



Microphone Choices: *Reflections in a Golden Ear...*

“At The Harmonica Microphone Bench” with Fritz Hasenpusch, www.harmonicassessions.com

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Thus far we’ve strolled along the mysterious alleys of the harpmic’s origins, digging in the deep shadows of the communications industry’s young history to put some perspective into the WHEN, WHERE, WHO, and HOW of the microphones that have helped to bring our humble Tin Sandwich to the attention of the world’s ears. By assessing a microphone’s SOUND and WORKABILITY, we’ve seen how some examples excel at providing the fundamental traits that harpsters desire while minimizing the aspects that could prove to be problematic (good sound versus ungainly size, for example). Others, not so worthy...

While much of the informational data that’s used to represent a microphone’s performance and physical mass can be shown as a black-and-white column of numbers and formulas, the stuff that really matters on the SOUND side of the equation can’t be rendered on the printed page. In fact, I’ve found that numbers can be quite misleading. As an example, comparing the response curves of the Astatic/Blues Blaster MC-151 crystal (30-10,000 cycles per second) and the basic Shure Controlled-Magnetic cartridge (100-9,000 CPS typically, although they can vary greatly), you might expect to hear a greater proportion of bass frequencies or even a Hi-Fi quality from the crystal when running it through a reasonably neutral amplifier. Typically this isn’t the case. Even though the numbers show more low end, the nature of the element’s output accentuates its “edge” when used in common harp applications. Although this characteristic can provide definition when playing through a smaller “saggy” sounding tube amp, it’s the CM that will usually be perceived as “warmer” or “bassier” by comparison, when in fact it would be described as a midrange-heavy mic by virtue of its numbers. Another example is the output level generated by the element. In the numerical representation, a lower number means a higher output (-51db is hotter than -54db). It’s commonly thought that “the hotter the better” is the rule pertaining to elements for harmonica. However, it’s a generalization that must be considered along with the application. For example, you would benefit sonically by using a mic that generates enough output to drive a particular amp’s input effectively, but not if the mic’s signal is hammering it so hard that it clips or oscillates uncontrollably. “Squirrely,” I like to call ‘em. It’s like matching an engine to a transmission, but you’re doing it with your ears. Go figger...

I’d used the word “alchemy” to describe the magical science and psycho-acoustic properties of microphones because of the indefinable nature of their resulting effects on us. Still, here in the land of the Hummer, Donald Trump, and the Yankees, people are fixated on the Biggest, Fastest, Mostest, and Bestest. And people want concrete answers... I hear the same question over and over: “What’s the BEST microphone?” Well, ask yourself this: What’s the best shoe size? The answer is in finding what fits you and your needs the best. What’s the BEST ice cream flavor? Well, what do YOU like? This is the subjective side of

the equation where the numbers don't apply and the answers vary with the individual. Where one player may want the most over-the-top distorted Fuzztone sound possible, another might be seeking a bright, airy, fast-responsive tone from his mic. Is there a mythical supermic that can be all things to all players? The short answer is "NO." The longer answer is that there are individual solutions to more specific questions. And the answers will vary along with the individual...

More on practical audio perception and problem solving, 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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