

Studio Projects
C1, C3, and T3
Out of the (Mic) Closet

By Rusty Cutchin

It used to be tough to buy a good studio microphone. Scraping up enough dough for a couple of Shure SM58s that you could use on a gig or a recording was hard enough; making the leap into +\$1000 territory for a good large-diaphragm condenser was impossible for the average working-stiff musician.

Now LDCs are growing on Chinaberry trees. It's been decades since Asian manufacturing was considered suspect, so it should come as no surprise that Asian microphones are beginning to make inroads here. Although snooty engineers will always want to drive the BMWs of the gear world, the smart money knows you can reach the same destination in a Camry and be just as comfortable while saving a pile of Deutsche marks.

Enter the very Western-sounding Studio Projects microphones, which are emblazoned with the logo of the company's Eastern partner, 797 Audio, which has manufactured microphones in China for decades. The mission: engineer mics of "German quality" using Asian manufacturing to reach new, lower price points for the worldwide project studio market. It only takes a listen to realize they've succeeded.

Like a Sherman Tank

I first listened to the Studio Project mics at the summer NAMM show in Nashville, where the company's distributor, PMI Audio, set up a bold, brazen, hear-for-yourself display: a Neumann U 87 mounted on a desk stand next to Studio Projects C1, C3, and T3 mics. Daring audio pros to listen to each through headphones, the company's reps showed no surprise as listeners reacted to the similarity in overall sonic quality. What really startled everyone; however, were the list prices: \$300 for the cardioid C1; \$500 for the multipattern C3; and \$799 for the tube-driven T3. Okay, I thought, breaking the price/performance barrier is one thing. How will these not-so-little lotus blossoms hold up to real-world recording?

When the three mics showed up at the office for testing, I had already heard more good things about the mics. I was surprised when I opened the C1's solid road case and pulled the stoutly built mic out of its protective foam housing: The foam, though clearly providing the proper protection, looked like it had been cut by hand with a butter knife. This didn't bode well for Studio Projects quality control and attention to detail.

The C1, however, made me forget packaging concerns. A center electrode microphone with transformerless FET circuitry and a gold-sputtered membrane, the C1 has a frequency response listed at 20 Hz - 20 kHz, self-noise at 17 dB (A-weighted) and

sensitivity at -37 dB. It can handle SPL levels of over 130 dB (but don't use it on a kick drum). The C1's single cardioid pattern makes it a good choice for most home studio applications where you need to record a single vocal or instrument, like an acoustic guitar, at a time.

The next mic up in the Studio Projects line is the C3, a dual-diaphragm mic that adds omni and figure-8 patterns (useful for recording two or more performers at a time), a 10 dB roll off switch, and a low-cut switch (6 dB/octave at 150 Hz). The C3's other specs are similar to the C1's.

At the top of the heap is the T3, a traditional tube LDC that comes with its own power supply. The T3 offers 9 stages of pattern width between cardioid and omni, as well as the roll off and low-cut switches of the C3. All three mics boast a S/N ration of 76 dB and weigh about 27 oz.

In the Projects

We tried out all three Studio Projects mics on a guitar/vocal demo, using mic pre's in a Mackie 24 x 8 console and a PreSonus Blue Tube. The sound quality of each mic lived up to the advance word and the memories I had of my first listen in Nashville. The C1 and C3 reproduced the acoustic guitar beautifully. Both mics exhibit a slight bump in the upper midrange/highs, which distinguishes them from a U 87. This bump was acceptable and pleasing-much like the slight EQ boost around 12K that would be used with many singers on modern recordings. Both exhibit the low self-noise characteristic of transformerless LDC designs, but are very sensitive to ambient noise, as quality mics of this type usually are. Both, of course, require the 48V phantom power available from most new mixers and mic pre's.

The T3 is a slightly different animal. It has a different sound and a different connection scheme, like traditional tube mics such as a Neumann U 67. The hefty power supply is plugged into the wall and connected to the mic. The mic is then connected to the power supply. (The mic receives 200V DC from the power supply, as opposed to the 48V received by the transformerless FET mics.) The T3 doesn't have the same upper mid boost, and I found it a perfect complement to a female vocalist I was recording on an old-school R&B vocal. The T3 rounded out her occasionally piercing high notes to just the right timbre.

The T3 is my favorite of the bunch, because it provides tube warmth at a fraction of the cost of a comparable European mic, but I've already used the entry-level C1 on other projects and developed new customers for Studio Projects without even expressing an opinion. Clearly the price/performance planning is paying off with vocalists, songwriters, and recording engineers as soon as these mics get plugged in.

There are unknown quantities here, of course. Studio Projects is a new company, although its distributor, PMI Audio Group also works with Joemeek and Trident-MTA which are well-known companies with pro audio products. The list of Studio Projects dealers seems to be growing steadily. And at these prices, you can keep a spare on hand for emergencies.

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C1 \$299

C3 \$499

T3 \$799