



✘ The Ball – weird name, weird look, nice mic

BLUE – THE BALL

✚ BLUE CONTINUE THEIR FORAY INTO THE CHEAP SEATS WITH THE CURIOUS ‘BALL’ POWERED DYNAMIC MIC. JON MUSGRAVE STEPS UP TO THE CREASE...

ONE OF THE first things you learn in audio recording (along with how to make other people tea) is that mics can be easily divided into two categories – dynamic and condenser.

The former includes such ubiquities as the SM58 and also the more rare but equally valid ribbon mic. The latter is reserved for the more delicate and typically more pricey capacitor classics, like Neumann's U87.

Leaving aside valve variations that typically come with their own power supply (and likewise PZMs), the capacitor lot tend to require phantom powering (that's 48 Volts of juice down the mic cable), and the dynamic lot don't. Instead, their output is stepped by some kind of transformer circuit within the mic and then left to the vagaries of the mic cable impedance.

So why, when these facts are so set in stone, would someone want to change

them? Well, the people in question are no strangers to interesting mic design (though typically that's kept to the physical appearance as much as anything). Yes, it's our friends from Latvia, Blue (Baltic Latvian Universal Electronics). And okay, I admit this one does look a little strange too, although essentially the thinking is quite logical.

Ball games

Take the benefits of a dynamic design – ruggedness, high SPL tolerance – and redesign the output stage to overcome its inherent non-linearity. Obviously most recording set-ups already have a phantom power supply for powering their condensers, so making use of this to power a Class-A discrete amplifier stage within the mic itself is certainly feasible and a genuinely good idea.

All fine so far (although why it's taken this long for someone to do it is

anyone's guess). However, in typical Blue style, they couldn't just leave it at that and they had to go one further. So what we are presented with for review, it has to be said, is one of the most bizarre new mics you are likely to encounter this side of Christmas.

As you can see it's a sphere (and blue, naturally). All its gubbins (XLR socket, stand thread, constructional screws and so on) are secreted within the boundaries of that nice, textured surface. So, if it weren't for the large Blue logo stuck on the front, you could conceivably challenge your granny to a game of crown green bowls with it. However, at a not inconsiderable 10cm in diameter, it feels slightly larger than your average softball.

Those of you familiar with Blue's mic range will no doubt be aware of the 'lollipop' design that accompa-

£260

INFO

Blue – The Ball
Phantom-powered
dynamic cardioid mic

Cables:
Blueberry £25, Cranberry
£27, Kiwi £32

Spec
Operating principal:
Dynamic transducer with
active Class-A phantom-
powered circuit.

Polar pattern
Cardioid

Frequency response
35Hz to 16kHz

Sensitivity
3.5mV/Pa at 1kHz

Output impedance
50 Ohms

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It's blue and a ball

However, although distinctive, there are good reasons for designing condenser capsules this way. But 'The Ball'? Well, this seems to be an entirely different story. You can't help being seduced by it, from the large logo to the little red power LED that sits above it. This mic wouldn't look out of place in Orwell's *1984*, yet you still get those nice touches associated with a quality manufacturer, such as an individual serial number (here it is actually printed on the silver strip that covers the join between the two hemispheres).

INFO (cont.)

Recommended load impedance:
2k Ohms

Maximum SPL
162dB

Output noise
17dB 'A' weighted

Power
48 Volt phantom

Current
2.5mA

Contact
01494 462246

Website
www.focusrite.com
www.bluemic.com

In use

Okay, it's all well and good to get carried away by the design aspects of this mic (both physical and technical), but that doesn't really explain what it's about from a practical aspect. I think you'd probably be a little hard-pushed to use it as a hand-held (now I've said that, it'll no doubt crop up in a music video within weeks).

What's more, its physical size will certainly curtail its use in certain awkward spots (drum kit toms or snare), plus you don't want the drummer getting confused and cracking that shell. It's also worth bearing in mind the spec – cardioid polar pattern, self-noise at a reasonable 17dB 'A' weighted (though not as good as a typical condenser), and frequency response typical of a dynamic (35Hz to 16kHz).

Thankfully, as with Blue's Baby Bottle, The Ball's manual has plenty of suggestions for how to use it (and some useful miking up tips too). But common sense tells me to use this mic on the things I'd typically use a dynamic for: guitar amps, drums, organs (basically anything with plenty of volume).

With a guitar amp the sound is certainly less nasal than you get with a typical dynamic (SM58 or MD421) and is a bit brighter. But as you'd expect, you don't get quite the same proximity boost that accompanies a close-in capacitor. Unfortunately I couldn't try this mic on a full drum kit set-up, but on small hand-held percussion it performs well, delivering more of a 'rock' and less of a 'hi-fi' sound.

I suppose the real revelation is acoustic guitar (a typical candidate for

a condenser). Here, the mic's healthy output and frequency lift in the higher frequencies (4kHz to 8kHz) combine to produce a solid sound that's great for acoustic rhythm playing. And one rather useful by-product of The Ball's design is that, even when connected up, it sits perfectly stable on a flat surface. So, if you find yourself short of a stand, or just fancy sitting it somewhere to capture the ambience of a situation, that's no problem.

I suppose on the downside, because the whole casing is interconnected (along with the stand-mount), handling noise and transmission noise can be a problem. Obviously this is dependent on how you use the mic, but it's definitely worth a mention.

Finally, and here's a bit of a curveball (pun intended), the phantom power that gives this mic its uniqueness could also be a hindrance. In the normal course of events, if you're connecting a few mics directly to mic pres, this isn't an issue. If, on the other hand, you regularly do multi-mic recordings via patch-bays (and that's the real issue), you'll probably be looking to reduce the number of phantom-powered mics you use to the ones that really count. This is simply because a slightly dodgy patch-bay connection on a phantom-powered mic will always haunt you during a recording session, and in the case of The Ball may make you wish you'd used a regular dynamic.

Verdict

So there you have it: the first phantom-powered dynamic mic – a combination of innovation and common sense. But in typical Blue style they've let their imaginations run wild and in the process produced a bit of a design classic. They could have produced something more in keeping with the established hand-held mic design, but probably realised that was a saturated market. And anyway, the best way to stand out from the crowd and make a splash is to push things a bit too far.

So have they done that here? I don't think so, although I can't help wishing that The Ball were just a little bit smaller (more cricket ball than softball). But as I said above, you can't help being seduced by it, and everyone who's encountered it while I've had it on review feels a need to pick it up and inspect it. So at the asking price of around £260 you're paying more than you would for a good quality dynamic, but you're getting something a bit special too. As ever, in their own distinctive way, Blue hit the mark again. **FM**

ON THE WIRE

Got the mic? Why not treat yourself to a luxury cable as well?

Anyone who's ever bought themselves a posh hi-fi – I'm talking separates here, carefully matched with the aid of the latest hi-fi journal's league table – will be familiar with the subject of interconnects. Just when you're ready to leave the shop, you'll be encouraged to blow a few hundred quid on expensive looking cables (it's where the salesmen make their money back having done you a deal on everything else).

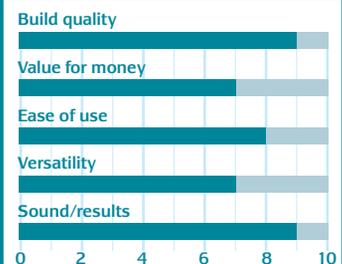
Obviously, buying good quality cabling is important, and the difference in sound will be very noticeable if you've only ever used bell wire. But once you enter the impedance-matched, gold-plated and 'directional' cable world, the diminishing returns set in.

So when Blue delivered their range of mic cables for review, my immediate response was one of suspicion. However, the three supplied (blueberry, cranberry and kiwi), although pricey (£25, £27 and £32 respectively for a 20-foot cable), are well built with good components (gold plated XLRs and cable with a tinned copper braided shield and twisted core wires). All this means that electromagnetic interference rejection is excellent (good news for the modern compact studio) and these cables will deliver the best possible signal to your mic pre.



Anyone else suddenly feel hungry?

VERDICT Blue – The Ball



Blue's weirdest mic to date combines innovation and imagination and will no doubt be a talking point whenever you use it.