



THE SPACE RACE > Sputnik sends a message to any other mic wanting to compete in the value-priced vacuum-tube condenser mic market: It's here, it's sound is clear, get used to it.

FLIGHT PATTERNS > Switches determine the three available pick-up patterns for the Sputnik: cardioid, figure 8 and omnidirectional.

M-AUDIO SPUTNIK

TUBE MICROPHONE WITH VINTAGE SOUNDS ROCKETS VALUE INTO ORBIT

BY MIKE HIRATZKA

> In the world of audio technology, it's natural for people to make comparisons between different pieces of gear; just as people often describe music as sounding like a mixture of its influences, audio gear gets pinned as sounding like a combination of x and y with the added features of z. It is helpful to have a point of reference, especially when discussing the often subtle and subjective characteristics of comparable equipment. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the world of microphones, where esoteric adjectives such as "airy" and "transparent" commonly try to define what is ultimately a unique experience for each listener. Along with this typical terminology, M-Audio took the bold step of stating in the manual—in no uncertain terms—that its Sputnik multipattern large diaphragm vacuum tube microphone is in the same class as two of the titans of the industry, the Neumann U 47 and AKG C 12. That is a ballsy claim, like a new band of snot-nosed punks declaring to be the next Beatles or Parliament/Funkadelic. So testing this mic was a curious proposition indeed.

Other than a local friend who was called away on tour with Mary J. Blige, I unfortunately don't know anyone who has any of these legendary vintage mics lying around, as a vintage C 12 will often fetch more than \$10,000 in the open market. However, I have recorded with those mics that M-Audio targeted in its literature, as well as a wide variety of other pro mics, so I judged the Sputnik on its own merits after testing it in some real-world studio applications.

M-AUDIO
SPUTNIK > \$699.95
Pros: Excellent performance, value and construction. Great sound quality.
Cons: None if you're looking for a high-quality tube condenser mic.
Contact: www.m-audio.com

INITIATING LAUNCH SEQUENCE

The Sputnik comes in its own silver briefcase, and inside is just about everything you need to start recording: the flashy, nickel-plated microphone; its dedicated power supply; a special 7-pin cable to connect the two; a shockmount; and a black cloth bag to protect the mic while it's in the case or between uses when it's on a stand. The only things you need to add are a mic stand; an XLR cable to connect the power supply to your mixer, preamp or interface; and a pop filter. The quality of all of the components is impressive; they are solid, well built and would likely cost hundreds of dollars in additional expense if this were any other microphone from another manufacturer. For instance, the optional shockmount for my Neumann TLM 103 mic lists for \$349.99, which is half of the Sputnik's suggested retail price. M-Audio definitely delivered a lot of bang for the buck, so it was time to see if this great deal would also perform as advertised.

After perusing the well-written and often-amusing manual, I wired up the Sputnik. The power supply is fairly heavy and not something you want to jam a toe against, so place it somewhere out of the way. I connected the included IEC power cable to my power conditioner and then plugged my best XLR cable into the line out and ran it to my preamp. The manual says to not use phantom power with the Sputnik, so I didn't. Although M-Audio confirmed that if you do feed phantom power to the Sputnik, electrolytic DC blocking caps in the power supply protect the circuitry and the mic capsule, but to be safe, I avoided trying it. I screwed the shockmount onto my mic stand, and then threaded the mic into place in the shockmount. The 7-pin cable that connects the power supply to the mic is a fairly heavy gauge, which translates to a good-quality signal path from the mic. Remember that your audio will only be as good as the worst link in your input chain, so high-quality cables are always a good idea. The lengthy Sputnik cable easily reached my closet/vocal booth.

The Sputnik is a multipolar-pattern microphone, which allows for a variety of uses. The most traditional is the cardioid pattern, which picks up source audio primarily from the front of the mic and eliminates most of the background noise from your signal. The other

patterns you can choose are omnidirectional, which is great if you want to record room ambience along with your source audio, and figure 8, which records from both the front and back diaphragms of the capsule while rejecting any sound sources that are to either side of the mic. That would be great if you were recording two backing vocalists who were facing each other. For most purposes, I usually use the cardioid position.

RECORDING COMRADES


Lucky for me, I received the Sputnik on the same day as a session scheduled with DJ Rap, so we decided to give the mic a try for her vocals. While checking levels, I was immediately impressed with the tone and presence of the signal: very rich and warm, with a clear, smooth high end and a very transparent sound. The first passages for that day were very subtle and breathy, where Rap was in close proximity to the mic and singing fairly softly. Her vocals have a lot of sibilance in them, but rather than sounding harsh or brittle like some condensers—including a few very expensive models—the sound was smooth and pleasant. The character and detail of her voice was excellent. We were both very happy with the results and kept using the Sputnik for the rest of the session. With the song intro out of the way, the verse was sung in a much fuller, louder tone, including a few lines where she was singing in her powerful head voice. The Sputnik handled the dynamic and proximity changes with grace and style, with only a slight bit of distortion on the very loudest moment, when she was sustaining a high note at full volume. Because of the nature of tube circuitry, however, the distortion is actually a good thing. The manual goes into greater depth about the harmonic qualities of tube distortion, so you can learn the mathematical intricacies of it if you are so inclined. In practical terms, it sounds slightly fuzzy and not at all unpleasant to the ears. I have heard plenty of other mics begin to break up and sound really nasty under this kind of abuse, whereas the Sputnik performed as well as any other mic I have ever heard in this type of situation.

Next, I tracked some guitars I needed for the same song. Normally, I use a Shure SM57, the Neumann or a combination of the two, depending on whether the guitar tone is clean or overdriven. After impressive

work by the Sputnik on vocals, I had high expectations for its performance on the guitar tracks, and it did not disappoint. Beginning with a rhythm guitar track that was fairly distorted, I placed the Sputnik about three inches from the speaker cabinet, directly in front of the center of the driver. Listening to the Sputnik's output through headphones, I was rewarded with a big, fat, creamy guitar tone that put a huge smile on my face. If anything, the recording of the guitars was even more phenomenal than the vocals. After tracking and doubling the rhythm tracks, I panned them out in the mix and was blown away by how immediate and present the guitars sounded, even without any compression or EQ. On a heavily overdriven lead sound through a tube overdrive pedal, I practically drooled on myself at the tone in the headphones. I tracked some overdubs and then brought up the mix on the monitors and once again was overwhelmed by the results from the Sputnik. This is definitely going to be my guitar mic of choice for every future application.

After using the Sputnik on a variety of other projects, including some with male vocals, live percussion and more female vocals, it has performed superbly on every occasion and also impressed my collaborators. On male vocals it sounds very warm and rich, with outstanding low-mid and midrange body and top-end detail. On loud passages, the Sputnik handled extreme dynamic changes like a champ, as it did with fairly close-miked congas, which I would normally choose to record with a dynamic mic such as the SM57. I did use the -10 dB pad on the Sputnik for the congas because the sharp attacks of strong drum hits were quite loud.

BACK FROM THE VACUUM

M-Audio put its reputation on the line by comparing the Sputnik to some of the most venerated microphones in the business, and as a result, it will likely receive a lot of attention and scrutiny. After using this mic, and given my previous experience with a wide variety of its world-class competitors, I can understand M-Audio's confidence in its product. All comparisons aside, the Sputnik is a microphone that you can trust to deliver a beautiful, transparent take on every session. After all, that's what really matters. 



FULLY ARMED AND OPERATIONAL > How much would you expect to pay for all of this: the nickel-plated Sputnik, custom flight case, shockmount, black cloth bag and a dedicated power supply with a special 7-pin cable? \$1,000? \$2,000? Guess again.