

# Something Red, Several Things Blue

Blue Microphones celebrates its 10th anniversary this year (see page 32), and the company has included Pro Sound News in the festivities by providing our review team a steady stream of products. Randy Poole reviews the offerings.

## THE BLUEBIRD

The Bluebird was designed as an affordable and versatile large-diaphragm, cardioid condenser vocal/instrument mic with a Class-A discrete output circuit. It has all the clarity of many a high-dollar condenser, with a subdued proximity effect that really works well for multiple uses. We had great results with percussion, especially when miking congas and smaller percussion instruments. The max SPL handled is 138 dB, and Blue recommends it for close-miking of drums. It scares me to see a large-diaphragm condenser on the snare drum, so I went with the floor tom instead, getting a good blend of body and attack, and with a little low-end EQ, the tom rounded out nicely with good low-end extension. For drum overheads, the Bluebird was a nice fit, with good articulation on the cymbals, I EQ'd a dip in the low-mid EQ, and the sound was well balanced. On acoustic guitar, this mic excelled, and was consistently among the top picks for male vocals. On females, the Bluebird generally worked well also, but its "tell the truth midrange" could sometimes make you wince with a strident female vocalist. The Bluebird is a good place to start a mic collection—not a lot of dough for a mic that can go almost anywhere.

PS.—My producer, who is a singer himself, borrowed (and purchased) the Bluebird and I haven't seen it since. **\$699**

## ROBBIE THE MIC PRE

Robbie is a new Class-A discrete/tube microphone and instrument preamplifier with an ECC 88 tube gain stage and an electronically balanced solid-state output stage. The unusual layout features a front panel with only one large, backlit gain knob, the tube behind a window (for easy tube swaps), and a hi-Z instrument input. Rear-panel controls include phantom power on/off and a switch to engage a -20 dB pad.

Robbie looks cool, and the large gain knob is one of the smoothest ever. With many of the controls on the back of the unit, you'll want to make sure you have access to the back during use. We used this pre on vocals, electric guitar, steel, acoustic guitar and with an ambient room

mic. Sound-wise, it has all the attributes of well done tube electronics, but also the clarity of a Class-A discrete piece. On electric guitar (paired with a Manley VariMU compressor), it was smooth without being too glassy. Several guitars were captured without any EQ, which lets me know when I have a good mic/preamp combination. On vocals, it gave females that "breathy" sound, but wasn't too strident, and males had clarity without the mud of some tube pres.

With all sources, Robbie seemed to play down the harshness of some frequencies, yet it maintained transient response and clarity. A lot of gain was needed for quiet instruments—the big knob stayed around the 9.5 position out of a possible, you guessed it, 11, in order to have enough gain for acoustic guitar. More gain was definitely on tap (rated to 68 dB) in the last two steps of gain, but it comes on fast towards the end of the knob's travel. It may not, however, have the gain necessary for ribbon mics in some situations.

Sound-quality-wise, this is one useful mic pre, giving a nice combination of clarity and warmth. **\$1,299**

## THE KICKBALL AND THE BALL

The Blue Ball mics are part of a new trend of taking something old, in this case, a dynamic mic, and adding something new, like phantom-powered, Class-A active electronics. That changes the way the mic and mic pre interact, creating a new sound.

Kickball: After you get past the cool red color of the Kickball, the question comes up, "How do I place a 5"-inch sphere on a drum kit?" Very carefully. The threaded mic insert pivots in the body of the mic for more placement options, but I could have used more range of tilt for my tastes.

On kick and on floor tom, the results were, in a word, thunderous! The mic was placed 1/3 to 1/2 way into the kick drum, and achieved the kind of sound that usually takes two mics to create. A 3-position switch tailors the low-frequency response, though I ended up leaving it in the neutral position. In direct comparison to a well-known dynamic kick mic, the kickball's bottom end literally blew it out of the water! I could feel the wind rushing through the kick and landing a punch right to my midsection as I was dialing in the sound through a Neve 1081.

Consistently, the mic had great attack transients, not smeared like some bottom-friendly dynamic mics tend to do. With the price of the kickball, there is no reason not to own one. **\$149**

The Ball: The original Ball is also a 5-inch sphere, this time in traditional Blue blue and with a flatter frequency response. I liked this mic on snare—it was punchy but with a fatter lower-mid and smoother top than the old standard. But, as good as it sounded, it was not unable to unseat the old standard. I also employed the Ball on guitar cabinets with quite favorable results. This mic approaches the sound of a ribbon mic on an amp, fat and punchy. Now, I still like to blend a little SM57 with my ribbon mics on guitar to help them cut. The same holds true for the Ball, but I didn't need as much of the 57 in this blend. All in all, the Ball is a great guitar cabinet mic and all-around performer with a tight cardioid pattern, not too much proximity effect, and nice transient reproduction.

Both the balls tested take loads of level, sound great, and are extremely affordable. **\$139**

## RED TYPE B

For an interchangeable capsule tube mic without a hefty price tag, look to the Red Mic (VintageMicrophone.com) Type B mic system, designed by Blue. The Red Lollipop stock capsule is designed for all around use. Nine additional capsules with various sound characters are available (from the top line Blue Bottle system) and the Type B is compatible with vintage capsules from other brands.

The capsule mounted easily after a minor consult with the manual. Unfortunately, the supplied shock mount was too large, but once past that, we compared the Type B to two other high-quality mics on vocals. The Type B has plenty of detail and clarity with a flattering low-end bump that helped fatten vocals without being muddy. A mild high-mid bump in the 5-8 kHz range adds a nice clarity. This mic, through a warm mic pre, was a great combination for several vocalists. I also tried the Type B on acoustic guitar with session player Mark Baldwin, with stellar results: warm and articulate sound.

I can't wait to hear some of the other capsules Blue has worked up for this mic system, and, at their price point, a stereo pair of Type Bs and a selection of capsules seems economical as well as adding flexibility and performance to your mic collection. **\$699**

*Chris Milfred contributed to this review.*

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Kickball active dynamic mic



Left: Bluebird condenser microphone; right: Red Type B (with Lollipop capsule)



Robbie mic pre



The Ball active dynamic mic