



TAPE OP

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(/)MICROPHONES (/REVIEWS/CATEGORY/MICROPHONES)

ISSUE #96

R88 Mk2 stereo ribbon mic, RPQ500 mic preamp



BY AEA ([HTTP://WWW.RIBBONMICS.COM/](http://www.ribbonmics.com/)) | REVIEWED BY CHRIS KOLTAY ([/REVIEWS/BY/CHRIS-KOLTAY](/reviews/by/chris-koltay))

JUL/AUG 2013



If you have a pulse and have been making records during the last few decades, then you are aware that Wes Dooley and Audio Engineering Associates have been making the finest ribbon mics available. I bought two R84 mics [Tape Op #38] when I opened my joint, based on reputation alone, despite my modest equipment budget. Years later, a friend contacted me to tell me that Wes was looking for a studio to do a ribbon mic workshop. I jumped at the chance.

Wes showed up with a trunk full of mics and preamps, and we had a few days of informative fun together. I was immediately taken with the R88 Mk2's appearance. It's the standard coincident pair design, but using the trademark Big Ribbon motors of the R84, as opposed to smaller ribbons like those in the Royer Labs SF-12 [Tape Op #25] I was used to. Much larger and covered in black mesh, the R88 Mk2 looks more like some sort of measurement device from the antique future than a mic. Not surprisingly, its sound was directly proportional to its size! The R88 pairs well with AEA's RPQ preamp [#73], and together they are a staggeringly useful, awesome sounding team. In this review, I'll cover the RPQ500, the single-

channel, 500-series module, which shares the same circuit design and features as the original RPQ, including 10 k ohm input impedance, 81 dB of clean gain, switchable mic/line inputs, the unique CurveShaper semi-parametric high-frequency boost, and a variable-frequency high-pass filter.

Wes has a penchant for acoustic music, so on this day, I called on two of the most talented and patient musicians I know - Scott Michalski and Jennie Knaggs. Scott's music is gorgeous acoustic drone steeped in an obsession of the celestial that would rival Pharaoh Sanders.' With his large voice instantly recalling Scott 3 era Scott Walker with a Jackson C. Frank delivery, I was worried a ribbon might be too boomy. We used the nulls and center points of each ribbon's figure-8 pickup pattern to our advantage - both for rejection and for managing frequency response. We got the best vocal/acoustic sound I ever achieved with the body of the R88 parallel to the ground and one ribbon pointed up at his mouth and one down at the guitar. Any low-end issues were easily tamed by employing the RPQ500's high-pass filter and CurveShaper controls. This combination removed all evidence of any recording process, and everyone involved was amazed at the immediacy and lifelike detail captured.

Next up was Jennie Knaggs, whose voice is at once comforting and distinctly emotive. Her range is jaw-dropping to say the least, and her vocal dynamics can be challenging to capture. Luckily she has great mic technique, and with a pop screen, we were able to get her close enough on the quiet parts to make the R84 we used sound awesome - quiet or loud. For her jams, we used an RPQ500 and R84 on both vocal and guitar, and the R88 Mk2 as a near-ish room mic to capture the full intensity of her voice when loud. Again, the detail was great. What was most curious, and pleasant, was the difference between the left and right sides of the stereo field - largely due to the fact that my studio is in an abandoned liquor

store. I had heard this with my naked ears before, but never with a mic. It gave her voice just the slightest movement in the stereo field when loud. Super cool. Some minimal EQ'ing as above, and the track mixed itself!

Needless to say, my time with Wes Dooley and his AEA mics and preamps was enlightening, and since then, I've had more opportunities to use the R88 Mk2 and RPQ500 with quite a bit of success.

Relaxer is an intense quartet of psychedelic wizardry hailing from Akron, Ohio. Weaving a tapestry of dynamic intricacy is their thing - to the tune of epics 11 minutes long! The drummer is a guy who loves his toms - all three of them. He is a drumming rarity in that he understands cymbal dynamics when recording. I had heard other engineers making glowing statements about the R88 as a one-mic drum-track miracle device. Being from Detroit, I record a lot of pounders, like Ben Blackwell and Pat Pantano, both of The Dirtbombs, and Alex Leonard of Protomartyr. While the R88 Mk2 and RPQ500 combo immediately became my overhead mic'ing chain of choice, I hadn't had the opportunity to try it alone in a mix. Needing only some snare bottom and slight kick, we were able to get a very early-'70s-era Traffic kind of thing for quite a few passages. The sense of space was again remarked upon. Magic!

Our friend, Chicagoan horn legend Rob Mazurek, happened to be playing in Detroit, so I asked him to bring his cornet to play on the Relaxer record. Pressed for time, I grabbed the R88 from the drum kit and placed it in front of Rob, mentioning in passing that it was a stereo mic. Knowing Rob and his work, I purposefully avoided giving any direction. Typically, we did three passes at a time - each one different and equally bad-ass. For all of these takes, he was moving back and forth in the stereo field. What a

pleasure to be able to utilize this type of sound reproduction on an all-out master of his instrument, let alone give him the opportunity to mix himself! We were all super stoked.

The above sessions are just a few instances involving the R88 Mk2 and RPQ500 that readily come to mind. I've also had great success using the combo on a horn section 15 ft from the drum kit. Recording two Ampeg Gemini guitar amps in stereo was totally killer. On piano, I was able to use the placement and nulls to effectively control the bleed and frequency response of a baby grand track. As a room mic for percussion ensemble overdubs, for backing vocals, etc. - all amazing.

Being on a budget, when Wes came by, I was not expecting to purchase a stereo ribbon, especially since I already owned a Royer SF-12. I also have a ton of preamps that I think are great with ribbons. But the RPQ500 has magic inside. I had tried the R88 Mk2 with tons of other preamps while I was waiting for my own RPQ500 modules to arrive. The mic sounded great, but a whole new thing seems to happen when it feeds an RPQ500 pair! Take your favorite Shure SM57 or Sennheiser MD 409 on a twin, and plug it into the RPQ; you'll see what I mean. The mics open up, CurveShaper adds air without harshness, and the detail is amazing. No surprise - Wes and company have managed to define the 500-series ribbon mic preamp that also brings out the best of any mic.



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When I was contacted about reviewing the LD-2ube and was told that it was a tube mic for \$300, I said, "Huh? yeah! I'll check that out." I've used it on every vocal session since then. This mic is...

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BY PETE WEISS (/REVIEWS/BY/PETE-WEISS)

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BY JOHN BACCIGALUPPI (/REVIEWS/BY/JOHN-BACCIGALUPPI)

I first became interested in the KMS 105 condenser mic at TapeOpCon 2004 in New Orleans when both Ian MacKaye of Fugazi and The Evens along with Don Zientara of Inner Ear studios, mentioned it as one...

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BY GARRETT HAINES (/REVIEWS/BY/GARRETT-HAINES)

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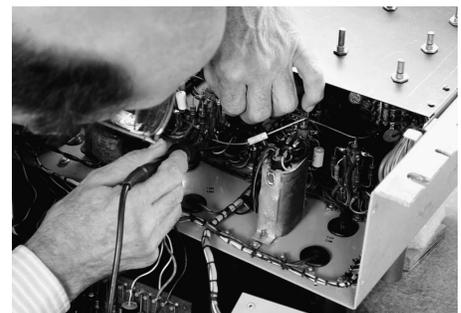
BY DAVID HUBER (/REVIEWS/BY/DAVID-HUBER)

Every once in a blue moon a deal on equipment comes along that grabs me by the neck and just says "I'm good, and I'm affordable...ya simply gotta buy me!" Recently, one of these little screamers took...

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BY

Vintage King co-founder Michael Nehra shares some of his love, knowledge, and practical advice for diving into the world of vintage audio gear, and then takes us behind the scenes for a walk through...

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BY JOHN BACCIGALUPPI (/ARTICLES/BY/JOHN-BACCIGALUPPI),
LARRY CRANE (/ARTICLES/BY/LARRY-CRANE)

Bill Cheney and Jim Romney are the men responsible for keeping the amazing legacy of Spectra Sonics, a legendary, if criminally unheralded, pro-audio company alive.



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BY LARRY CRANE (/ARTICLES/BY/LARRY-CRANE)

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