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Blue Microphones' Spark is a cardioid-only, FET-based studio condenser microphone that borrows its all-discrete and Class-A FET design from the company's more expensive models, yet sells for \$199. Spark retains the "lollipop" look for which Blue mics are known, and comes in a festive burnt-orange color with a custom shockmount, pop filter, wooden storage "stash" box, excellent recording guide and a three-year warranty.

Spark is 7.76 inches long, 1.77 inches in diameter and weighs 1.75 pounds. It is manufactured using minimal parts and screws to hedge against possible mechanical resonances. It is phantom powered and the manual says it has a noise level of 10dB (A weighted), 28mV/PA sensitivity and a max SPL rating of 128dB. The 25mm-diameter capsule has a 4-micron-thick, nickel-sputtered diaphragm and is mounted in a soft-rubber isolating sleeve "tuned" to dampen its mass.

Spark has two switchable response curves that are toggled in/out by a flush-mounted pushbutton at the back of the mic called the Focus control, which changes the capsule's input driver rather than the signal output of the microphone circuit. With Focus switched out in the Normal mode, Spark exhibits a response curve characterized by a lift between 8 kHz and 12 kHz, a small presence bump at 1 kHz, a dip within the 200 to 400Hz area and a healthy boost centered at 90 Hz. With the Focus button in, the response is the same except for a roll-off starting just above 100 Hz.

SPARK IN THE STUDIO

I first used Spark for a male vocal recording and compared it (probably unfairly) to mics that cost from five to 16 times as much: David Bock's U195 (another FET mic) and a Neumann U87. I found that Spark held its own in comparison to these pro stalwarts. Spark offered a lot of output--the studio's API console mic preamp gain was set minimally for most sources.

My male singer sounded big and warm on Spark with a similarly wide pickup pattern as the U195. The U87 sounded great, although it had a much "drier" sound with less of the room mixing in as compared to the other two. All three mics sounded good, and I would have no trouble recording a vocal for a demo, record or jingle with Spark.





It is essential to use the included windscreen for most close vocals, but plan to supplement it with a secondary screen or foam "windschutz" for singers who are big mic poppers. Operationally, the Focus button is a little tough to get at when the mic is in the shockmount, but I liked that switching between Focus modes requires no special tool and produces nearly no noise, making A/B comparisons possible while listening loudly.

I used Spark to record two different acoustic guitars and two ukuleles. At the API studio, I pushed the Focus button in to remove some boominess coming from a Goya gut string guitar. I had Spark placed at about the 10th fret and, as I would do for any mic for this recording, boosted upper midrange and high frequencies to get this somber instrument to speak within a bright pop music track.

When recording a Collings D2H Dreadnought acoustic guitar and 4 and 6-string handmade Hawaiian Mele ukuleles, I had an all-tube signal chain using a Manley EQ500 preamp followed by a vintage Tube-Tech CL1A compressor. I used no EQ and had the Focus button pushed in for the Collings, but switched Focus out when recording the ukes. I place the mic at the 12th fret for the guitar and closer to the sound hole for the ukes. With a good squash provided by the Tube-Tech, the sound was marvelous. I got a little room tone mixed in because I was no closer than about a foot away in all cases.

Another good application was for electric guitar. I have always loved condensers on guitar amps, but some are brash-sounding and can overload. Spark sounded wonderful when placed midway between the dust cover and the surround of the 12-inch speaker in a Fender Deluxe Reverb amp. My guitar player used a Strat and was impressed by the thick tone, even using the back pickup and treble boosting on the amp. Spark's diminutive size is a plus when recording instruments, allowing it to be precisely placed in any spot using a small mic stand.

SPARK ME UP!

Spark is a genuine "jack of all trades" working for male vocals, steel- and gut string guitars and in front of a guitar amp. In these situations, I was able to get good to excellent results every time.

PRODUCT SUMMARY

COMPANY: Baltic Latvian Universal Electronics (Blue)

PRODUCT: Spark

WEB: bluemic.com

PRICE: \$199

PROS: Excellent all-purpose and inexpensive workhorse studio mic.

CONS: Focus button hard to access when mic is in shock-mount.

Barry Rudolph is an L.A.-based recording engineer. Visit his Web site at: WWW.BARRYRUDOLPH.COM



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