

JZ Microphones Black Hole

In a time of knock offs and copies it's refreshing to see a mic design that nobody would dare to copy. **JON THORNTON** rises above his preconceived ideas and expectations and mounts a Black Hole...

'Polarised' is perhaps the word best used to describe the variety of responses I've had from people the first time they set eyes on this microphone — and I'm not talking about back-plates here. It seems that people either love or hate its looks, with no middle ground. But before acknowledging that beauty is after all, only skin deep, a little background.

JZ Microphones was established in September 2007 in Latvia and the initials reflect the chief designer behind the microphones, Juris Zarins. If the name sounds familiar, that's because you would have heard about him with regard to Violet Designs — another company not renowned for conservatism when it comes to the external appearance of their products. In fact, sharp-eyed readers may have spotted the Black Hole's distinctive shape featuring briefly in the Violet line-up some while ago. To cut a long story short, JZ Microphones was spun out of Scruples (the manufacturing base for Violet Design) as a separate brand, with its eye firmly on the high end of the market. The Black Hole is the company's first product — tweaked and tuned from the original (and now discontinued) Violet Designs version.

The reason for the name is obvious; it's not often that you can see right through a microphone thanks to the oblong shaped cut-out in the middle of its flat rectangular body. Two metal nubs inside this cut-out act as the anchor points for an equally unusual looking clip — best described as a string of rubber beads that you squeeze together, position in the hole and then release. The ends then clamp onto these nubs to secure the clip to the microphone. It's definitely a look, and the idea is to provide a degree of damping and shock isolation to the assembly. In practice though, this seems to be a case of form over function, as a 414 XLS in a more traditional suspension mount proved far more effective in suppressing thumps and mechanical vibrations.

The top half of the microphone is a lot more traditional, at least externally, with a flat black head grille giving a surprisingly compact business end to the microphone. Inside this assembly lurk two completely

separate opposing capsules, rather than the shared back-plate design often seen in multipattern microphones. Each of these externally polarised capsules feature a 27mm diaphragm, coated with a specially mixed alloy using a patented variable sputtering system. Internally the electronics are discrete Class A.

The whole assembly looks and feels extremely well engineered with one notable exception. The pattern select switch is a flimsy looking and feeling three-position slider located inside that rectangular cut-out. It somehow feels slightly at odds with the rest of the microphone, in terms of build quality and aesthetics. It also makes it quite hard to see which of the three available patterns (omni, cardioid and fig-8) are selected.

Quoted equivalent noise for the Black Hole is 7.5dBA (although I thought that in space, nobody could hear you scream...) While subjectively this figure seems a touch on the ambitious side, it's not a noisy microphone by any stretch. But, put up against a 414 XLS, and it becomes immediately apparent that the Black Hole could really do with a high-pass filter, as it seems really susceptible to air movement and air-con rumble. Still, low frequency extension isn't necessarily a bad thing, and after bringing in the console's filters to curb my monitors' wilder excursions, I set about some tests with male vocals and spoken word.

It's immediately apparent that the microphones are poles apart. On the cardioid pattern the 414 exposes the voice mercilessly when used close up, while the Black Hole softens it up slightly in the mid range, and seems to add some high frequency presence while rounding off the hard edges. If anything, this tendency seems to get more pronounced as the distance to the microphone increases. While the 414 tells you everything about the direct and reflected sound (not always nice), the Black Hole seems to dip out some of the room's more annoying modes, while still tracking the detail in the voice superbly.

Switching to a 12-string acoustic, and the roles are reversed somewhat. Here, the openness of the 414 gives plenty of harmonic detail, and when switched to the omni pattern allows a nice blend of direct and reflected sound. This is harder to achieve with the Black Hole; there's a slight tendency for the low mids to either sound overbearing or lacking in weight depending on placement. Finding an ideal spot is far trickier than with the 414, although I concede that this could simply come down to familiarity.

Speaking of which, there is a familiarity to the Black Hole's sound that suddenly strikes me — it sounds far more like a U87 than a 414, with the same softness in the mid range without the loss of clarity. Ditching the 414 in favour of a U87 Ai showed that my memory wasn't playing tricks on me and they are quite similar sounding, although the U87 seems to have a slightly more elevated HF response than the Black Hole does.

Which is, in my mind, praise indeed for JZ Microphones' first product (about UK£999 inc. VAT). I have to admit that I'm still not a fan of the looks but it does look better in the flesh than in pictures though. And I've been won over by its sound, which goes to prove that you can't judge a book by its cover (*Or, more precisely, a mic by how it looks. Ed*). I'm not about to flog my U87s and replace them with Black Holes but if, like me, you didn't take to the look straight away, you need to give this mic a fair hearing before you judge it. ■



PROS Unusual looks; very flattering sound, particularly on male vocals; works well close in and at distance.

CONS Unusual looks; slightly flakey pattern select switch; funky clip arrangement not as effective as traditional shockmount; could really use a HPF.

EXTRAS JZ Microphones' Black Hole SE (BH-2) is a fixed cardioid pattern mic with a lower price than the original Black Hole. The Black Hole SE has one large, true electrostatic capsule inside the compact head made by 'golden drops' technology.



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