

# Golden Age Project ribbons

The ribbon is not a microphone technology that all will have had experience of due partly to rarity, perceived fragility and a traditional association with certain types of recording.

They tend also to not be cheap. There's been a recent rush to redress this balance;

**JON THORNTON** investigates a clutch of affordable ribbons.



**T**HERE WAS A TIME when, if you were in the market for a ribbon microphone, your choices were somewhat limited. The venerable Coles 4038 remained for many years one of the few choices around, and while its sonic characteristics made it a favourite in classical recording applications especially, the inherent fragility of the ribbon design and relatively high cost seemed to place it — and most other ribbon microphones — on the edges of the mainstream. Then along came Royer with their fantastic new take on ribbon designs, including the option of active circuitry to better buffer the output stage, and now, much like buses, a whole fleet of affordable ribbon microphones are appearing all at once.

Golden Age Music is a Swedish pro-audio reseller that is providing its own range of microphones under the Golden Age Project badge. The microphones on offer here are all of Chinese origin, and the range comprises FET-based capacitors, tube-based capacitors, dynamic and ribbon microphones, all with a distinctly retro approach to their physical appearance.

The ribbon mics are the R1 (UK£109 + VAT), R1 Active (£169 + VAT), R1 Tube Active (£254 + VAT) and R2 (£75 + VAT). Internally, the R1 family all feature the same 50mm long, 2 micron thick, corrugated aluminium ribbon, and the same external housing — albeit finished in different muted colour schemes. The differences between them are entirely to do with the associated electronics.

The R1 (now in its Mk II version) is the simplest, being entirely passive with a transformer output stage. The R1 Active features a FET-based amplifier, powered by phantom power, in an attempt to make interfacing with the input stage of your mic preamplifier somewhat more predictable. As well as meaning that the source impedance of the active version is somewhat lower (200ohms rather than 600ohms for the passive version), this also offers a 10dB increase in sensitivity. Finally, the R1 Tube Active does the

same thing, but uses a 12AX7 valve rather than a FET-based design. The Tube Active comes with its own power supply — a very basic affair with a 7-pin XLR connector running to and from the mic and a standard XLR giving microphone level output.

All three mics feature an integral mounting assembly, reminiscent of old RCA 77 microphones, whereby the microphone swivels in a yoke that screws on to your mic stand. This certainly contributes to the 'retro' design statement, but the XLR entry point on the microphone does rather limit the extent to which it can be swivelled to point in an upwards direction.

Given the common ribbon element, you would expect these microphones to sound pretty similar but in practice there are some marked differences between them. The passive R1 certainly sounded the darkest of the trio on male vocals, with the active version tightening up the mid range considerably and giving a greater sense of transient detail. The Tube Active builds on this by adding quite a significant but gentle presence boost between 2 and 4kHz, and a little more 'air' around the 10kHz area. This worked nicely on male vocals but to my ears sounded too gritty on female vocals. On the other hand, the darkness of the passive R1 did a much better job when used to mic up a guitar cab than either of the active versions, which both came across as a little harsh sounding.

All of the R1 variants have a nice smooth and extended low-end response that contributes greatly to that slightly rounded off, mellow sound. However, with no onboard high-pass they did prove incredibly susceptible to air-con movement in the studio — you will need a good HPF on your preamplifier or console with these mics. Placement is somewhat critical too due to the very tight HF pick-up on the vertical axis, coupled with a pretty wide front and rear pick-up in the horizontal axis. This leads to some interesting artefacts when recording vocals without any form of absorption behind the microphone.

From the same manufacturer, but with a slightly

different internal design and radically different external design, is the R2. This adopts the 'lollipop' form factor, and incorporates a slightly smaller and thicker ribbon element (42mm long and 2.5 microns thick). Like the simplest R1, the R2 is passive, yet sounds quite different from its larger sibling — much darker overall with a lot less HF definition, but a very smooth extension in the low-mids. Overall it's much more obviously voiced.

Comparisons with other capacitor or conventional moving-coil dynamics would be slightly unfair — luckily I had a pair of Royer R122s to hand, probably closest in design philosophy to the R1 Actives. I'd like to say that the GA Project mics compared favourably, but in truth there was really no contest. Admittedly, the Royer is pitched somewhat higher than the Golden Age range in terms of price, but in terms of the smoothness of response, detail and warmth — particularly in the critical 2–4kHz range — the GA mics sounded quite 'closed in' by comparison.

Which isn't to say that they don't have useful sonic characteristics — indeed the R2 worked as the best of the bunch (Royers included) as a room mic for a kit recording. Despite needing a whole heap of gain it added something quite distinctively chunky to the sound. If I had to pick one of them to keep, my money would be on the R1 Active, as it seems to have the most balanced and flexible sound. If you fancy a ribbon microphone with a very distinctive voicing for relatively little outlay, you might want to investigate these microphones further. ■

## PROS

Very affordably priced; retro styling a definite talking point; distinctive sound.

## CONS

Cable entry placement on R1 range is annoying; range seems to lack some detail and warmth in the mid range and HF in comparison to other ribbon designs.

## EXTRAS

The GAP range includes a variety of condenser and dynamic mics. Notables



are the FC 1 FET large diaphragm condenser; FC 4 MC small diaphragm condenser with pad, high-pass and three interchangeable heads; TC 3 valve small diaphragm condenser with pad, high-pass, and three interchangeable heads; and the TC 1 valve large diaphragm condenser with nine patterns.

## Contact

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