

PRO AUDIO REVIEW

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Lawson L251 Tube Microphone

BY STEPHEN MURPHY

Since the early 1980s, Gene Lawson has won attention and praise from many audio engineers and producers with his line of handcrafted microphones modeled after the vintage Neumann U 47 tube microphone.

Building on the success of the L47, Lawson and his Nashville-based company, Lawson, Inc., set their sights on remaking another revered and increasingly rare tube microphone, the Telefunken ELA M251E (commonly known as the ELAM 251). The result of the company's labor is the Lawson L251 (\$2,495), a visually stunning, craftsman-quality microphone that aims to faithfully reproduce the sound of the original model first introduced about 40 years ago.

FEATURES

The L251 (\$2,495) features an internal shock-mounted capsule with dual one-inch, 24-karat gold vacuum-deposited diaphragms. The microphone's solid brass housing measures 9 3/4 inches long and 2 3/8 inches in diameter, with an exterior finished in a handsome combination of dark blue lacquer and gold plating.

The L251 uses a 6N1P (6922) low noise/low distortion vacuum tube mounted in a unique socket outfitted with beryllium cop-

per contacts that have been thickly covered with gold plating. According to Lawson, the NASA-approved tube socket provides exceptional gripping, low contact resistance, low noise and long life.

A spare tube is thoughtfully included in the shockproof case, which also houses the mic's power supply, a 30-foot Mogami/Neutrik seven-pin XLR cable and swivel stand mount.

The L251's rated impedance is 150 ohms, and can handle a maximum SPL (1 kHz 1 %) of 134 dB (144 dB with 10 dB pad engaged, switchable from the power supply). Lawson recommends an optimal load of 1000 ohms or higher.

While Lawson took great pains to recreate the trademark ELAM sound, he also incorporated additional features (I would say 'improvements' if it were not grounds to be stoned to death for blasphemy) not found on the original.

One such example is the difference in polar pattern selections. Where the ELAM 251 featured the standard dual-

diaphragm settings (cardioid, omni and bidirectional), Lawson chose to include his innovative infinitely variable pattern selection design, which can also be found on the Lawson model L47MP microphone. A cardioid-only switch on the base of the microphone defeats the variable pattern feature and



Fast Facts

Applications:
Studio recording

Key Features:
Multipattern with infinitely variable pattern settings; 6N1P (6922) tube; ELAM251-based capsule; 1-inch 24-karat gold vacuum deposited diaphragms; internal shockmounted capsule; low frequency contour; 10 dB pad; electronically filtered/fully regulated power supply

Price:
\$2,495

Contact:
Lawson Microphones at
615-269-5542,
www.lawsonmicrophones.com.

locks the mic in a cardioid pattern giving a +3dB hotter signal.

Another departure from the original ELAM is in the microphone's respective low-end response. The Telefunken 251 had a non-defeatable 100 Hz 6 dB/octave rolloff; Lawson incorporated the same shelf into the L251's standard operating mode, but also includes the ability to bypass the filter via a power supply-mounted switch labeled "251" and "+Bass."

IN USE

With vintage Telefunken ELAM 251 microphones currently selling for between \$12,000 and \$20,000, a faithful, handcrafted reproduction for under \$2,500 seems like a bargain (the ELAM 251 originally sold for about 1/5th Lawson's price). But talk is

cheap—how does the L251 sound?

The word that came to mind upon hearing the L251 for the first time was “amazing.” After much use on a variety of recording sessions, the word stands!

Having had the privilege of using both an original Telefunken ELAM 251 and the impressive Soundelux ELUX 251 remake in the recent past, I jumped at the chance to review the Lawson version.

While I was not able to do side by side comparisons, certain differences in overall timbre were obvious. Listening to recordings I made with each of the three mics, while unscientific, helped confirm some of my initial observations (note: all three mics can be heard on 3D Audio’s Mic CD).

It should also be mentioned that, while they all retain an overall trademark sound, it is a given that no two unmodified 40-year old Telefunken ELAM 251s sound exactly the same, so A/B-ing a single vintage 251 against the remakes is futile for any purposes other than broad comparison (one ELAM 251 I used sounded as dark as the Neumann U 67 that was set up next to it!).

Upon opening the L251’s carrying case, I was initially struck by the two-pound microphone’s large size and overall departure from the ELAM look. But sonically, the mic delivered an eerily close representation of the ELAM’s signature sound.

Curiously, the Soundelux ELUX model is an impeccable physical reproduction of the Telefunken body, and while it is an excellent mic in its own right, I found the Lawson to be closer to the overall sound of the original model, especially in the midrange.

During the course of this review, I used

the mic across several recording projects on a variety of instruments. I found the mic to present a solid, detailed midrange with a smoothly emphasized upper lift, making this mic ideal for many uses including electric and acoustic guitars, drum room and overheads, woodwinds and, of course, vocals.

One of the first sessions on which I used the L251 was recording vocals with Lesley Gore for an upcoming CD release. (It occurred to me that she may well have sung her first hit, ‘It’s My Party’ through a Telefunken ELAM 251. Quincy?)

I was at the ready with a variety of other failsafe vocal mics, but there was no need to call on any of them. The L251’s airy top end and full bottom complemented Lesley’s bluesy/sultry singing style perfectly. Producer Patrick Hand, Ms. Gore and I were impressed with what we heard and continued the L251 for the rest of the recording, on vocals as well as a number of instruments.

The L251’s variable-pattern mode was a unique, and ultimately, indispensable tool. While miking many different instruments and vocalists, I found myself typically sweeping the pattern out from cardioid towards omni or figure 8 — increasing the room to source ratio — to find the perfect sound. The sweepable range of pattern settings let me achieve ambient balances that would have otherwise been impossible.

SUMMARY

While its sound is impressively similar to the Telefunken original, its stellar build quality, low shelf bypass, variable patterns and reasonable price make it even more

impressive. After the initial familiarization period ended, I found myself reaching again and again for the Lawson L251 instead of my old favorites.

As with all mics, the key is in knowing when and where to use the L251. One of the best compliments I can give to a mic is this: I found more appropriate uses for the L251 and its variable patterns — times where it almost demanded to be used — than with any mic I have owned.

Stephen Murphy, contributing studio editor for PAR, has recorded over one hundred vinyl and CD releases including Grammy, gold and platinum albums. Steve can be reached at editor@smurphco.com.

REVIEW SETUP

Westlake Lcw 8.1 studio monitors; Hafler H3000 power amplifiers; API 512, Joemeek VC1Q mic preamps; API 2500 and UREI LN-1176 compressors; Zaolla Silverline analog and digital cables.



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