

Bock Audio 195

A smart condenser with shades of vintage flavour at the affordable end of the manufacturer's range, **JON THORNTON** discovers there is more to a name than the name.

A badge is one thing, and there's terrific value in a name or brand that has spent years building its reputation. But it pays to remember that it's also the people that matter, not the name on the tin. When the two are one and the same, both personal and corporate reputations are being held up for scrutiny.

In this case, the name is Bock — David Bock. A microphone guru of long standing, Bock was one of the driving forces and chief designer behind Soundelux microphones, which produced some superb microphones between 1996 and 2007. Modern recreations and interpretations of classic designs were the order of the day here — including one of my favourite microphones of recent times, the ELUX 251 (*Resolution* V2.6). When parent company Ascent Media decided to close down Soundelux microphones an agreement was reached in terms of ownership of the designs, which are now manufactured by Bock's own company, Bock Audio. The Bock 195 (UK£675 + VAT) is essentially the same microphone as the original Soundelux U195, albeit with the designer's name now squarely on the logo.

Unlike other mics in the Bock Audio line-up, the 195 doesn't set out to directly recreate a specific vintage design. Rather, it sets out to deliver a sound that draws on aspects of several respected classics in a very modern way. Its looks seem to underscore this approach, with a nicely detailed, rather retro looking chrome head-grille set against a smooth matte black body, rather than the enamelled finish of the Bock 251. It's all very well screwed together, and comes in a wooden case with a fixed clip that screws into the base of the microphone.

Internally there's a dual symmetrical backplate, k67-type capsule featuring a 1-inch diameter diaphragm. This is married to FET-based electronics, with the emphasis here on

simplicity and minimalism in circuit topology. A quick peek inside confirms this, with a very neatly manufactured circuit board populated with high quality components. Also in evidence is a larger than usual custom designed output transformer, which takes up nearly half of the available space in the microphone body.

The pick-up pattern is a fixed cardioid, but there are the usual switches on the rear of the mic body for a -10dB pad and high-pass filter. More unusual is a third switch that selects 'fat' or 'normal' modes. Effectively this applies some contour shaping to the bass response, elevating the output between 10Hz and 400Hz to help emulate the sound of some classic tube microphones. The only niggle here is the slide switches themselves. They're well recessed into the microphone, requiring some sort of implement to operate (not a bad thing in itself). But in comparison with the rest of the microphone they appear a little flimsy in nature.

Duly plugged in, phantomed up and with preamp duties carried out by a Millennia HV3-C for some good clean gain (and a fair amount of it — the 195 isn't blessed with a spectacularly high output), its first call of duty was for some male VO work, with a U87 for comparison.

What's immediately obvious is that the 195 definitely isn't trying to ape the U87/67 sound — it's a much more laid back sound without such an obvious presence bump in the mid-range. It also doesn't have that slightly hyped and potentially brittle HF response of some modern large diaphragm capacitors. Having said that, there's a lot of detail up there that helps give a nice sense of intimacy to the spoken word.

Switching in the 'fat' switch in this application does bring a certain thickness to the voice, but certainly with male vocals I'm not sure that the effect is wholly desirable — certainly I got better results with the 'fat' switch off and just moving a little closer on mic. Next up was female (sung) vocals, which

was quite a surprise. Although the detail in the high end remained the same, the mid-range in particular sounded a little more forward and crispy. Of course, microphones will sound different with different sources, but here the effect was extremely pronounced — almost like a completely different microphone. I really liked this microphone on female vocals — it sounds full and natural, but with a nice sheen to the high end that doesn't exaggerate sibilance. OK, it's not in the same league as the 251 here, but it is really very useable.

Moving on, and in an attempt to evaluate the 195 as a general purpose workhorse rather than just a 'vocal mic', some close-ish miking of a guitar amp was on the agenda. Set about 15cm in front of an Orange Tiny Terror combo, the goal was a slightly gritty but not overtly distorted rhythm sound. With the aforementioned combo, this is always something of a challenge — there's a particular balance between it not sounding thin and not sounding over-cooked in low end due to proximity effect. First attempts were passable — a solid mid-range with just a little too much HF 'scratch' that was easily cured with EQ — but still a little thin sounding. But here's where that 'fat' mode really comes into its own by adding that missing well to the bottom octaves without sacrificing the 'air' by moving the microphone too close in. I'm not usually a fan of large diaphragm capacitors on guitar cabs, normally preferring a dynamic or ribbon, but the 195 makes a very convincing case here.

If I had to sum up the 195 in one word, it would be 'surprising'. It has a sound that is at once very familiar, yet managed to surprise me constantly in terms of how it sounded in different applications. I've grown used to mentally classifying mics in my head on a spectrum of 'hard' and 'soft' in terms of their sound but this one was hard to place. It's not that it sits in the middle of the range, but rather that it can be anywhere along that range depending on source and application. And that is a positive, not a negative characteristic. As a result, what you get here is a genuinely fine example of a highly capable recording tool that will complement any microphone collection, no matter how large or small. Long may the Bock name live on. ■



PROS Nicely built; generally smooth yet detailed; flexible sound that can be tailored to different applications with 'fat' mode.

CONS Needs a lot of experimentation to fully appreciate; switches hard to get at and a little flimsy.

EXTRAS Repairing and rebuilding original 251s has been David Bock's work for more than 30 years. The Bock 251 is his answer to the vintage mic dilemma of getting that sound without the vintage headaches. It uses a proprietary hand-made German capsule, a proprietary hand-wound multisectioned audio transformer, a NOS tube in the mic amplifier, a hand-built outboard power supply and a custom low capacitance audio cable.



Contact

BOCK AUDIO, US:

Website: www.bockaudio.com

UK, **Studiocare:** +44 151 236 7800