

Mics & Miking Techniques—**Inside Hollywood's Famed NRG Studios**

RECORDING

The magazine for the recording musician®

BUILD YOUR MIC LOCKER!

- Tips From The Pros
- Make The Right Choices
- Buy The Best, Skip The Rest

In The Studio:

Make Sure You
Get What You Pay For

Mic Preamps:

Know What To Look
(And Listen) For

16

Hot Products Reviewed:

Mics From ADK • Audix • Lewitt • Shure
Cathedral Pipes • Samar Audio Design

Plus New Gear From Apogee • Manley
Gibson Pro Audio • Focal • Retro Instruments



VOL. TWENTY NINE
NUMBER ONE

OCTOBER 2015
USA \$5.99
CANADA \$5.99



0 09281 03050 8



REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Samar Audio Design VL37 Ribbon Mic

A boutique maker's newest ribbon offers elegant performance and unique tonality



Samar Audio Design is a ribbon mic manufacturer based in Salt Lake City, Utah. Founded by Russian recording engineer / electronics engineer / concert pianist Dr. Mark Fouxman, Samar describes itself as making microphones "built in an artisan tradition." Each Samar mic is made completely in-house, from its stainless steel endcaps to its custom-wound transformer, and sold direct to customers rather than through distributors or dealers.

Samar's flagship mic, which I got to see and hear briefly at the 2013 AES Convention in New York, is the boutique and unique MF65. It is a high quality precision build with an integrated stainless steel shockmount and stunning maple box, the kind in which high-end wines or liquor might be sold. It has a reported frequency response of 20 Hz up to higher than 25 kHz. That gives the MF65 perhaps the widest frequency response of any figure-8 ribbon mic on the planet.

Of course at \$1999 a pop, the MF65 is a pretty serious investment. That is why Samar took on the task of designing a new model that offers exactly the same internal components and many of the MF65's body design elements and boasts the same specs, but cuts costs by removing many of the hi-end extras—the maple presentation box, the shockmount, and so on. This new model is the VL37, and I had a period of several months to work with a pair; all of the photos accompanying this review were taken in my studio as I put the VL37 to work on all manner of sessions and sources.

Meet the VL37

The VL37 is a figure-8 passive ribbon microphone. Its body is made of precision machined stainless steel. It measures 6.375" long with a diameter of 1.3" and is a solid 8.2 oz.

It uses a rigid honeycomb style corrugated grille with a second tighter weave/perforated grille in the inside (that works as a built-in air-redirecting pop filter). Its fit and finish are so well done that if it weren't for the small recessed Allen screw holes, you would be hard pressed to tell where the top and bottom end caps are

attached... and I'm told that current runs of the mic actually screw together like the MF65, so even those screw holes will be gone!

Everything about this mic feels classy and well built. It comes in a small foam-lined wooden box with an off-the-shelf third-party shock style clip mount. AEA uses this same mount for the Nuvo series ribbon mics.

Internals

Internally the VL37 uses a proprietary corrugated ribbon that measures 2" x 0.25" and is 1.5 microns thin. The ribbon appears to be internally protected by another thin layer of screening and uses a proprietary fine-tuning adjustment which helps maintain consistency. Samar claims that its sophisticated ribbon motor has the "shortest front-to-back path ever seen in ribbon microphones."

Its specs include a sensitivity of 2mV/Pa and an output impedance of 250 Ohm. There are no other specs listed on the site or provided with the mic, although Mark Fouxman says it's been tested with a 140 dB SPL source and showed no distortion at all, so its maximum SPL *could* be as high as 160 dB. Still, while specs are nice, we listen with our ears...

I can say that while the VL37 is not the hottest passive ribbon in my collection, through my Millennia Media HV-3D set to 49.5 dB of input gain, I was still able to do spoken word tests and achieve average levels in my DAW of -6 dB with next to no added noise. In practical terms, that means that this is a very clean and quiet ribbon with a good output level that is low compared to most condenser mics, but still in line with most passive ribbons. If that's not enough, consider pairing this mic with a Cloud Microphones Cloudlifter CL-1; I did, and the Cloud inline amplifier made the VL37 almost frighteningly strong and clear!

Frequency, proximity, rejection and lobes

The VL37's frequency response is surprisingly close to that of its more costly sibling. It is pretty much ruler flat from 20 Hz up to 5 kHz with only the slightest of occasional rises and falls. From there, there is a slight 1 to 2 dB rise around 10



kHz, followed by a 5 dB dip to 18 kHz. Here, unlike most ribbon mics, rather than rolling off completely the level starts to rise again... up to 25 kHz and possibly beyond. Apparently the company that did Samar's graphs and tests had equipment that topped out at 25 kHz, so no one knows how high it really goes, and I wasn't able to bring in a dog or a bat to test it in my studio.

I found the VL37's proximity effect to be very mild from a few feet up to a few inches away. It only got noticeable when a source was right up on the mic—which, thanks to all of its layers of screening, was never a problem. Even plosive issues were few and far between. The mic has a tight null for its side-axis rejection, making it easy to position so as to reject bleed from nearby sources. The rear lobe was a touch more bass-heavy than the front, as is the case with many modern figure-8 ribbon mics.

Sound and use

Over the last three months, I have found lots of great uses for the VL37, from drum overheads to male vocals, on vintage Fender and VOX guitar cabinets, capturing acoustic guitar and mandolin, on congas, shakers, and cajon, and pressed into service as a room mic. It does exhibit a smooth even ribbon tone, but as I mentioned above, it is not as big and thick in the lows as many ribbon mics. It is also, as you might expect from the frequency response, easily the brightest and most open-sounding ribbon mic that I have ever heard or used.

By "bright", I mean "clear" vs. "harsh" or "spitty". The VL37 sound is highly detailed in the treble, but still ribbon-smooth. Previously my modern bright ribbon of choice was an sE Electronics Voodoo VR1 (reviewed May 2011), but the VL37 is more open and brighter still. This is definitely a ribbon mic made for people who want something different than the thick, natural, rounded sound of classic ribbon mics, and who want a top end that's clear and present without the peakiness of many condenser mics.

I usually use and love ribbon mics as overheads and room mics on vintage, classic rock, and jazz drum tracks, but move back to condenser models for modern rock and pop songs. These VL37 mics, though, give most condensers a healthy run for their money. These are the type of overhead/front of kit mics where you can get great-sounding

results and imaging by starting with just a pair of VL37 mics in the mix, then bringing up the kick and snare to taste.

Again, thanks to the layers of screening, the VL37 makes a wonderful vocal mic; you can get right up on the mic for an open, natural, and intimate vocal take. While I feared the VL37 would be too bright for screaming electric guitars, I was surprised by how much I liked the results when blended with a Shure SM57, Audix i5, or Telefunken M81. The dynamic mics grabbed the punch and forwardness and the VL37 brought out an even clarity.

Conclusion

The VL37 of course sounds nothing like a Royer R-121, or even your typical Big Ribbon from AEA. That's what makes Samar's newest mic so beneficial; it literally opens up new sonic territory in the world of ribbon microphones.

While \$899 is well above the usual import/beginner ribbon range, it's also \$200 to \$400 less than the average professional ribbon mic. Not having one for comparison, I can't say how well the VL37 does or does not compare to Samar's upper-end MF65 in sound... but the VL37 sounds so good that it really doesn't matter. ☺

Price: \$899 (limited-time introductory special price \$749)

More from: Samar Audio Design, www.samaraudiodesign.com

