

AKG C451B

The Austrian manufacturer's definitive modular stick mic has been reissued without the modularity but with improved performance and a lower price tag.

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THE ORIGINAL C451 was launched in 1969, and its last incarnation was discontinued in 1993 with the arrival of the Blue Line, which replaced it with a new modular range featuring snap-on capsules. To be honest, the fact that the 451 had been discontinued had missed me, which says much for the longevity of this little Austrian 'wiener', which is still used in many studios. Evidently, the market still wants more.

This popular condenser microphone comprised a kit with the C451 body, along with a variety of interchangeable capsules for different polar patterns. By far and away the most popular of these was the cardioid CK-1. This attached by means of a very fine screw thread. The only on-body adjustment available was the low-frequency roll-off, selectable at either 75Hz or 150Hz using a small slider sunk behind a slot on the body. A 10dB pad was available as a screw-in insert between capsule and body, if you were lucky enough to find one in the mic drawer. Frequent insertion and removal of these predictably had a wearing effect on the screw-thread, and the difficult-to-adjust filter switch often also caused trouble as the indent got worn away with repeated pressure from sharp objects.

The new C451B is a reissue of the original model, faithfully copying the old design, but with a major

difference: the capsule is permanently fixed. Designed to replicate the CK-1 transducer, one could be fooled into thinking that it could also be unscrewed. Without the possibility of screwing on a 10dB pad, AKG has included a second sliding switch for 10dB or 20dB gain reduction on the barrel. Both this switch and the filter switch are recessed in holes cut in the side of the body.

The switches include a very small slot indentation, implying the need for a trim tool or very small screwdriver for adjustment. This can be a problem, for if anything is likely to hand in a studio it is more likely to be a ballpoint pen, leading to slightly rougher handling and possible damage to the switch. Only time will tell if these have any greater longevity than the previous model's notorious filter switch. The clicks are not particularly positive, and the -20dB setting didn't quite line up with the legending, and the switches have some 'give' and feel a bit spongy.

The review model came in a lightweight shaped padded foam case with a zip up fabric cover. A standard AKG rubbery plastic flexible mic clip was included along with a foam pop shield. The clip holds the mic securely, but in one direction the tilt angle doesn't really adjust far enough, meaning you have to sometimes remove the mic and re-insert it the other way round to be able to point it where you want. The mic is phantom powered but will happily run from a supply as low as 9v. The satin nickel finish is particularly impressive, and AKG has taken the trouble to engrave most of the lettering on the barrel - current AKG mics are usually printed.

The original was notable for its treble lift, and this reissue is certainly similar in that respect - far brighter sounding than, say, a C414 on a cardioid setting with both mics pointed directly at a bright percussion instrument. This can be a blessing and a curse, and will be a major factor in the choice (or not) of this mic in a given situation. The supplied plot shows a boost of about 5dB at 10kHz, and with some steel strung guitars this can be a bit too sparkly, although with a large bodied instrument, such as a Gibson J200, I found it to be excellent. And with a reduced treble response off-axis you are able to control the sound considerably by placement. When the desire is for especially sparkling hi-hats or other bright percussion, a mic with such an exaggerated treble response can be just the ticket. This is not to say the 451 lacks low end, however. Indeed there is a measure of richness at all frequencies, although in a shootout with an original 451EB, the new 451 sounded very noticeably richer, bigger and better.

Another reason for the popularity of the 451 was its size: the 451B is a mere 160mm long and is only 19mm in diameter. Putting an enormous condenser close-in can actually have a detrimental effect on the sound due to turbulence. Having a small mic like the 451 can certainly help reduce the problem.

The review model came with an individual frequency response graph that was reassuringly similar to the one printed in the manual. AKG claims vastly



improved specification figures, and these were substantiated in use. I had no cause for concern with noise or any other aspect of its performance, and in comparisons it always sounded better than the original model.

The new model has one other distinct advantage over its predecessor - it is considerably cheaper than the old 451 and CK1 combination. If you are a fan of bright, precise sounds, then this bright precise mic is the one for you. □

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PROS Accurate, bright sound; cheaper than original combo; small and light, easy to position; attractive and desirable appearance.

CONS Spongy switches, awkward to adjust; no visual clue that capsule does not unscrew; too tonally bright for some applications.

EXTRAS Many will be surprised by the humble C451's elevation to classic status but a look on ebay will confirm that some older models are attracting extraordinary money, particularly in the US. Part of the standing of the mic has to be attributed to the era in which it established itself. These were times before the enormous choice of affordable mics that we enjoy today and the C451 earned its reputation on the back of its performance and, by virtue of its interchangeable capsules, flexibility. Just how flexible depends on how far you want to go back. Aside from the CK-1 cardioid, which was the standard capsule for the C451 system, you could choose the: CK-1S cardioid with HF lift; CK-2 omni; CK-3 hypercardioid; CK-4 fig8; CK-5 cardioid with shock mount and windscreens; CK-6 (incredibly rare) variable pattern omni/cardioid/fig8; CK-8 short shotgun; CK-9 long shotgun; and later the CK-22 omni.

The fact that it was a stick mic, and consequently easy to point and get into tight spaces with, has been underplayed but this undoubtedly contributed to its flexibility.

