QUICK PICKS

M-AUDIO

Sputnik

By Babz

EM ★★★★★ hot pick

Despite modern advances in the studio, the quest to capture quality audio often leads back to vintage technology, such as the vacuum tube. And as more condenser microphones hit the stores each year, many aim to emulate the classic high-end tube sound of such venerable transducers as the AKG C 12 and the Neumann U 47. However, M-Audio has gone in a slightly different direction with its new tube-based mic, the Sputnik ($699.95).



The M-Audio Sputnik is a large-diaphragm tube mic that offers classic sound quality at an affordable price.

Rather than setting out to create an exact clone of a C 12 or U 47, the company has bridged the gap between these classics by incorporating what it sees as the best qualities of each into a single-solution mic for the personal studio. This different approach is also evident in the Sputnik's space-age-lollipop look—an exposed disc mounted atop a thick central shaft. And the name itself, taken from the Soviet-era satellite, is evocative of a time when the vacuum tube was king.

The Sputnik has a 1.1-inch diaphragm, uses a 6205M vacuum tube, and offers three selectable polar patterns (cardioid, figure-8, and omni), a –10 dB attenuation pad, and an 80 Hz rolloff switch. The mic comes with a dedicated power supply with a 7-pin cable; a shockmount; a soft cloth bag; and a flight case. The well-designed shockmount allows you to securely mount the mic upright or upside down. The cloth bag is a welcome accessory that protects the mic from dust when it is kept on the mic stand, and the rugged flight case makes for efficient yet stylish transport and storage.

Test Flight

Tube mics are known to be great on vocals, and I tested the Sputnik on a variety of male and female voices. My first stop was the studio of guitarist-producer David Spinozza, where we recorded singer Tabitha Fair during a songwriting session (see **Web Clip 1**). On her voice, which can be both powerful and delicate, the Sputnik delivered results that were smooth, rich in harmonic detail, clean, and quiet, even through six to eight layers of multitrack harmonies. While the mic was generally transparent on female vocals, I did find the need to lower the EQ just a hair in the upper mids on Fair's voice, and with upper-register vocals in general.

Next I was off to Fluid NY, a busy Manhattan ad-music house, where we recorded various male voices and set up an A/B test pitting the Sputnik against the studio's '40s-era U 47. With both mics side by side, we recorded voice-overs with Andrew Sherman (see **Web Clips 2a and 2b**) and rock vocals with singer Ian Jefferys (see **Web Clips 3a and 3b**). How did this $600-street-price mic stand up to a $6,000 legend? Well, when I informed the studio owner of my intent, he warned me that "many a mic has taken this challenge and fallen." Nonetheless, in the end the Sputnik stood up remarkably well. In many cases the differences were subtle and essentially negligible.

The complete answer, however, is a bit more complicated. We found that on a speaking voice that was naturally more robust, the differences were small. But with a thinner, more average voice, the U 47 definitely had the edge, lending it a slightly richer bottom and a tad more sparkle on the top end. But *only* a tad—such differences could probably be addressed with EQ and mic placement.

The Sputnik also delivered impressive results in my tests on saxophone and various acoustic guitars. On acoustic guitar, the mic was a bit more sensitive to placement differences than other condenser mics I've used. I found a wide range of tonalities as I experimented with positioning, but ultimately I zeroed in on a sweet spot that imparted a lush presence. Larger-bodied guitars were a bit boomy, but that was easily tamed with the rolloff switch. On a louder and more distant sound source, such as a tenor sax, the Sputnik provided smooth sound, even as the player moved a bit off-axis.

Does It Fly?

M-Audio deserves kudos for taking a bold and well-researched approach to a new tube-mic design. The company has managed to develop its own look and sonic character with the Sputnik, which delivers a classic sound that stands up admirably next to the best-of-the-best tube mics, but at a fraction of the cost.

EM WEB CLIPS

Value (1 through 5): 5

M-Audio
www.m-audio.com

IK MULTIMEDIA

Ampeg SVX 1.0

By Geary Yelton

Amp-modeling plug-ins have been available to electric guitarists for years. Some include a few presets for bass guitar, but software designed specifically for electric bassists has been nonexistent. IK Multimedia, in collaboration with respected bass-amp manufacturer Ampeg, has corrected that situation by developing Ampeg SVX (Mac/Win, $399). The AU-, RTAS-, and VST-compatible plug-in emulates Ampeg amp heads and speaker cabinets, Ampeg-branded stompboxes, and several popular microphones.

Setting the Stage

I tested SVX in Apple Logic Pro 7.1, Digidesign Pro Tools 7.1, and Steinberg Cubase SX3. My computer was a dual-processor 2.3 GHz Power Mac G5 with 4 GB of RAM running Mac OS X 10.4.8. My bass was a 1993 Fender Prophecy III played through a PreSonus MP20 preamp, a MOTU 2408mk3 audio interface, and Tannoy PBM 6.5 LM amplified monitors.

Installation and authorization were straightforward, though after I'd authorized the AU version, I had to reenter the serial number when I opened the RTAS