

> THE GREAT VIOLET MICROPHONE SHOOTOUT!

Review of the Flamingo-ME, Finger, Black Knight and Vintage Amethyst

Reviewed by Mike Lawson

Several months ago we published a review of The Globe microphone, manufactured by advertiser Violet Microphones, and it was frankly a deservedly glowing review...

...So when given the opportunity to have at a case of most of their microphone models, we were eager to give that a go.

Overall, Violet Microphones are extremely high-quality and represent a very high cost-to-quality ratio, making them an excellent buy for professional and hobbyist recording studio use. Each are hand made in Latvia, and the capsules used are all tested in an anechoic chamber where their parameters and measurements are checked for optimal performance. That's not something you can say about most microphones imported into the USA these days from other countries. Violet microphones, across the board, represent an almost custom shop type quality in assembly and packaging, and in each of the price ranges they excel in sound vs similarly-priced import microphones tested in our studios over the years.

Enlisting the help of producer/engineer and studio owner Michael Holmes of Hot Haus Productions in Nashville, TN, we ventured to his Music Row studio to give them each a try. Violet sent a representative from their USA distributors, FDW Worldwide, along with the pro audio direct sales rep from Nashville music retailer Corner Music.

For the better part of a day, we recorded my trusty Gibson J200 acoustic guitar, freshly strung the night before for the session the next day on Nashville's Music Row and checked out the following from Violet:

The Flamingo ME- No Pad, No EQ, No Compressor, Direct into the UA 6176

The rest of the microphones use a Trident 580 Pre-Amp, no Pad, No EQ, No Compressor

**The Finger (another stereo pair)
The Black Knight (a stereo pair)
The Amethyst Vintage**

This review is written in the order we recorded the parts, and the order we tried out the various Violet Microphones.

THE FLAMINGO-ME SCORES 5 OUT OF 5



This Flamingo is the flagship microphone line from Violet's Custom Shop. It comes in three versions, Flamingo Standard, the Flamingo Vintage, and the Flamingo ME, which uses Violet's Magic Ear capsule—a capsule with the shape of a human ear, which is the model we tested. The ME is not a standard capsule. It is an absolutely unique irregular shape dual diaphragm capsule with a larger than standard capsule surface. The ME uses the highest quality Mylar film diaphragms, sputtered with Violet's special gold formula mixture, and tensioned on a precision-made brass back-plate. In true form to Violet, the color purple is predominant on the microphone housing.

The microphone's capsule is inside of grille that acts as acoustic filter of multi-layer brass mesh intended to reduce plosive sounds, breath, pop and wind noise, minimizes internal resonance, and keeps high frequencies and sound transparency unaffected.

And as always, we still say every microphone needs a pop filter in front on it for vocals, no matter what!

There are multiple internal shock-mounts for the capsule, head, electronics board and tube itself to help reduce the tube microphone's stand rumble, outside infrasonic interference and mechanical shocks.

"Flamingo" also comes with compact external shock-mount. All housed in a lovely wooden case for storage and protection, with form-fitted Violet velvet inside.

We were pleased to verify that the studio's AC power output was measuring up, and we were able to see it exactly thanks to the Flamingo's sequential soft-starting power supply, which provides DC voltage stabilization with current limiting to protect the tube heater in the microphone. After the heating the cathode, the stabilized plate and polarization voltage rises from zero to full nominal voltage rating. An LED digital display shows the actual voltage.

This is Violet's very best. ... the Flamingo is a professional microphone targeted to serious recording professionals and studios...

THIS BIRD SOARS!

The Flamingo ME is no standing-pretty bird for posing. It sounds amazing. It comes equipped with an internal vacuum tube pre-amplifier based on class-A fully discrete electronics with a 6267 vacuum tube and a custom wound large size balanced audio transformer at the output signal.

When you listen to me playing my Gibson J200, you are hearing a full, warm, sweet-sounding recording with nothing added to it, straight and as-is. I'd welcome that tone on any record I make any day. In my previous review I was knocked out by the Globe Microphone, but the combination of this custom tube amplification circuitry and this capsule is breath-taking. You'll notice as you listen to it, that once again, placement is paramount to the recording of a jumbo acoustic, with an occasional "woom" as I move a bit while playing. The engineer placed this one a little differently that I might have had I been recording it, but it still resulted in a great guitar sound. You'll notice the positioning in the photo was more toward the neck joint of the J200, and with this kind of guitar, you really should point it more toward the 8th-10th fret.

Still through it all the clarity of the highs and the warmth of the lows shows me that this microphone would be wonderful to record acoustic instruments with, and I can only imagine the results with a sultry jazz diva crooning in front of it, over stereo tracks of a classic Steinway recorded by two Flamingos.

Simply put, this is a class-A microphone. It stands high among its peers from Germany and other legendary microphone countries of origin. I'll dare to say that if Violet focuses on quality like these in all of their gear as they grow as a company, they are destined to be mentioned alongside the greats like Neumann/Telefunken and the rest without hesitation by those who know microphones.

Big words to say, putting a microphone on par with those classic German microphones. And a lot of companies will throw that comparison around in marketing material, but the Flamingo microphone lives up to the hype. Violet does not do make this claim, they don't have to, as the conclusion is instant when you hear the Flamingo. I'm happy to put them in that league having heard the Flamingo.

This is Violet's very best. Pride in workmanship, design, and delivery shines through every part of this microphone. With an MSRP of \$5259.00-US and a MAP (minimum advertised price) of \$4195.00-US, the Flamingo is a professional microphone targeted to serious recording professionals and studios, but if your wallet allows, you will love having this microphone in your home studio collection. The shockmount is \$249US MSRP, and my opinion is that you don't sell a microphone like this without a case and shockmount included. A \$5k microphone should come with a shockmount. That's just my opinion on the subject.

THE FINGER -SCORES 4.5 OUT OF 5

The Finger is a small diaphragm condenser microphone with another typically unique design from Violet. Its "pencil mike" profile, sports a group of three supports from base to the end of the capsule allowing for a disk which they call a Reflection Ring to be added to the microphone's shell, which changes the sound dramatically.

We recorded the Fingers in a stereo pair, four different ways. You'll see that you have a wide range of sonic choices using the "Reflection Ring" options for The Finger.

This is the J200 recorded with a stereo pair of The Finger microphones from Violet, with no Tone Ring added. I love these microphones. They sound great. A pair of these, or even a single one, would be an excellent choice for acoustic instruments, and The Finger microphones seem to love the sound of the Gibson J200.

Crisp high end, really catches the rhythmic tone and delivers qualities I might sometimes try to create with a compressor, but recorded straight into the board through the Trident 580.

What is amazing is how much these Reflection Rings change things. Listen to the improvement in the tone with the Reflection Rings added onto the pair, flush at the edge of the microphones. I really like this sound over the non-Reflection Ring recording.

Next, we gave the Reflection Rings a push to the middle of the support area on the mics, halfway from flush to the solid casing. I think this one is my favorite of the four positions for the Reflection Ring that we tried. Listen to the difference from no Reflection Ring, to a flush mounted Reflection Ring, to a mid-mounted Reflection Ring:



...because that Reflection Ring is the equivalent to having multiple patterns to play with and makes The Finger go from better to best. Without it, its a good mike, but with it, it is exceptional!

Next we put the Reflection Ring to the rear of the support part of the casing, all the way to the solid part, fully behind the capsule. This one has a really pleasant sound to it, too.

Listen to all four and decide which is your favorite. I like the middle and rear position for the Reflection Rings the best, in that order.

Here are some more recordings of The Finger. This is a drum track overhead stereo recording with them, and no reflection rings. I really love the sound of these microphones for stereo drum overhead recordings. Listen to what they pick up and the clarity. On this track, it is from a full session, so there is about 30 seconds of barely audible guitar intro that The Fingers picked up from the headphones on the drummer.

Now, since I think these are excellent small diaphragm condenser microphones, why 4.5 out of 5? It comes down to this. The Reflection Rings are optional, and have an MSRP of \$50 each. I think that is too high, for starters, for what they are, and because this review shows how important they are to the overall use of The Finger, I believe that they should be included with The Finger, with Violet either raising the price slightly to adjust for their extra costs, or throwing them in completely. They are just too integral to the overall use of these great microphones to be options. If I was at the store comparing similar mics and the sales guy showed me two small diaphragm mics that were both about \$300, but showed me the tricks with the Reflection Ring, and if that Reflection Ring was part of the package, it would be a slam-dunk, easy decision to go with The Finger. Another \$50 higher is where the pain threshold kicks into gear with me on a \$300 purchase.

Speaking of options, there is an optional shockmount for these microphones, with an MRSP of \$145US. A little spendy for a shockmount in my opinion, but that said, they are nice shockmounts, and since The Finger is a pretty standard sized tube casing, you should be able to use the mount for other microphones like in these type of casings.

The MSRP for The Finger is \$359US, with a MAP of \$299US. This is a microphone definitely worthy of that price range, and one that I was expecting to see cost a little more, frankly. If the Reflection Rings were included for the \$299, this would be one of the best buys on the market for small diaphragm microphones. The Finger is available in black and silver (The Black Finger), and in black and gold (The Gold Finger). There is also a stereo pair available on their retail price list, for \$718 MSRP US, or MAP of \$598US. If you can get your dealer to make you a great deal on The Finger with a Reflection Ring, you will be very happy with your purchase, because that Reflection Ring is the equivalent to having multiple patterns to play with and makes The Finger go from better to best. Without it, its a good mike, but with it, it is exceptional!

Just for fun, we paired up a single Finger (no Reflection Ring) with the Flamingo ME. We recorded them together and came up with a pretty nice sounding acoustic guitar, with both bright and warm sounds captured between the two, and this seemed like a wonderful pairing to our ears.

BLACK KNIGHT MICROPHONES -RATING 3 OUT OF 5

Violet describes the Black Knight as a large-sized, dual-diaphragm capsule microphone designed for detailed and neutral sound - with transparent highs, smooth midrange with minimal presence and close to flat low-end response. The Black Knight has a unidirectional cardioid polar pattern.

The Black Knight no doubt gets its name from its appearance that brings to mind scenes from Monty Python's Search for the Holy Grail, looking like the helmeted black knight who bravely fought until he had not a limb left. The microphone has a unique design that allows you to rotate the capsule about 160 degrees, allowing for tweaking the position of its placement ever-so-slightly. That's frankly one of the cooler features of this microphone.

It has a textured matte finish in black, of course, with a gold capsule covered by a black screen on its pivoting swivel mount. The 6-micron film active diaphragm is sputtered with Violet's special formula of gold, and tensioned on a brass backplate. The microphone has an internal solid-state preamplifier based on a class-A fully discrete transformer-less electronic design, which sounds better when paired with a good tube-preamplifier.



The Black Knight microphone has a unique design that allows you to rotate the capsule about 160 degrees, allowing for tweaking the position of its placement ever-so-slightly

With so many options for tweaking the position of the capsules, the Black Knights took the longest to setup and record while we tried a variety of positions, finally settling on pointing the left mike about 8 inches from the 12th fret, and the right mike about 18 inches from the edge of the soundboard on the jumbo Gibson acoustic.

The Black Knights sounds good on the J200, and require a little placement tweaking to get the sound we wanted, but with the swiveling capsules, that was easier to do than with any other microphone in the collection. The Black Knights come in a wooden box, and fit in most any spider-style shockmount. A shockmount is available from Violet as an option.

The microphones, which have an MAP price of \$369, are similar to other large diaphragm mics in their price range in that you'll find a bit of a boost in the midrange around 3k, and its easy to hear when you plug them in after listening to top-of-the-line microphones from Violet that cost many times more. Still, they are pleasant to use, not too harsh or too brittle, just not really flat. Then again, its nearly impossible to find a really flat one in its class from any microphone manufacturer that is in this price range, in my opinion. Its easy to hear the mid-range boost of these microphones, which makes for a pleasant enough guitar track and sounds great in stereo, but this is not the flat, warmth of The Globe or The Flamingo. And how could it? This is a \$369 microphone, from Violet's more budget-priced offerings. These are still handmade, high quality, great sounding and all-around versatile microphones suitable for a variety of applications. I like the recording captured here, though I could see myself working some compression and EQ to get the final results I wanted, whereas with the Globe it was straight in and record, nothing really needed further than that.

We will use the Black Knights for a variety of recording projects in the future, keeping this pair in our microphone cabinet for future projects. Why 3 out of 5? They get marks for their innovative capsule pivot design, nice design and



packaging, but the mid-range boost is a bit more than I like. I like less mid-range boost, and I like as flat as possible. You can get excellent results with the Black Knights, but be prepared to do some EQ reduction, especially around the 3k range. The Black Knights will fit in most standard shockmounts, but come with a mounting ring. An optional shockmount from Violet has an MSRP of \$95US.

THE AMETHYST VINTAGE SCORES 5 OUT OF 5

And now, in my opinion, we saved the best for last when it came to how these microphones recorded the Gibson J200. The Amethyst Vintage uses the same capsule as The Globe, so its no wonder I love it the best our of all the ones we used today, because the Globe was astounding on that guitar. The Amethysyt Vintage sounds a lot like The Globe, but with a warmer, darker sound that just resonated musically with my ears and tastes. I love this microphone. With a MSRP of \$1295US and a MAP of \$1069US, this might be the microphone of choice for me across the board if I were out shopping for microphones in the \$1k price range. It uses Violet's wonderful large dual diaphragm gold-sputtered capsule, and its circuitry is spot-on with the sound of vintage microphones from the best collections in the industry.

Compared to The Globe Standard and The Globe Vintage, both of which has an MSRP of \$1799, I'd be hard-pressed if I had to make a choice between recording my guitar and vocals with The Globe and The Amethyst, because the only thing swaying my choice would be the price to buy them. If I had limited funds I would buy an Amethyst Vintage and a Finger with a Reflection Ring for the price of The Globe, which in no means says anything negative about the Globe's price, because if you use it, you'll hear what an awesome microphone it is and what a great value it is for its price. What it comes down to is that I think they could have probably made the MSRP on The Amethyst Vintage higher than it is, because its quality is so much akin to that found in the sound of The Globe. Both are real winners in my book. Want real fun? Record a Globe Standard and an Amethyst Vintage together in stereo. NICE!

Microphones are perhaps the most subjective area in the recording process. Its all about tastes, from placement to choices, and my personal choice for recording acoustic guitars, to get a vintage, classic-sounding warm tone, is to

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use large diaphragm condenser microphones. Some prefer small ones. I can see why. I guess it comes down to what kind of tracks I am doing, how I want the guitar to appear in the mix, and what kind of guitar I am recording. For my personal tastes, these large diaphragm Violet microphones make outstanding guitar and vocal recordings, and as we've shown, the small diaphragm ones are amazing on both guitars and drum overheads.

Want real fun? Record a Globe Standard and an Amethyst Vintage together in stereo. NICE!

It comes down to this. Violet is making great products. It looks like they are here to stay with products that deserve to do so. With so many microphones coming onto the market every year, its nice to see a company in that mix that is making really nice, high-end mics and pricing them where most any serious home recording studio, and any professional studio, can justify the purchase and look forward to years and year of excellent recordings with the investment. Violet microphones had proven themselves to us and those here on Nashville's Music Row that have had the chance to work with them so far. Years from now, when these Violet models are considered Vintage, I predict people will be clamoring for them from this early era for this company. I think we are seeing classics in the making. And to me, that's exciting.



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