

Rode K2

In the K2 tube condenser, Rode has a new flagship microphone. Konrad Skirlis lines it up against the 'classics'.

Rode doesn't have any problem selling microphones... quite the contrary. That said, there remains a staunch core of studio pros who aren't overly enamoured of the Rode 'sound'. When Rode released its first Classic tube mic, it had its sights set on the 'big boys' – the Neumann U47, the AKG C12 and the like, and although the Classic and Classic II have become very popular mics, those who actually own the original tube icons have largely remained unconvinced. Rode has now upped the ante, and considerably so. The new HF1 capsule, as first seen in the NT2000, aims to address any lingering concerns that anyone might have about the subjectively 'hyped' sound that some people associate with Rode. Combined with the K2's tube-based design, Rode has gone all-out to build a modern classic.

In addition to the new capsule design, the K2 offers continuously variable polar patterns on the power supply rather than on the mic itself – as is the case with its predecessor, the NT2000. Furthermore, the mic's sound may be reminiscent of older



mic designs of the '50s and '60s – but the specs are resolutely 21st century: low noise (10dBA) and an astoundingly high SPL (162dBA).

Hooked on Classics

The Rode K2 is built solidly and requires a sturdy mic stand to support it. As mentioned, the variable polar pattern control is located on the power supply unit, which means the mic itself is free of any switches.

The K2 has a smooth, open sound with an even midrange response and fat, solid bass. A slight emphasis (in cardioid mode) at 5kHz and again at 10kHz provide vocal enhancement and air respectively without any audible or exaggerated 'presence' factor. Thanks to the K2's class A electronics and the preamp's 6922 valve, the amplification stage is as clean as a whistle.

During various sessions with the K2 I lined it up against a number of popular large diaphragm condensers and certainly the K2 distinguished

Joe Chiccarelli speaks from LA about his K2 experiences

I took delivery of a pair of K2s while I was tracking a UK singer/songwriter on BMG Records called Tom McRae. The mics arrived on the morning we started recording Tom's vocals. I had a bunch of mic contenders to try out and the first one I put up was the K2 and it stopped everyone in their tracks – everyone there was blown away by the sound.

I hasten to add that matching a mic to a vocal is more an art than a science. Sometimes what sounds great on one singer can sound terrible on another; and it could be a \$10k mic we're talking about. So, it was just the luck of the draw, if you will – from the first moment we put this mic up we knew we'd hit the jackpot. The K2 gave Tom's vocal a fair amount of air, there was a good amount of size on the bottom as well, while the midrange was quite smooth – detailed enough, but never harsh in that 2kHz to 7kHz neighbourhood which can get a bit nasty on some singers.

The next mic we tried was a modified Neumann U47 tube. I know the sound of this particular mic intimately – its phenomenally big sound... it's a clean, wonderful mic. The U47 sounded

very good on Tom but didn't quite have the sweetness that his voice had with the K2. In other words, the K2's mellow quality to the mid range really helped Tom's vocal.

We also tried a Neumann U87, a U67, a Shure SM7 (which Tom used to record his last album on), an Audio-Technica AT 4033 (a mic which Tom loves and uses for all his home demos) and a BLUE Kiwi microphone. So in Tom's case, the K2 beat out all these other mics. There were a couple of times when we opted for the BLUE Kiwi because it has a much more detailed, projected midrange and we wanted that detail and graininess in his vocal on a couple of rock-ier tracks. But the K2 has made it onto a dozen of the songs that we've just recorded for his album.

From Tom's perspective, as soon as he was singing into the K2 with his headphones on he was saying things like: "it feels like I can really 'sing' this microphone... It feels like I can move in for the close parts, pull back for the loud stuff and it doesn't disappear, I feel like there's enough detail in my voice... this is a mic I can really 'work'". Tom's very savvy like

that, and it didn't take long for him to get very comfortable with the K2

As far as preamps go, I tried the K2 through a Martek MSS10, a Neve 1073, and an API 312. Initially we tried all the mics through the Martek, which is an open, hi-fi, transparent kinda of preamp – not too coloured in the midrange. The first impression of the K2 through the Martek was "wow, this sounds great... but I wish it had a little more grit, a little bit more character in the midrange". Once we realised the K2 was the mic for Tom's voice, we then put it into the Neve 1073, and immediately the mids had a little bit more crunch, a little bit more dirt, and we knew we had the perfect combination.

I found the continuously variable polar pattern a useful feature. In its 12 o' clock position the polar pattern borders on being a little too wide. I found myself tightening the pattern a little. Also, changing the polar pattern definitely affects the frequency response, which you can use to make things brighter or a tad darker.

itself – the lack of obvious presence consistently gave instruments under its gaze a smoother sound than the assembled competition. The K2's low end is particularly round and full. In fact, it enhances low frequency response yet the proximity effect is more controlled – as the vocalist moves in, compared to other large diaphragm mics, the low frequency boost is not as prominent. I had a number of vocalists (both male and female) in front of this mic and heard nothing but positive comments from the engineers and artists themselves. Regardless of the style (from an acoustic outfit to electric rock), the K2 captured vocals that seemed to sit effortlessly within the mix without the need to equalise pre or post recording.

Mounting K2

Whenever I get a new tube mic through the door, one of my favourite tests is to put it into omni mode and put it up as a drum overhead – positioned to slightly favour the crash cymbals. How well a mic deals with a combination of crash cymbal transients and room ambience detail tells me a lot about how a mic handles these two extreme tasks. Compared to an overhead favourite like the Neumann KM84, the Rode K2 may not have expressed as much brightness but did provide punch and low frequency solidity. Using a dynamic (AKG D112) on the kick drum and the K2 (in omni) as the overhead sounded wonderfully big and warm with no upper mid and high frequency harshness in the recording at all. On its own, as a distant room mic in cardioid mode, the K2 was fuller and more sensitive than a Classic II, smoother than a Groove Tube 1A (original build) and slightly warmer than a Studio Project T3 Dual Triode. These results were somewhat exaggerated in omni mode where the K2 shined in its

overall ability to capture a smooth, full sound with high frequency clarity.

On a Marshall quad box with the amp set rather bright, the K2 (at a distance of six inches) handled the overwhelming SPL with clarity and ease yet continued to display this distinctive warmth. Compared to the other valves (mentioned above) and large diaphragm studio condensers (such as Neumann U89's and TLM 170's), the K2 may not be as bright or forceful and the overall guitar sound was less forward – quite the opposite of a 'hyped' sound. Overall, there wasn't a hint of the extra 'fur' so evident with cheaper tube mics at high SPLs. The K2's innate ability to enhance low frequency fullness without exaggerated low-end boom, while at the same time maintaining uniformity in the mids and highs without sounding thin, is a real highlight.

On acoustic guitar, the K2 was used 45-degrees off-axis to the sound hole favouring the neck at a distance of about four inches. Both the strumming and finger picking parts retained the clarity of the acoustic sound while faithfully reproducing the original acoustic guitar tone. In cardioid mode, the K2's pickup pattern naturally displayed greater focus than in omni mode where room ambience was obviously enhanced. However, the full-bodied sound character was uniform between cardioid and omni. With the continuously variable polar patterns, it's great having the ability to fine tune pickup characteristics – it can help find the right balance for the audio task at hand.

On percussion, the K2 offered a wonderful balance across the entire frequency range yet maintained a

Next, I put up a pair of K2s as drum overheads. The room we're working in is a little too live in the mid range so we tried quite a few mics to get the right sound – Neumann KM54s, KM86s, U87s, AKG 414s, BLUE Dragonflys, Audix SCX25s, and the Rode K2s. Overall, the Rode sounded quite impressive. But – depending on the drummer, the cymbals they were using, and how aggressive the track was – the K2's midrange warmth or softness didn't suit our purposes. In those cases my favourite mic was the BLUE Dragonfly because it's a much more aggressive mic. But for the tracks that were softer and jazzier – where the drummer was using brushes or where I didn't want such a pinpoint sound but more of a wide overall picture of the drumkit – the K2s were fantastic. The tone of the toms in the K2s as overheads was great, and they take a lot of level – not once did I get the K2 to overload on a lead vocal or a drumkit.

I also tried the K2 on acoustic guitar. For a guitar that was smaller sounding – like a Takamine – or something that was bright in that mid range, the K2 sounded great. For a guitar that was a little thumpy on the bottom – like a Guild – I tended to prefer something like a Neumann KM84, which

has a faster, tighter sound and more pronounced mid range.

Overall, I'm impressed with this mic. And, to be honest I'm as surprised as anyone! My experience with Rode in the past has not been particularly positive – I wasn't too wild about the previous Rodes I'd heard because I don't tend to like mics that have an exaggerated top end... they felt a little 'hyped'. Saying that, I've used the Classic II and thought it was quite an accomplished mic... but the K2 is a totally different animal – Rode has stepped up to the plate with something really, really good here. Depending on how you view things, you could say the K2 borders on being overly 'thick' or warm; and it's not the most edgy, aggressive microphone; but it fills another place in the quality end of the mic market. Not too many new mics make it into my shortlist that I'm willing to put in front of a client, but I'll definitely be using the K2 again.

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detailed and natural sound with ample low frequency response. Replicating the dynamic volume changes of a djembe wasn't a problem – a full, round tone was maintained at all times.

The K2 is packaged in a large plastic hard-case accommodating accessories such as the power supply, IEC power lead and 30ft nine-pin cable that connects the power supply to the mic. Additionally, the SM2 shock mount works effectively by screwing the mic using the heavy-threaded collar and thereby securing the K2 in place.

The K2's sonic characteristic, like other mics with multiple patterns, varies with the polar pattern selected. In cardioid mode, for example, the frequency response is flatter with a lack of upper midrange prominence. But thanks to the continuously controllable pattern control, you can dial in that upper mid lift as you open up the breadth of the mic's pickup. For example, I set the K2 up as a room mic and set it to its omni position. Then to marginally change the balance in favour of the source I simply adjusted the pattern control toward the cardioid position. And by doing so I was also getting marginally more linear, less 'live' response from the mic. It's a powerful weapon in the engineer's arsenal.

K2 Peak

The K2's specs are impressive and the continuously variable pattern control is no gimmick – it's a winner. The K2's sound is extremely smooth, lacking any hint of harshness – it's a great sounding microphone.

And the \$64,000 question: how does the K2 stack up against the C12/U47 yardsticks? Well, after a number of weeks with this mic, in my opinion, Rode can hold its head high in such lofty company. The K2 isn't going to bring about a mass dumping of vintage classics but will offer a genuine and viable alternative for those seeking that classic vintage sound. In short, if you have the cash for a quality tube condenser, then the K2 demands to be auditioned regardless of who you are or what your preconceptions of Rode might be.

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