

TAPE

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

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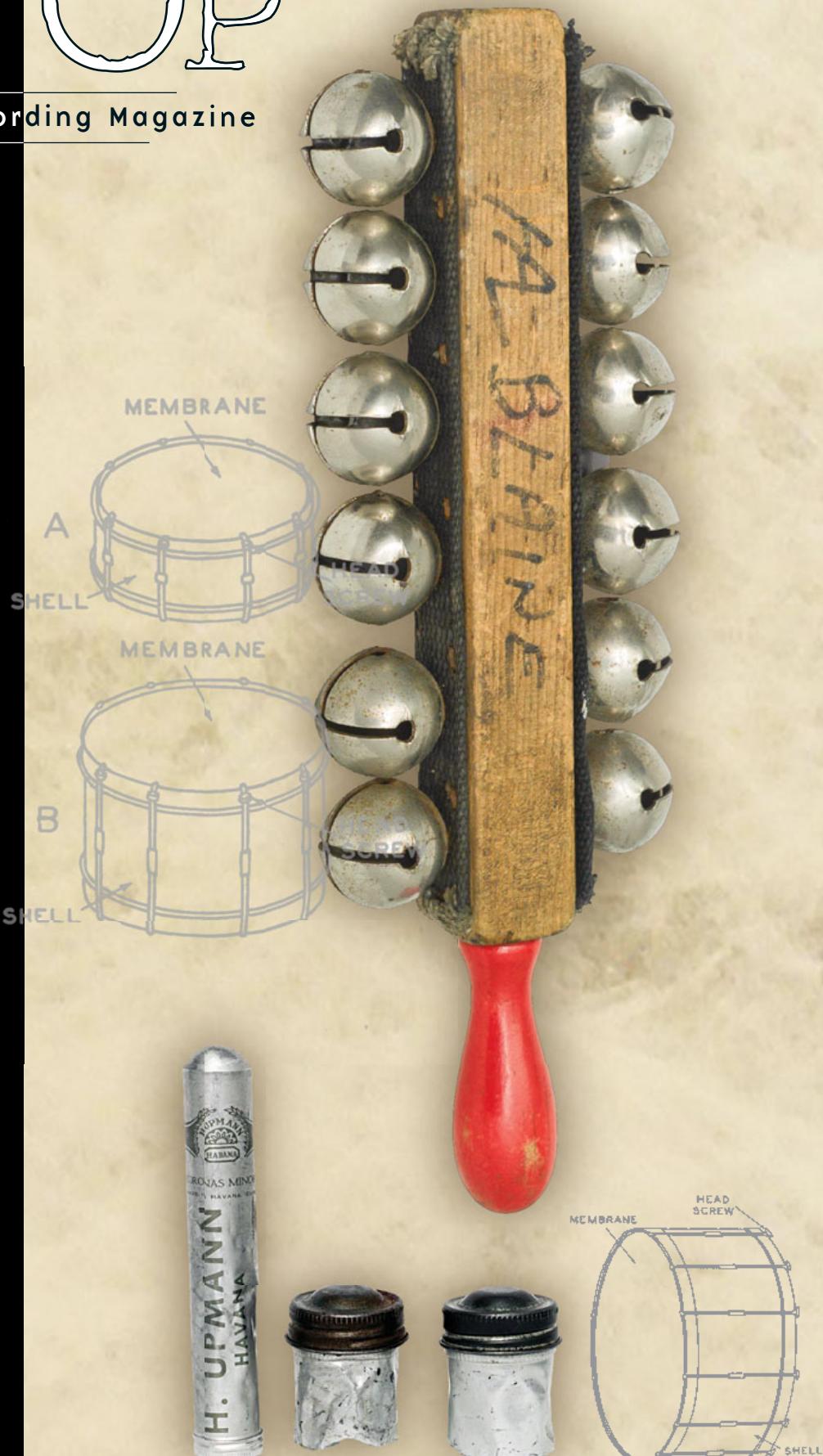
WHY RECORD IN A PROPER STUDIO?

GEAR REVIEWS

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Audix A133 condenser microphone

I would be hard-pressed to remember a recording project where I didn't use an Audix microphone. Your initial reaction to the name Audix may paint a picture of affordable workhorse dynamic microphones that sound great on percussion and bass instruments, but this company has made plenty of headway in recent years with condenser mics (and much more!) that should not be glossed over. One of their latest offerings is the A133 large-diaphragm condenser mic, equipped with a 29 mm 3.4 micron gold-sputtered capsule, cardioid polar pattern, 10 dB pad, bass roll-off switch, machined body, and proprietary internal shock mount. Each mic is assembled in an American factory and individually tested. The feeling I get from the literature (and in use) is that the A133 is meant to be an all-around solution that bridges the gap between a podcasting or voiceover mic with a studio solution that focuses on music.

Audix provided me with a single mic for review, so I used the A133 as a mono drum overhead to test during a punk band's session. I put the Audix on my tallest mic stand, and after moving around to find the best balance of the kit, it wound up about two feet above the drummer's head. I like my overheads to be a little tighter to the kit to eliminate room sounds, but I was pleased with how much of the back and side reflections the A133 rejected, so I felt better about hanging this thing up so high up. The picture I got from the Audix was a clear capture of the drum kit, with a transient response that fits in well with my close mics – and the cymbals weren't harsh. The client is pleased; I am pleased. The drum sound is awesome. We would've been even more pleased with two A133s for a stereo overhead capture.

For vocal applications, the A133 came across as having a neutral midrange relative to other mics I've used for this purpose. Vocals came in clear and defined, the top end was not overly harsh, and sibilance was more than manageable. With its internal ultra-thin foam windscreens and double mesh grill for added pop resistance, the A133 performs particularly well for podcasting and voiceover work.

The A133's shock mount is internal (without a bulky spider web-style cradle), so I was able to place it right on a guitar cabinet's grill cloth, adjacent with other mics I typically use on electric guitar amps. The transparent nature of the A133 also made it very useful for acoustic guitar tracking. Transients came through clearly, the low end wasn't boomy, and it fit well in a dense mix. The only real con I can find with the A133 is its lack of multiple polar patterns, but at this price point, I'd rather have a stellar-sounding cardioid than a cheaper multi-pattern mic that performs poorly. Overall, Audix has added a very useful microphone to their line. If you need a microphone with a transparent and neutral sound that won't butcher the high end, and can be used in front of just about any source, you'd do well to consider the A133. (\$499 street; audixusa.com) -Dylan Ray <dylan@blackwolffrom.com>

Little Labs LL2A Compressor Limiter

I'm always excited to see a new product from Little Labs. I've been collecting Jonathan Little's [Tape Op #75] ultra-handy studio devices for over 15 years, starting with the ground-breaking IBP Phase Alignment Tool [#33]. I've purchased a number of his various boxes over the years, and I use his plug-ins – made in collaboration with Universal Audio for the UAD format – on almost every mix.

However, even as a fan of the company, it took me a minute to wrap my brain around the LL2A. It's like hearing one of your favorite bands branch out into a new sound, and maybe it takes a few listens to decide whether you enjoy the new direction or not.

The first item to contend with is that, despite the name, the LL2A is NOT a Universal Audio LA-2A [Tape Op #26] clone. Jonathan makes it clear in the manual that the name is merely meant to evoke the *spirit* of the classic compressor, not to imply a lineage. Instead of using tubes, or an opto circuit, the LL2A employs a "single linear analog multiplier to control the attenuation (not the amplification) of an audio signal," a concept Jonathan obtained from renowned gear designer Dave Amels (Bomb Factory, AnaMod) [#31]. Jonathan also reports this to be a completely new take on compressor design, and since it involves a bunch of analog circuitry math operations that I can't pretend to understand, I'm gonna take his word on that.

The one technical thing I do understand is that the LL2A is fully differential throughout its signal path. This means that the balanced audio you put into it stays balanced throughout the whole process, running through only two active audio stages, which makes for some very clean – not to be confused with sterile – sonics. Any character the unit has (and I found it to have quite a bit) comes from the compression artifacts, and not from harmonic distortion. This fully differential design also means that although the LL2A is, on the surface, a mono compressor, you can run it in unbalanced stereo mode by using insert-style cabling to access the Tip and Ring of the TRS jacks, or pins 2 and 3 of the XLR jacks.

The faceplate of the LL2A is simple and elegant in its symmetry. There are two knobs on the front panel: Threshold and Output. They are similar in function to the knobs on an LA-2A; that is, one determines the amount of compression applied, and the other controls the amount of makeup gain to add after the compression occurs. The Bypass switch disables the Output control as well as the compression circuit, making level-matching a cinch. The Meter switch allows the beautiful orange Nixie tube (an old-school neon meter design) to represent either gain reduction or output level, with VU-type ballistics. You can stereo link two units together with the Link switch, but there is also a "secret" feature that is explicitly called out in the manual: When there's not a plug in the Link jack, the switch drastically slows down the time constants, as described below.

I/O is all on the back of the not-quite-half-rack, not-quite-single space rack unit. You can buy a rack kit for mounting either one or two LL2As. The unit provided for review was the desktop version and comes in a cool retro-looking cream-colored housing. A screw-on barrel connector securely attaches the included 16.5V power supply. Parallel XLR and TRS inputs and outputs are there for convenience, and the parallel output is particularly handy for one task that I'll talk about in a few sentences. There's the 1/4-inch TS Link jack, which allows you to run two LL2As in fully balanced stereo, and finally, a jack labeled Side Chain Insert TRS. This is also where the parallel output comes in quite handy, because if you take the output of the unit and run it through an external (balanced) EQ, and back into the sidechain input, you have an extremely powerful sidechain modification tool, allowing you to "tell" the compressor which frequencies to ignore or pay attention to the most. This is in lieu of a simple sidechain filter, which many modern compressors possess.