



Microphone Choices:

The Misfit Grab Bag Meets Pandora's Box...

"At The Harmonica Microphone Bench" with Fritz Hasenpusch, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

October 2005

HEY! OVER HERE... The Harpmobile is cruising the peripheral bi-ways of the Microphone Kingdom, out where the pavement's as patched as a gingham quilt. Misfit Boulevard is paved with such a mixture of new and old technology that it can make for a bumpy ride. Even so, it's a stretch that makes for some mighty interesting sonic sightseeing. You will spy a wide (and sometimes historic) variety of Ribbon and Condenser microphones, weaponry much more accustomed (and some would say well-suited) to applications other than delivering the gospel of Saint Harmonica. Harpsters do have a knack for improvising... even with Misfits.

On our last outing we looked at the development of the Ribbon and Condenser microphones. As for their uses: for decades they've both been favored for a variety of audio tasks; they each excel at the transduction of audio sources for the purpose of high-resolution sound reproduction; they both can be utilized as audio-shaping tools. Example: the Ribbon microphone is known for its "warmth." It has been employed as a principal mic for recording vocals from its inception. We've all seen photos of Elvis recording with an RCA 77, of Sinatra crooning into a 44, even Kate Smith singing "God Bless America" into a Ribbon mic. In fact, in this age of digital recording, Ribbon technology has found new fans for this reason: It is often utilized to soften the clinical "edge" of the digital format. Although the RCA 77's and 44's are long out of production, the surviving examples are in high demand among professionals. Stories about the RCA 44 maintained for recording Michael Jackson's vocals are well known (I didn't mean to frighten you...) and we've all seen the iconographic RCA 77's conspicuously positioned in front of Larry King and David Letterman (though principally as visual props). Newer Ribbon mics by Royer (patterned after the Danish Bang & Olufsen models) and Beyer have found wide acceptance, primarily for recording and vocal applications.

So what about the SOUND and WORKABILITY assessment of Ribbons when applied to the Tin Sandwich? Well, the warm tone for which the Ribbon is known could certainly be deemed an asset, UNTIL cross-referenced with its WORKABILITY: The great majority of Ribbon mics are side-address, meaning their pick-up pattern is oriented at 90 degrees from the mic's vertical body (making them virtually impossible to cup); they are very susceptible to "pop" and wind (so cupping need not apply); they are considerably more fragile and more expensive than, say, a comparable dynamic. All these aspects would relegate Ribbons to a hands-free, non-cupped application such as off-mic country harp or their specialized use for bass and chord harmonica (as seen in harmonica trios). The exception to all this would have to be the Beyer line of Ribbon mics, Lee Oskar's choice for harp. Configured for polar or "top" address, they are of a "ball and wand" design (the M160 and M260 being somewhat sleeker than an SM58) and were primarily conceived as high-end vocal mics for

sound reinforcement applications (the M500 being a favorite with Kenny Rogers and Stevie Nicks) so they're less susceptible to "pop" and "blow-out". But for harp? Well... How would you spend YOUR allowance?

All condensers, great and small... Next Time, on THE MIC BENCH.

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

To contact Fritz for his Custom Mics or Repair email him at harpmicman@earthlink.net