

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 trees—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, 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,



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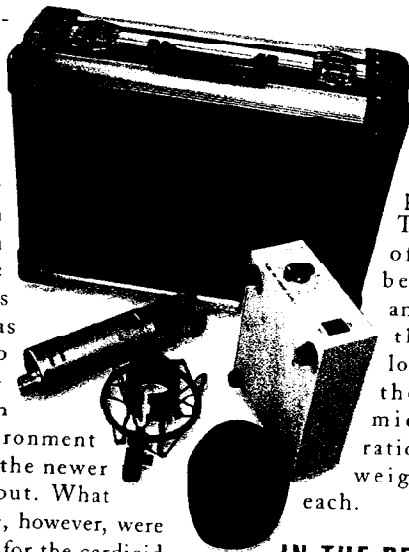
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C1 \$299.99
C3 \$499.99
T3 \$999.99

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 the headphones, the company's reps showed no surprise as listeners reacted to the similarity in overall sonic quality. Even in the bad audio environment of a trade-show hall, the newer mics' quality stood out. What really startled everyone, however, were the list prices: \$299.99 for the cardioid C1, \$499.99 for the multipattern C3, and \$999.99 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 only 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 simi-



lar 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 16 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 ratio of 76 dB and weigh about 27 oz. each.

IN THE PROJECTS

We tried out all three Studio Projects mics on a guitar/vocal demo, using mic pre's in a Mackie 24x8 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 those of traditional tube mics such as the Neumann U 67. The hefty power supply (shown in photo at left) 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 via phantom power.) The T3 doesn't have the same upper mid boost, and I found it a perfect complement to a female vocalist I was recording for 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, also works with Joemeek and Trident-MTA, well-known companies with pro audio products. Some people might be afraid they'd have to send the mic to China for repair.

PMI assures us that this is not the case. According to the company, all repairs are conducted at PMI's California facility, where Joemeek and Trident products have been serviced for over six years. They promise a 24-hour turn around, and don't charge for service, even when the product is bought used. (Yes, I had trouble believing that too, but the company insists it currently services all used Joemeek gear for free, and promises the same for the Studio Projects line, which has already been expanded with a new line of even lower-cost mics.)

Even if service issues arise, the list of Studio Projects dealers is growing rapidly, and word of mouth on these mics is spreading as rapidly as I've seen for a new product. Besides, at these prices, you can always keep a spare on hand for emergencies. **HR**