

# Telefunken ELA M 250 F

It's a name that many people will have heard from a certain Frank Zappa song and it has connotations in pro audio that are lasting and valued. The microphone name is reborn in the USA. **JON THORNTON** says he ain't gonna squash it and you don't need to wash it.

Obsession, don't you just love it? It's the thing that separates 'good enough' from 'perfect', and somehow sits a little uncomfortably with modern views of design, mass production and distribution. It can also take a small, left-field project, and without anybody realising, turn it into something exponentially larger. It pretty much sums up Telefunken USA. You see, it all started with a switch...

Toni Fishman, founder and CEO of Telefunken USA, had noticed while working with certain vintage microphones that there was a slight problem. In particular, original Ela M 251s and 250s suffered from the pattern select switch breaking, which rendered these highly desirable microphones at best limited in functionality, and at worst unuseable. He set about trying to source original blueprints and manufacturing data to manufacture replacement switches as close to the original spec as possible. But before long the nascent company's focus had shifted to not just replicating the switch, but to replicating the entire microphone.

Fast forward to the present day, and Telefunken USA now offers a range of microphones, in the main hand-built and assembled in the USA, but granted the license to use the original Telefunken name and the design rights to the original microphones. The common denominator is that they are all obsessive recreations of the original microphones, the fruits of untold man hours of sourcing original blueprints and manufacturing data, and extensive networking with individuals involved in the original design and manufacture. The range now includes most of the classic designs originally exported by Telefunken to the USA, and based on their AKG/Neumann European counterparts. In no particular order these include the Ela M 250, Ela M 251, the rather rare Ela M 270 stereo microphone, Ela M 12 and U47.

Quite an impressive line-up — but even across these models there are various ranges, the differentiation for which is principally just how 'authentic' they really are. Top of the tree in terms of authenticity and pricing are the Vintage series. The M 251 and M 12 in this range feature original Austrian manufactured CK12 capsules from a stock of 50 bought from a private collector. The 251 is also available with either a GE JAN 6072a tube, or a NOS Telefunken AC701 tube, reflecting the original export and non-export versions respectively. All of the vintage series microphones also come complete with a re-manufactured, but historically accurate power supply based on the original designs and components.

The slightly more affordable Platinum range features the same historically accurate PSUs, but with newly manufactured CK12 capsules — again based on the original blueprints, right down to the screw and tap sizes used in the diaphragm assembly. Finally, the Professional Series, indicated by the 'F' suffix, mark the most affordable range. The key difference here is that the capsule is Telefunken USA's own TK12 design, a sonically accurate replica of the CK12, but with a nod to cost savings by using more standardised components such as the screws used in the diaphragm assembly rather than costly, built to order components. The PSU is also a more modern design, using standardised and



readily available components rather than custom-wound transformers, etc.

The microphone on review is the Ela M 250 F — in other words the most affordable of the range (UK£3519 + VAT). Based on the original Ela M250, it is basically a 251 with only two, rather than three polar patterns on offer. So you get omni and cardioid patterns, a modern PSU, and a cardboard sleeve to hold the wooden mic box, PSU, clip and cable (the other ranges give you a nice leather bound flightcase modelled on the original, of course!)

Internally the 250 F features the aforementioned TK12 capsule with a dual 1-inch diaphragm. Internal electronics are fully discrete with hand-wired point-to-point connections, and are based around a (new stock) GE JAN6072a tube with a custom-wound Haufe output transformer. Externally the 250F is as authentic looking as possible, and other than the prominent 'F' designation underneath the pattern select switch, there's nothing really to distinguish it from either the original, or from its more expensive stablemates.

Finished in the classic 'mint-green' enamel, the authenticity extends to the integrated cable and swivel-mount assembly, which screws into the base of the microphone in a reassuringly 'built from girders' fashion. This assembly terminates in a 7-pin XLR connector, which plugs into the PSU. And if there's anything to quibble about with the look, feel and build quality of the whole package, then it's said PSU. Not that it doesn't work admirably — it just looks a little thrown together when compared with the meticulousness of everything else.

With so much build-up, not to mention the expectations raised by wearing the Telefunken badge, it would be easy to be vaguely disappointed when you actually stick a vocalist in front of it. Let's start off with the bad — it's not the quietest microphone in the world, but certainly not the noisiest either. Specs quote equivalent noise at 16dBA although it somehow sounds a little noisier than that in reality. On the negative side of the ledger that's about it, so how does it sound? I couldn't tell you how close it is to an original as I've never used one, but you can understand why the 250 / 251 is one of the most sought after vintage microphones around as soon as you audition it.

There's a fine line with vocals between detail in the high end and harshness — some microphones sound very warm but lacking in detail, others give you plenty of detail but can sound very hard, very quickly. The 250 F nails it absolutely. Coupled with a real warmth to the low mids without a hint of boxiness or exaggerated nasality, and vocals are pretty much mix-ready out of the box. On the cardioid pattern, there's a big proximity lift that takes a little getting used to — some caution needs to be exercised on male vocals working close in. Having said that, the 250 F is equally at home with male and female vocals — again, not something that can be said for many microphones.

In comparison to a C-414 (B-ULS), the 250 F sounds a little darker and much softer, and there's a little less edge to the beginning of consonants but 9 times out of 10 that isn't necessarily a bad thing for vocals. While I suspect that vocal recording would be the mainstay of its duties to most purchasers, I also gave it a brief whirl on acoustic guitar and piano. With both of these sources, although there isn't quite the snap to the strings or hammer sound when compared to a Neumann M149 or 414, there's a very solid rounded out sound that is pleasantly lacking in the brittleness around the 3kHz mark that many modern large diaphragm condensers seem to exaggerate.

So, what's not to like? Well, even though this is the 'affordable' end of the Telefunken USA line, it's still going to make a sizeable hole in your budget. And it's not without competitors. Even though Soundelux has stopped manufacturing its own vintage recreations, these microphones live on through designer David Bock's new company, Bock Audio Designs. But, though I was hugely impressed by the Soundelux ELAM 251, from memory the 250 F sounds just that little bit bigger in every respect. Even given its fairly hefty price tag, the 250 F is still a fraction of the price of an original — if you could find one. And if the pattern select switch breaks, you know that you'll be able to find a spare... ■

## Contact

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## PROS

Very rich and smooth sounding vocal microphone; build quality and attention to detail; great at taming brittleness in nearly every sound source; affordable in comparison to original model; lives up to the badge it wears.

## CONS

PSU looks slightly at odds with microphone in terms of build and finish.

## EXTRAS

The range now includes most of the classic designs originally exported by Telefunken to the USA, and based on their AKG/Neumann European counterparts. In no particular order these include the Ela M 250, Ela M 251, Ela M 260 the rather rare Ela M 270 stereo microphone (pictured), Ela M 12 and U47.

