



AEA KU5A

Rugged ribbon: **JON THORNTON** finds his new snare mic

The latest ribbon microphone from Wes Dooley's Pasadena-based outfit is unusual in a couple of respects. The first is that it's an example of a uni-directional (super-cardioid in this case) ribbon design. You can point to a handful of current and classic ribbon microphones with uni-directional responses, such as Beyers' M160, the classic RCA 77A and even AEA's own KU-4. It's also been engineered to be equally at home used live on stage — not unique, with several 'stage-rugged' ribbons available from Royer, Shure and AEA themselves with their Nuvo range. But put the directionality together with a package that's rugged enough for stage use not only on instruments, but also on lead vocals — and things start to get interesting.

Looks-wise, it's hard not to make comparisons with the Shure SM7B, as the KU5A features a similar permanent yolk-mounting assembly and a captive 3m cable. It's a little more svelte than the SM7, at 5cm in diameter a little more than half as broad for similar overall length. KU5A is an end-addressed design, and a J-FET based amplifier married to the same large output transformer that can be found on AEA's A440, R84A and Nuvo microphones means that sensitivity is relatively high. The ribbon element is smaller than those employed in the company's more traditional microphones, at 29mm long and 1.4mm wide — but I imagine that's the trade-off required to build a compact

microphone with the associated acoustic labyrinth needed to achieve the super-cardioid polar response.

Smooth and rich sounding on vocals

initial check with spoken voice immediately delivers the goods, with a beautifully smooth, rich-sounding response on both male and female voices. Off-axis response is reasonably flat to about +/-45°, with a little HF loss beyond that. From around the 135° point there's considerable rejection of most everything down to the low mids — certainly more focussed than a standard ribbon figure-8 response. Closing in on the microphone to distances any less than four inches and there's a pretty phenomenal bass tip up due to proximity effect — I suspect more pronounced than standard ribbons due to that acoustic labyrinth. Close miked vocals, whether live or studio based, would be swamped by that bump, were it not for the inclusion of a high pass filter.

A recessed push-button set into the base of the microphone (tweaker or ball-point pen needed) engages a 6dB/octave per filter at a relatively high 283Hz. But this turns out to be a well-chosen frequency, as it more or less flattens the response of the mic at close distances, allowing a small amount of bass-tip if a vocalist is really close up. And on closed miked sources, this filter has the added benefit of cleaning up the low-mids off-axis, making

the rejection very impressive.

There's no danger of such close positioning with vocals overloading the microphone or causing undue stress to the ribbon either, as AEA claim that it has the most protection against wind and plosives of any mic they have ever made. This seems to be borne out with both sung and spoken vocals in practise. The documentation does caution against using it on kick drums however, at least directly in the line of fire of any air blasts. It didn't say anything about snare drums though...

Don't fear the SPL

There are two points here. Such is the feeling of solidity and security you get having put the KU5A through its initial paces that you feel it will handle pretty much anything you can throw at it — it doesn't shout out to be handled with kid gloves. The published specs support this intuition — 135dB is quoted as the maximum SPL. Those specs also confirm something else — that super-cardioid response also results in an atypical frequency response curve for a ribbon. Rather than the usual linear response with a progressive fall from 10kHz, the KU5A has a couple of significant peaks and troughs in the mid-range and starts to slope away from about 8kHz. But the reality is that this voicing never sounds lumpy, just hugely satisfying and smooth — and really, really works on a wide range of sources.

Stick it on a snare drum and you're rewarded with a sound that is big and bold, but captures the detail of the stick sound in a way a moving coil dynamic never would. Go as close as you dare with the high pass switched out and that massive proximity effect is on tap for stadium like snare sounds. Or switch the filter back in for something a little more natural and acoustic.

The same goes for electric guitar. It pretty much sounds great straight out of the box, and playing with distance and the filter setting is mostly all that's needed. It 'just works' on vocals too. Granted, you know it's a ribbon — breathy female pop vocals are always going to need a healthy dose of HF shelving EQ if that's the order of the day — but still manages to sound solid and smooth. After just half a day I'm a huge fan of this microphone. At just shy of £1,000, or \$1,199 it's an expensive microphone, but one of the best and most versatile I've heard for a very long time. 🎧

resolution/VERDICT

PROS Beautifully put together; excellent rejection of unwanted room sound — especially close up with HPF in place; voicing gives great results on a wide range of sources; ribbon sound for vocals in a live environment perfectly possible.

CONS Frequency response flattering rather than flat; pricey.

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