

Korby KAT Blue and KAT Red

Deviating slightly from the 'boutique' nature of its other products the Red and Blue Kat see Korby moving towards a wider market. **JON THORNTON** is mightily impressed by both colours.

KORBY AUDIO TECHNOLOGIES has come a long way since 1994. From a background in restoring and repairing classic microphones, founder Tracy Korby moved into designing and building his own microphones, drawing heavily on design principles and production values from the 'golden age' of large diaphragm capacitors. While the first products were one-of-a-kind, custom pieces, the company eventually developed its own product line — the crowning glory of which is the KAT 4 modular microphone featuring interchangeable capsule assemblies.

And in an age where off-shoring manufacture and assembly is commonplace, even with established marques, Korby has resolutely stood by the principle of designing, building and fine tuning every component

in its new Nashville facility. Boutique manufacturing doesn't even come close as a description. So the introduction of the KAT Blue and KAT Red (UK£2095 + VAT each) is something of a surprise — moving as it does towards a wider market place, and towards something that seems a little more off-the-peg than a designer one-off.

Both of these microphones are fixed pattern cardioid, large diaphragm capacitor designs and both feature valve output stages. At first glance they look very similar, sharing the same svelte machined body and 'U' shaped yoke assembly for a mount that screws directly into the microphone body. Under the skin, though, the similarity ends. The Blue features a centre-terminated diaphragm, whose tuning owes more than a nod towards vintage U47s and U67s, while the Red has an edge-terminated design, and tends towards a more 'Austrian' sound — think C12 and Telefunken here.

There's nothing to differentiate the two microphones externally other than squinting through the steel mesh, so if you were fortunate enough to own both of them you might think this would make for problems in knowing exactly which one you'd set up. Until you turn them on. Both have a funky coloured LED at the base of the diaphragm housing that illuminates the diaphragm assembly in the appropriate colour. Views on the taste factor of this varied wildly. I have to admit to viewing it as a little bit 'pimp my mic' at first, but most performers (particularly vocalists) seemed strangely attracted to it — a little bit of that 'specialness' that helps them get in the mood.

Power supplies for the two mics are simple, sturdy and straightforward. The supplied 6-pin XLR connects it to the microphone and provides mic level output. A front panel power switch on the supply is the only user control, apart from a mains voltage selector switch on the rear. I did find this switch a little alarming — rather than the slide type arrangement that requires an implement and a concerted effort to switch between voltages, the KAT supplies use a standard toggle switch. Granted, some effort has been made to shield it, but in a dimly lit studio it could easily be mistaken for a ground lift switch by someone who didn't know the mics well — ouch...

Both microphones seem eminently suitable for vocal recording, so female vocals were first on the agenda. From the

outset I'll have to say that tonally both microphones are fantastic on first audition. Both deliver a full, compelling sound, with none of the rasp or honkiness that seems to have crept into quite a few modern designs. They also, despite the radical differences in diaphragms, sound quite similar at first but there's enough difference on critical listening to see that each does have its own peculiarities.

The Blue delivers a nice up-front vocal sound. A gentle mid boost helps here and a progressively tapering HF response meant that even a quite sibilant singer was easily tamed. It takes EQ nicely too, although for vocals this wasn't really necessary as the sound just sat in the mix — not even any need for a gentle cut in the low mids as backing off the mic reduced the LF bump, but still managed to sound very close and intimate. The overall sound here is very reminiscent of a U47, but with a slightly more extended top end.

The Red proved a little less forgiving on the same vocalist. There's definitely a sense here of more HF extension, but with a slightly harder sound overall that didn't flatter this particular singer. Given its design cues, you might expect it to sound similar to something like a Soundelux 251, but in reality it's just that little bit harder sounding in this application, and quite similar in some respects to a Brauner Phantom C.

Moving on to acoustic guitar and the Blue again turned in the most rounded performance — solid and detailed, especially in the low mids, which really seemed to capture the low harmonic detail of a strummed acoustic. The Red seemed to catch just a little more transient detail and air though, but without sounding brittle, just a little less warm than the Blue and seemed more suited to a picked playing style.

Individually both microphones are sonically very impressive — as a pair they complement each other brilliantly. You'd be hard put to think of a situation where if one of them wasn't quite right, the other wouldn't solve the problem. They're not without issues though.

The first is the yoke assembly that acts as the microphone mount. While this works well and offers a good degree of movement, it's a fixed mount, and some kind of elastic suspension really is necessary with these microphones. The second is sort of a by-product of this issue, in that the shape of the yoke means that you find yourself handling the body of the microphone more than usual to adjust its tilt. And in doing so, I discovered that the head grille was not anchored on one of the microphones, which led to it popping out and having to be twisted around to re-seat itself. This is a shame, and something I hope is just a one-off problem in what otherwise appears to be absolutely bullet-proof build quality.

Even so, I'd be inclined to forgive on the grounds of sound alone. If I were picking just one, it would have to be the Blue as on balance it seemed to be the most versatile performer to my ears. But the pair is incredibly tempting... ■



PROS

Great sounding microphones — warmth and detail without hype; Red and Blue complement each other nicely; compact and lightweight.

CONS

No suspension mount; PSU voltage select switch seems a little vulnerable to mis-setting.

Contact

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