

Milab DC196

Billed as the smallest large membrane microphone in the world, this underrated Swedish manufacturer has taken a very fresh look at one of its enduring designs and upped the spec all round. JON THORNTON says Gimme that night fever, night fever...

MILAB'S NEWEST OFFERING is distinctive in many ways. The first is its diminutive size — it's not quite the smallest side-address large diaphragm capacitor microphone I've ever come across, but it's close. But it's the size in conjunction with its overall shape that makes it look for all the world like a cross between a U87 and a C12 that has somehow been shrunk in the wash. Not only that, but it's been washed while wearing John Travolta's best white strutting suit. The glossy white finish certainly makes a change from the rather dour silver, greys and blacks of late — I can't work out whether this is 21st Century iPod cool or 1970's disco throwback.

There is a point to all of this, as the DC196 (Euro 850) is equally distinctive under the surface. For starters it features the signature rectangular diaphragm common to a number of Milab designs. It is based (externally at least, John Travolta notwithstanding) on the DC96B, a microphone that Milab has successfully been producing since 1967. The DC196 isn't a case of simply dressing up an old design in new clothes. The capsule has been substantially reworked, as have the electronics, resulting in considerably reduced levels of self-noise (12dBa for the DC196 compared with 19dBa for the DC96B).

The most significant change is the addition of variable polar patterns compared with the original's fixed cardioid — a choice of cardioid, fig-8 and omni can be selected via a small but positive rotary switch on the side of the microphone. A -12dB pad also finds its way into the specification, again on the side of the microphone. Confirming one of its principle applications, an internal metal pop-shield has been added to the capsule housing although in practice this wasn't really sufficient to deal with anything other than very minor plosives.

One of the nicest things about this microphone is that it is so discreet, which would be rather compromised if it were necessary to surround it with a huge shockmount. Thankfully, the supplied clip is a small tube with a rubber mount that slides snugly over the microphone and holds it firmly without significantly increasing its girth. This works perfectly well due to the fact that the capsule assembly itself benefits from a rubber shockmount assembly internally.

First impressions of the microphone on male vocals on the cardioid setting are of a fairly understated, open sound. There's certainly no hint of brittleness to the voice, but no real sense of a mid-frequency presence bump either. Compared to a C414, the DC196 sounded slightly softer, although the 414 revealed a slight low-mid 'honk' in this particular voice that wasn't apparent with the DC196. There was also the sense that low frequency extension fell off more rapidly with an increase of distance to the microphone than was the case with the 414, meaning that the best results were obtained quite close up.

This is helped by a very useable proximity boost that comes in very progressively, although there

was always the sense that there was something of a dip between the low-mids and the proximity effect induced tip-up. This wasn't an objectionable effect, but did result in the DC196 seeming to exhibit less depth of field than the 414 did.

Off-axis response on the cardioid setting is extremely smooth and consistent, with minimal colouration. Switching to an omni pattern and that perceived unevenness in the bass response disappears completely. Used as a distant room microphone on a drum recording, the DC196 sounds fabulous — something that I've noticed before with other Milab designs that use the rectangular capsule. Not only does everything sound balanced and natural, but there seems to be less in the way of objectionable room modes, and a detail to the HF elements that you wouldn't necessarily expect from its placement. This characteristic remains even when switched to a fig-8 pattern with the null point facing the sound source. Usually I'd expect to hear some slight phasing artefacts, but there is little if any of this.

Finally, I tried using the DC196 on an acoustic guitar. In both cardioid and omni modes it yielded a sound that was full and detailed, but always a little soft. There's a gentle and quite early roll-off of the high frequencies, coupled with a lack of brittleness that you sometimes find in the mid-range that gave an almost mellow sound to the guitar. Interestingly, although I'd normally favour an omni pattern in this application, it was the cardioid response that sounded more balanced here.

In all applications, the DC196 takes EQ very nicely — it's easy to add a little air around a guitar or voice without it becoming 'twangy' or overly sibilant. All of which makes it a little hard to categorise. I found myself deliberating for longer than usual over microphone choice while using the DC196, when normally I'd instantly make a decision after a couple of auditions — it does seem to make you think hard about exactly what you need to achieve in a given situation. In much the same way as I couldn't decide about its appearance, I can't quite decide about how to categorise the sound. There's a quiet authority about it — a sense of solidity without the hype. I liked it a lot — it's neither a mic for the iPod generation, nor a 70's throwback. Definitely more Reservoir Dogs than Saturday Night Fever. ■

PROS Compact and discreet, almost jewel-like in appearance; honest, understated sound that retains detail and openness.

CONS Built in pop-shield doesn't really work that well; might be a little too soft-sounding for some people.

Contact

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