

# Mojave Audio MA-300

Having tried the company's stick mic and loved it **JON THORNTON** is initially unsure of what to expect from this variable pattern large diaphragm offering. It's another hit.

Mojave Audio produce traditional FET and valve-based capacitor microphones designed by David Royer — a name more usually associated with the ribbon designs manufactured by Royer Labs. Having already been mightily impressed with the company's MA-101 FET small diaphragm condenser (*Resolution* V10.2), I was interested to see what the large diaphragm designs were like. The MA-300 is the most recent addition to the range, but has much of its design roots in the older MA-200 — a fixed pattern capacitor with valve-based electronics. The MA-300 (US MAP \$1295) differs chiefly by employing a dual-diaphragm capsule to allow multiple polar patterns.

Everything ships in a neat foam-lined flightcase, which contains the microphone itself, a dedicated shockmount, the microphone power supply/control unit, and a 7-pin XLR cable to connect this to the microphone. Visually, everything from the microphone itself to the wonderfully compact PSU/control unit looks very solid and purposeful. It's not just that it looks well built (it does), but that it doesn't feel the need to make an overt visual design statement. The message seems to be that it's quite happy to be judged on how it sounds, thank you very much.

The MA-300 itself is an absolutely conventional looking side-addressed microphone, with a black body topped by a silver finished head grill assembly. Two tiny toggle switches at the rear allow a -15dB pad and a low cut filter (6dB/octave at 100Hz) to be switched in if necessary but other than that it's plain as plain can be. Unscrewing the microphone body allows easy access to the internals, and lurking inside is a military-grade JAN 5840 valve. This subminiature device is held in a rubber grommet for mechanical isolation, with flying leads soldered directly to the circuit board. Output is via a Jensen transformer and the internal build quality looks solid rather than over-engineered.

The capsule is a double diaphragm, centre terminated affair featuring 1-inch 3 micron gold sputtered diaphragms, and polar pattern is continuously variable by combining the outputs of the two diaphragms. This is performed by a single knob on the small but perfectly formed PSU, which also delivers the audio output on XLR.

Powering up the MA-300 and leaving it to warm-up, I pondered just what to evaluate it against. After some thought, I chose a couple of similar (although slightly more expensive) valve designs — the Sony C-800 and Audio Technica's fixed-pattern 4060 with



a U87Ai thrown in for balance. Our Millennia HV3-C was used as a reference preamplifier on the grounds that any additional thermionic/transformer induced colouration might just muddy the waters too much.

An initial walk around the MA-300 with spoken voice, a cardioid pattern and no pad or HPF set shows a nice smooth off-axis response up to about 90 degrees each way — after that things get a little more coloured than you might like, so relatively close miking with this polar pattern would seem to be the order of the day. On-axis sound gives some nice detail and clarity to the mids and highs, but coupled with a very solid sounding, almost smoothed out low frequency response. This characteristic was even more apparent with sung male vocals, yet it never seemed to get overblown or massively exaggerated, even when getting very close to the microphone with the added proximity lift. In comparison, the 4060 sounded positively thin, with the C800 sounding similar in the low registers, but without quite the same level of detail in the higher registers. It's quite an achievement to get that balance between richness and clarity as so often I've found that it tends to tip too much in one direction or the other —Mojave seems to have nailed it here.

Moving to sung female vocals, and fully expecting things to be very different, what surprises is the ability that the MA-300 has to add the same broad characteristics in this application too.

I often find that a microphone of this ilk that works with male vocals doesn't quite pull it off with female vocals or vice versa but that's absolutely not the case here. There's still that very solid, rounded LF response, but with a slightly scooped mid range and very open high frequency response all of which somehow manages to convey delicacy and guts at the same time.

There's also some mileage in tweaking the polar pattern slightly even with close miked vocals. Widen the cardioid pattern a little by heading in the direction of the omni pattern and there's a very subtle reduction in LF weight — head in other direction to a hypercardioid and the microphone seems to focus in a little more on the high mids, giving a real sense of articulation to the sound. If anything, it sounds most like the U87 — a definite voicing to the sound — but sounds a little less hard in the mids and a little weightier at the low end.



A great sounding vocal microphone then but these days any microphone has to earn its keep by doing more than just being wheeled out for the pretty vocals session. Time to move on to that most challenging of instruments; 12-string acoustic guitar. Again, the MA-300, in cardioid and omni patterns gave a tremendously solid sound in the low frequencies and again it seems hard to push this too far, even on a cardioid pickup and set very close. Best results here were with a very wide cardioid pattern, which seems to make the off-axis response much smoother while maintaining a touch of rear rejection.

The harmonic detail of a 12-string guitar is a challenging source for some microphones — requiring good transient response as well as a nice even off-axis sound — and all of the mics tested here acquitted themselves well. Overall winner for detail and reach was probably the AT4060 but again it sounded a little thin in comparison to the MA-300. The C800 had the weight, but started to sound a little too bloomy down low when moved closer to source. And the U87, well it sounded entirely predictable with good overall tone but lacking that 'glue' that you sometimes hear that just holds the sound together.

And that's probably one of the best adjectives I can think of for the MA-300's sound — it seems to glue elements of sounds together in a way that just works. I'd like to think that is reflective of the way it was designed and built; after all there's nothing particularly new about the approach, the individual components or the design. Just occasionally the balance of all those ingredients comes together and it's just right — the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. ■

**PROS** Seamlessly marries warmth, weight and clarity; continuously variable pattern adds flexibility and allows 'fine tuning' of response; solidly and straightforwardly built.

**CONS** Off-axis response a little uneven at extremes; nothing much else.

## Contact

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