightly brighter sounding than the original demo unit; for this reason I didn't use the pair for critical stereo recording.

However, I did have occasion to employ both mics in a stereo XY configuration on an acoustic guitar overdub. For this rapid strumming part, the paired Blueberries contributed wonderfully airy highs to the mix. Individual EQ was required to create a tonal balance between the two mics, and I had to add some upper bass at about 300 Hz on both mics, despite placing the pair as close to the instrument as was possible.

I also performed a test comparing the BB Blueberry high-definition mic cable to a budget mic cord. To my surprise, the difference in high-end detail was easily audible. The BLUE cable provided more brightness and depth on acoustic guitar, more "smack" on a snare drum, and better definition on the attack of a kick drum. Indeed, the more I listened, the more differences I heard, including a cleaner hi-hat sound, smoother vocal sibilants, and a slight increase in sustain and coherency on bass notes.

NOTHING BUT BLUE SKIES BLUE

Is to be commended for producing a mic in the \$1,000 price range without compromising its reputation for superior construction quality and mod styling, and for creating a distinctive voice rather than just another sound-alike mic. I think the manufacturer would be well advised to better highlight the specialized purpose of this mic, though.

Emphasizing its unique qualities — and precisely how it should be used — would reduce confusion for potential buyers and attract the attention of recordists seeking the Blueberry's enhanced presence and superb transient response.

Specifically, the consumer should be made aware that the capsule design responsible for the Blueberry's exemplary transient response necessarily compromises the mic's low-end pickup to a degree. To make up for it, the Blueberry typically has to be positioned quite close — maybe two to three inches from the sound source. Only then does it deliver the full low end that many of us have come to expect from large-diaphragm condensers positioned, say, 6 to 12 inches from the source.

On the other hand, if you're the type of person who is constantly trimming bass frequencies on your tracks, the Blueberry could be the answer to your prayers. The mic's

quick responsiveness and airy signature sound make it ideal for capturing nuance and high-end detail. It is especially well suited for pop vocals and would likely be a great mic for sampling and Foley recording, as well. In addition, for percussion-based music and other styles that favor a clean, bright response (bluegrass or solo acoustic guitar, for example), the Blueberry will deliver snappy, lifelike presence every time. Moreover, an established recording facility may find its crisp attributes to be the perfect complement to a growing mic closet.

Without a doubt, the Blueberry is a superbly crafted microphone with a sound and look all its own. Considering the many copycat mics that have been released in recent years, that is something to cheer about.

BLUEBERRY HIGH DEFINITION MICROPHONE CABLE

A two conductor 22Awg cable using only BLUE's virgin proprietary materials. The twisted pair construction eliminates any noise caused by electromagnetic interference emanating from equipment used in the studio or stage environments. Furthermore, the tinned copper 95% braided shield makes this cable a dream to handle in any temperature condition where microphonic pick-up might come into play. When it comes to maximum frequency response, this is definitely a fruit of a different color. (\$34.95)

BLUE Blueberry large-diaphragm condenser microphone (\$1,295)

Audio quality: 4,5

Value: 5,0

PROS:

Solid, first-rate construction of microphone, wooden case, and accessories. Superb transient response and presence. Class A discrete electronics, custom transformer output, individually tested capsule. Affordable for its class. Excellent for percussion and any source requiring presence boosting. Blueberry cable yields easily audible increase in high-end detail compared to budget mic cable.

CONS:

Optimized for close-miking only; can sound thin and/or bass-lean on many sources when recorded from a distance. Without shock-mount, mic is difficult to position due to lack of jointed or swivel-mount. No pattern control or attenuation pad.

MICROPHONE (Large-Diaphragm Condenser)

BLUE Blueberry (\$1,295)

The penultimate year of the century was an outstanding one for microphones. more new mics than ever were released, including some of the finest we've seen. in the Large-Diaphragm Condenser category, two mics in particular — the Neumann M 147 Tuve and the Baltic Latvian universal Electronics (BLUE) Blueberry — proved so superlative that we had one heck of a time choosing a favorite. (That the two mics performed so differently made the choice even harder.)

In the end, we settled on the Blueberry. At \$1,295, this piece of work is an opportunity for the personal-studio recordist to own a world-class vocal condenser at a manageable price. Handbuilt (all components are made in-house by BLUE) and solid as an ingot, the mic's precision pedigree shows in every sumptuous detail. But the Blueberry is no mere

looker. Inside, the mic employs Class A discrete circuitry, a custom transformer output, and a hand-tuned capsule.

BLUE's focus on quality build and unique approach pays off in the mic's revealing signature sound. Although we love this mic on acoustic guitars, certain percussion instruments, and drums (as overheads), its true calling is vocals, especially when an "in your face" sound is desired. Designed to emulate the bright response of certain vintage vocal mics (especially the rare and coveted Elam 251), the Blueberry is not a tool for coloring or concealing a lame source sound. On vocals, for instance, rather than "warm up" the sound with hyped low mids, the Blueberry takes a different tack, its airy top end and superb transient response combining to deliver an open, natural sound replete with nuance. The mic is meant to be worked close (one to three inches) without causing undue bass boosting from proximity effect, and it can handle all the SPL you throw its way. Because it tends to downplay low frequencies, the resulting vocal track sits perfectly in even the densest mix, typically with no need for EQ.

Granted, the Blueberry is not an all-around, workhorse-type microphone. Its penchant for naked revelation sees to that, as do its single polar pattern (cardioid) and dearth of extras (no attenuation pad, no low-cut filter). But if your productions call for a large-diaphragm mic that delivers supreme clarity, detail, and life-like presence, without unwanted low-end resonance, the Blueberry will definitely float your boat.