



Microphone Choices:

Beyond the Valley of the Crystal...

“At The Harmonica Microphone Bench” with Fritz Hasenpusch, Mel Bay’s HarmonicaSessions® eZine

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So... As you may recall, we’ve navigated through the primitive frontiers of mic technology, pushing our Harpmobile past the numerous historical landmarks of the first units to find favor in the service of Saint Harmonica. As the crystals, ceramics, Controlled-Reluctance and Controlled-Magnetic elements fade in our rearview mirror, we survey territory that simply wasn’t on the map not so very long ago... Yep, “The Dynamic Zone” is where we find ourselves. Let’s have a look around...

The natural sound, durability, and flexibility associated with the moving-coil/dynamic microphone’s element were only the most obvious of its attributes. Being inherently low impedance by its physical design, the dynamic became a natural for such live applications as sound reinforcement in the ever-larger venues (think concert sound) where hundreds, even thousands of feet of audio cable might be employed. The advantage? LOW-Z signals exhibit significantly less line loss over distances beyond twenty feet than HI-Z signals, and unlike with HI-Z, LOW-Z cables are much less likely to become antennae for extraneous RF signals (such as walkie-talkies or taxi radios). The response curves (let’s say 50 to 15KHZ) yielded by the newly developed designs of Shure’s Ernie Seeler coupled with their tight cardioid feedback-fighting pick-up patterns made them logical choices for the bigger, louder live music venues that seemed to sprout like weeds during the Rock and Roll era.

An interesting thing happened: Harp players finding themselves in these environments began experimenting with these sound reinforcement mics. Although furnished primarily as vocal mics and secondarily as units for amplifying stage instrumentation (drums, horns, strings, etc.), harpsters started putting their hands around them. Some have never let go, utilizing the “house system” and forgoing the personal stage amp altogether. Others learned to “put a 57” in front of their rig of choice in order to be heard in the back of the room. Can you say GUITARIST? For some, going with the house system’s mic was a matter of practical adaptation: You’re on the road, utilize what’s available, whatever will get you heard. Still others have adopted the dynamic into their personal rigs, welcoming it and sometimes preferring it...

The first time I saw Paul Butterfield perform was at the old Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco on a Sunday in 1966. He alternated between two Shure 545's. One was the "wand" or "stick" model, which was designed to be a hand mic (no quotation marks here). The other was the "pistol" model, designed to be mounted on a stand. Butter utilized them both as hand mics, alternately singing and blowing harp through both of them, it seemed.

There were Fender Twin Reverb amps all over the stage, but it seemed as though BOTH of his 545's were going into the "house." It was the first time that a harp player had actually SCARED me. He had tremendous power and tenacious attack. And something else: "POP." It's how I describe the nature of the dynamic's response when cupped. It has to do with the way the dynamic element handles fast transients while enclosed within the environment created by two hands. It's an audio characteristic that stands out with players that choose vocal-quality dynamics. And a generalized observation: These guys are all capable of playing fast! GOOD COMPANY: Paul Butterfield: Shure 545; Carlos del Junco: EV RE-10; Charlie McCoy: 545/SM57; Howard Levy: Sennheiser 421; Jason Ricci: EV RE-10; John Popper: SM58; Magic Dick (the 1st time I saw him): 545.

The HI-FI / LOW-FI variations... Next time, on THE MIC BENCH.

For pictures and descriptions of most of the microphones listed visit
http://www.harmonicamasterclass.com/vintage_collection.htm

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