

Mojave Audio MA-200

By Eli Crews

Recently I've had the pleasure of using a pair of David Royer-designed Mojave Audio MA-200 large-diaphragm tube condenser microphones (\$995 each). Royer is well known for his trusty ribbon-mic designs, and although the MA-200 is his first commercially available condenser mic, he's been making them on a limited, custom basis for over a decade.

Function Over Form

The MA-200's cylindrical black-barrel body and silver-colored mesh grille are simple and elegant. However, it's easy to see that this mic is not your average large-diaphragm condenser (LDC). Its heft instills a sense that you are holding a solid piece of gear, reminiscent of a vintage European microphone. The sonic bonus of its weight is that the mic body's resonance is practically nonexistent, which means the capsule picks up vibrations only from the air and not from the body.

The MA-200, which houses a military-grade JAN 5840 vacuum tube and a top-shelf Jensen transformer, comes securely packaged in a small flight case within a bigger flight case. It is accompanied by a compact power supply with a 7-pin XLR jack, a 3-pin XLR jack, an IEC power socket, an illuminated power switch, and a selector for 110 or 220 volts. Also in the bigger case are a cable to run between the mic and power supply and a cage-and-rubber-band shockmount that screws securely onto the microphone's base. Given the quality of the microphone, the accessories (aside from the cases) feel a touch cheap, but are completely functional. The pins on the 7-pin cable are very tiny, and you should take extra care that the notches line up before pushing the connector into place.

The Ringer

I received two identical mics and could hear absolutely no difference between them in comparison tests. This is especially notable because the MA-200's 3-micron capsules are of Chinese origin, which is the reason the mic is as affordable as it is. Royer and company have gone to extra lengths to ensure that the quality of the

Chinese capsules meet their criteria. In fact, I learned that David Royer personally listens to each mic before it leaves the factory to make sure it's up to snuff.

As luck would have it, I received the MA-200s right before beginning a monster series of sessions that would push my studio's capabilities to its limits. Scott Pinkmountain of the band P.A.F. wanted to record music he'd written for a band with two drummers, an 11-piece big band with horns, a different 11-piece acoustic band, a 5-piece percussion ensemble, and a 28-piece orchestra. Tracking the ensembles was followed by a few days of overdubs with a variety of instruments, from celeste to bass flute to contrabass clarinet. I used the MA-200 on most of the sessions, and in A/B comparisons, it often won out over microphones costing two to five times as much.

By the end of those and a few other sessions, I had used one or both MA-200s on vocals, drums, piano, violin, cello, oboe, English horn, clarinets, alto and tenor saxophones, and electric and acoustic guitar and bass, as well as on a Buchla synthesizer, a 30-inch gong, and probably a few more instruments I can't remember. Not once did the MA-200 disappoint. Standout applications were as drum overheads through a Focusrite ISA 428 and Manley VariMu and as a vocal mic through a Vintech X73i and Empirical Labs Distressor.

The word that came to mind most often while using the MA-200 was *silky*, as the mic's high-mids are present enough to give the source definition and a place in the mix, without any of the harshness or sibilance sometimes abundant in other LDCs. It sounded brighter than a Neumann M7 and darker than an AKG C12, but with every ounce of nuance you'd expect from those classic capsules.

Mojave Desert Island Mic

A lot of readers might not consider a \$995 microphone to be a "budget" mic, and in terms of sonic quality, there is absolutely nothing "budget" about the MA-200. In fact, the only thing "budget" about it is that you should make room in our budget to buy at least one. In this humble reviewer's opinion, you would have to pay at least double, and maybe even multifold more, to acquire a modern or vintage microphone of similar quality from any other manufacturer. Anytime you don't have to settle for an inferior product just to save money, you've found a good value, and the MA-100 is a very good value.