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Cloud Microphones JRS 34 & JRS 34P

Ribbon Microphones

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By Paul White

Published [December 2011](#)**These retro-styled ribbon mics have a lineage going back to legendary models from RCA, and are completely hand-built in the USA.**

Cloud Microphones are based in Tucson, Arizona, where their mics are also designed and built, in collaboration with Stephen Sank. The 'JRS' initials in the names of both review models are in memory of Stephen's father, Jon R Sank, who played a major part in designing many of RCA's classic ribbon models, including the BK11 and BK10A. After RCA closed their microphone division, Jon passed on his knowledge to his son Stephen, so it comes as no surprise that these mics have more than a hint of RCA flavour about them.

The ribbon used in the JRS 34 is built the same way as those in the original RCA 44 series, although the rest of the mic is new, absorbing influences from the BK11 and other microphone designs, and employing neodymium magnets, Cinemag transformers, and active DC JFET circuitry.

Cloud build the active JRS 34 and a passive counterpart, the JRS 34P. Being passive, the latter requires a good-quality mic preamp with plenty of gain, or, alternatively, one of the company's Cloudlifter in-line preamps. We reviewed these, which are based on the active JFET circuitry of the JRS 34, last month (</sos/nov11/articles/cloudlifter.htm>).

These hand-built microphones use materials supplied exclusively by US companies, many of which are local to Cloud, and of course they are fully RoHS compliant, to meet with current manufacturing requirements. Both models come in a hardwood case with a contoured lining, and a soft storage bag, along with a user guide.

Spot The Difference

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Cloud Microphones JRS 34 & JRS 34P \$1499/\$1399

Pros

- Hand built in the US.
- Well-balanced sound that manages to be smooth without being dull.

Cons

- I would have like more detailed specifications and perhaps an included shockmount.
- Unless the sound source is very loud, the passive JRS 34P struggles when used with the mic amps built into typical audio interfaces.

Summary

These are great performers at an attractive price, but I'd buy either the active model or team the passive model with a Cloudlifter (reviewed last month), unless I already owned a really good external mic preamp.

Information

JRS 34 \$1499, JRS 34P \$1399.

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Looking rather like a skinny version of its RCA ancestor, the JRS 34 can be differentiated from its passive counterpart by its metallic-finished body panels (the passive JRS 34P has a grey paint finish). Both mics have their balanced XLR output connectors on the underside, off centre, and the active JRS 34 features a 48V logo on the side, to remind the user that phantom power is required. A simple swivel mic-stand adaptor is built into the underside of the mic.

The JRS 34 produces the expected figure-of-eight pattern, which is the natural pattern for a straightforward ribbon capsule, and can run from phantom power in the 12V to 60V range. Its frequency range is quoted as 20Hz to 20kHz, but there's no mention of how many decibels down the response is at those two points, and no frequency-response graph, so all my tonal judgements are subjective. The maximum SPL the mic can tolerate is 138dB at 1kHz, though there's no quoted sensitivity figure. In practice, there was plenty of output level for normal studio applications, with no need to crank the preamp up to full gain for things like acoustic-guitar recording or quiet vocals.

Outwardly similar and boasting the same ribbon design, the passive JRS 34P has a much lower electrical output, which places stringent demands on the preamp with which it is used. Adding a Cloudlifter in-line level booster essentially replicates the active part of the JRS 34, adding over 20dB of gain, which is a good option if you use the mic amps in a Firewire or USB interface, as when these are turned up to high gain, they often pick up interference from the digital interfacing circuitry. However, if you have a really good separate mic preamp, the passive mic has the slight advantage that you can use different preamps with different input impedances, to vary the sound to taste.

Testing



Each mic comes in a hardwood case with a soft protective bag.

On an electric guitar amp, I found that both models sounded pretty much identical, combining a good low-end weight with just the right amount of upper-mid bite. The smoothing effect of the ribbon's high end prevented the sound from getting too gritty, and the recorded result responded well to EQ. As ribbon mics exhibit such a pronounced proximity effect because of their figure-of-eight pattern, I applied an 80Hz, 18dB/octave low-cut filter to all my test recordings (which you can hear at [/sos/dec11/articles/cloudmedia.htm](https://www.soundonsound.com/dec11/articles/cloudmedia.htm)). Some ribbon mics can sound muddy on guitar amps, but these ones came across as pretty much right, even before I started playing with EQ or fine-tuning the mic position.

On all other sources, any difference in sound between the active and passive models was mainly down to the noise added by my interface preamps at high gain settings, otherwise

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I could find no real difference. Vocals came over as warm, but still bright enough to be intelligible, and even acoustic guitar showed a good balance between fullness of tone and string articulation. The acoustic-guitar recording would probably need some further low cut and 'air' boost to sit it in a mix, but it sounded very sweet to me.

Cloud & Clear?

Both of these mics work really well, though if I was using the passive model, which exhibits the expected low sensitivity of a ribbon mic, I'd probably also buy a Cloudlifter, as they enable even modest mic preamps to deliver classy-sounding results with minimal noise. These mics are very sensibly priced for what are essentially handmade, US products, and a recent price reduction has made them all the more attractive. In some applications you may want to use a third-party shockmount, but the in-built mounts do work well enough.

There's a lot of hype surrounding ribbon mics in general, with some of the models that claim silky-sweet highs just sounding hopelessly dull to my ears. These Cloud mics, however, sound exactly the way I feel a ribbon should: warm and with weighty lows, a clean mid-range, and clear but smooth-sounding highs. Their casework has a somewhat retro styling, which I like, and the build quality is sturdy. If you're after a hand-built mic that delivers a solid slice of retro sound at a realistic price, then you only have to look at the Clouds.

Alternatives

The SE Electronics Voodoo, the Audio Technica AT4080 and AT4081, and MXL's R77 are all slightly more affordable alternatives, although if your budget will stretch to it you could also check out what AEA have to offer.

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