



Cloud Microphones

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Cloud Microphones (): JRS-34 and JRS-34-P ribbon mics

REVIEWED BY CRAIG SCHUMACHER [/] REVIEWS / BY / CRAIG-SCHUMACHER

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One of the benefits of being a Tape Op subscriber is finding and meeting other readers in your home town. That in turn points you towards your resident gear geeks. The original rumor we heard here at WaveLab was that there was a new tech in town who was a ribbon mic repair specialist and had this connection to RCA and something about new-old-stock RCA ribbon material. The tech turned out to be Stephen Sank, son of Jon Sank. Jon Sank became the head of acoustical research at RCA after Harry Olson held that position. Jon worked with Mr. Olson, the inventor of the famed RCA 44 and 77 mics. Jon Sank contributed to RCA's tradition of innovative ribbon mic designs with his RCA BK-11 design. Stephen moved into a workspace that happened to be next to the project studio of musician RJ Cloud, who quickly became enamored of Stephen's microphones and heritage. Cloud began to buy up all of the vintage RCA ribbon mics he could find and had Sank refurbish them, whereupon he resold them, keeping a nice stockpile for his personal use. This led to a collaboration between Sank and Cloud on the design of a new mic, taking the best of the old technology and improving upon it, and that's how Cloud Microphones and their JRS-34 ribbon microphone (named after Jon R. Sank and his birth year of 1934) were born. By using 1.8 micron, specially-tempered, pure aluminum and a replica of Harry Olson's original ribbon-corrugation machine, Cloud Microphones is able to reproduce a ribbon that matches the 44's ribbon specifications of 2.5" long, 0.19" wide, and 13 corrugations per inch. This next led to creating a ribbon motor that, like the BK-11, is designed to reduce acoustic reflections that can impinge on the ribbon. Newly-transplanted drummer and engineer Fen Ikner became the manager and point-person of the fledgling company, and through Fen, we got our hands on some of the early production units; we've been using and listening to Cloud mics for six months now.

The first unit we got was a passive unit and came in a nice, secure wooden box. Upon opening the box, we noticed right away the familiar shape and grill-pattern of the 44. Expecting a big, heavy ribbon mic, we were surprised to discover that the Cloud was more like a 44 on an extreme diet. This thing is way skinnier than a 44 but still close to the same footprint in overall size. We also thought that the housing was a plastic material only to later learn it is in fact aluminum and steel, fabricated locally. We also learned that the magnets are neodymium magnets (that's why it's not as physically fat or as heavy as a 44) made and matched in California, and the output transformers are from Cinemag. No overseas stuff to be found anywhere.

The microphones are hand-assembled and tested right here in Tucson, the build quality is good, and the design is very straightforward and simple. We especially like that the grille metal is strong and won't dent from just touching it. The XLR connector is recessed in the bottom of the housing next to the mic mount. The

mount is the most limiting feature of the mic, with very little angle adjustment; to get some of the angles we needed, we had to use boom arms to position the mic properly. But the Cloud is way more manageable than the weighty 44, so it's a minor issue. Fen says the company is currently working on a shockmount.

Two months ago, Fen brought over the final production versions of the active JRS-34, which now features a brushed-steel finish and nickel-plated screens, and the passive JRS-34-P, finished in a grey body with nickel-plated screens also. You can also order the active version as a JRS-34-TV in a black, powder-coated, non-reflective finish. The production mics arrived just in time to coincide with a heavy tracking schedule, and they quickly found their way onto lots of tracks.

One of the first bands was Fen's Seashell Radio, which consists of guitar, drums, piano, and cello. We set up the active version on the cello and ran it into our TRUE Systems PT2-500 mic preamp (Tape Op #76) and placed the mic about 3 ft away and about 2 ft above the bridge, while angling the face of the ribbon to the same plane as the face of the cello. From the first bow stroke, the JRS-34 sounded fantastic. It captured all the rich tone of the cello while rejecting much of the scraping of the bow on the strings.

Our next tracking session was with our friend Jairo and his project Depedro. Jairo is from Madrid and backs up Calexico on tour, and they in turn support him on his recordings. We were tracking live drums, acoustic guitar, and acoustic bass. We like to cut acoustic bass with the drums and are willing to except some drum bleed onto the bass track as long as the drum bleed does not whack out the drums at mix — which is always a bit of a crap shoot. We create a wall of gobos, blankets, bass traps, and plexiglass around the bass position and get pretty good results. Our go-to mic has been our AKG C 414 TL II, and we like the way it responds to the growl of Joey Burn's bass playing, but that mic is a bear for bleed when the drums are more rocking. Since the Cloud was so good on the cello, we reasoned that it would work well on the acoustic bass. Also, being a ribbon, we could use the figure-eight pattern to our advantage by turning a null point towards the drums. The results were fantastic. Not only did the Cloud capture bass as well as the TL II, the drum bleed was practically inaudible, even on louder basic tracks, and the bass level was plenty hot. For us, this was huge because now we know we can get keeper bass tracks with the drums. The bass tone held up at mix even better, and we played with the bass EQ less at mix, mostly from not having to EQ out top-end drum bleed.

With the active version set up during the session for bass tracking, we utilized the JRS-34-P for overdubs. We tried it on handclaps, tambourine, shaker, and maracas; and we loved the smoothness the Cloud created on those often-difficult, transient-heavy overdubs. Jairo was so impressed with the Cloud that he bought one and had it shipped to Madrid. Handclaps sold him the most.

Ironically, it was another handclap overdub on our next session that also was a stand out track. In this situation, the person clapping was James Gadson. James also used the Cloud for tambo parts. James was really curious about the mic and really loved how easy it made recording those overdubs. James is a studio veteran and has worked with the best artists and has been in all kinds of studios. The fact that he heard how well the Cloud sounded was a big reinforcement to what we had been hearing and observing in those previous sessions.

The Cloud mics have become the “let’s try them first” mics on all kinds of difficult sound sources. One of these is Howe Gelb’s old pump organ that we store for him. We all love the dark tone of that organ, but it’s a creaky old thing. By positioning the Cloud parallel to the air/reed output, we were able to point the mic at the floor and let the passing sound go across the figure-eight pattern of the mic. With the null side pointed at the noisy organ mechanism, we pretty much cut out all the excessive wheezing and creaking, and the Cloud’s natural frequency response really helped the dark tone of the organ.

The same session that brought in James also brought in Greg Leisz for his multi-instrumental talents. One of the songs called for some mandolin parts, and the Cloud JRS-34-P was set up for the job. Now Greg has also been in studios worldwide and is a brilliant producer himself. He also was impressed with how smooth and even the Cloud sounded on the mandolin he was tracking, and we

While the RCA influence is apparent, the Cloud mics are not trying to be clones. They are modern ribbon mics that have all the clarity and robustness of the new ribbon designs but are more like the old ribbons in tone. The fact that several musicians we hold in high regard here all noticed how the Cloud enhanced some of their tracks was something special. While there has been no shortage of new ribbon mics hitting the market, the Cloud mics deserve serious consideration if you are looking to expand your studio’s tonal palette. (JRS-34 \$1799 MSRP, JRS-34-P \$1499; www.cloudmicrophones.com)

–Craig Schumacher <craig@wavelabstudio.com>



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David Royer and his company Royer Labs have a great reputation for their fine line of ribbon mics. When the time came to manufacture David's designs for non-ribbon mics, Mojave Audio was formed to...

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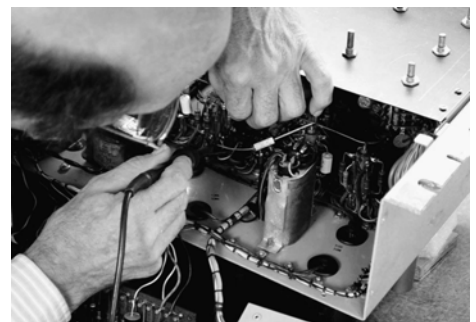
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BY

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