

Testing, Testing, 1, 2: If the Mike Isn't Old, Streisand Won't Sing

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Value of Vintage Microphones
Surges on User Feedback;
Warm Sound, Sinatra Cool

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LOS ANGELES — When the University of Southern California set up a business incubator for multimedia companies, officials there installed a high-performance computer network and top-of-the-line Internet servers. For the audio lab, they made sure to procure a Neumann U67 microphone.

The day the U67 arrived, the incubator's technical team summoned executive director Jon Goodman to hear the rich, velvety sound that the mike emitted. But as she listened, something caught her eye: The device she had just shelled out \$3,500 for had a few scratches on it. "Hey, guys," she said with some alarm, "I think they sent you a used one."

The room erupted with laughter. The U67, Ms. Goodman's staff informed her, was made by Georg Neumann GmbH of Berlin in the early 1960s.

Now hear this: The hottest pieces of equipment in state-of-the-art recording studios are microphones often older than the Web-company executives and musicians who use them. Demand for the old mikes — "mics" as they're known in the trade — has been surging. Gear that originally sold for a few hundred dollars now fetches many thousands.

"It's really no mystery," says music producer Brendan O'Brien, who has worked with such acts as Pearl Jam, Stone Temple Pilots and Rage Against the Machine. The old mikes "truly sound amazing." Besides, he adds, there's the coolness factor: "It looks like what Frank Sinatra used."

The anachronism spans musical genres. Barbra Streisand says she won't

go into a recording session without a Neumann M49 because the 1950s mike "makes the sound feel warmer." Rocker Eddie Van Halen and his band use a wide selection of vintage mikes made by Neumann and by Vienna-based AKG Acoustics GmbH. "They're so alive," he says. "The older the better."

Film-score mixer Shawn Murphy prefers to have an orchestra play into any of his 10 Neumann M50 mikes, the oldest of which were made nearly half a century ago. "There just isn't anything manufactured today that does as good a job," says Mr. Murphy, whose many credits include the music for "Star Wars" and "Saving Private Ryan."

Newer mikes do have their devotees. And most people in the business happily employ them for certain tasks. "I'm in favor of a lot of the newer technology," says Capitol Records executive Michael Frondelli. While he's proud to show off the Neumann U47 that Mr. Sinatra crooned into—it's known as "The Legend"—he also touts the company's M149, built circa 1995.

But by and large, it's the old mikes that inspire rhapsodizing by those on both sides of the studio glass. Stepping into a large

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"The Legend"

Old Mikes Thrive on Heavy User Feedback

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closet at Ocean Way/Record One Recording studios here, owner Allen Sides gestures toward rows of shelves filled with old microphones. Many are nestled in felt-lined boxes, as if they were jewels. "It's one thing to have an antique. It's another to have an antique that gives exemplary sonic performance," says Mr. Sides, who has put together one of the world's largest vintage-mike collections.

He and many other studio pros also use decades-old consoles and equalizers to take the harsh edge off today's digital recordings. The retro push is making some noise in consumer electronics as well; many people in pursuit of lush tones are paying big bucks for sound systems incorporating predigital technology.

As for the old vacuum-tube microphones, the secret starts with well-designed capsules—hair-thin diaphragms and other mechanical parts that convert sound into electrical energy. And they feature ingeniously simple electronic circuitry assembled by hand. Duplicating the process today, mike makers say, would be too costly given the narrow market.

On paper, many newer mikes are actually superior to those of yesteryear, ostensibly giving off less unwanted noise and handling high signal levels. But while the new mikes generate specifications that are pleasing to an engineer's eyes, they tend to produce a sound that is less pleasing to many an aficionado's ears.

And that presents a quandary for Neumann and AKG: It's flattering to have some of the biggest names in music clamoring for your merchandise, but it's a bit disconcerting to have so many want the old stuff over the new stuff.

Since the 1960s, the industry has gone

"backwards and sideways," says Klaus Heyne, a mike designer and a premier restorer of old mikes. "I mean, can you imagine the guys in the R&D department saying, 'We already did our best work. So fire us'? But that was the reality."

For their part, the manufacturers insist that many of their latest products are as good as the classics. Given that vintage mikes usually cost much more than the newer models, it's not surprising that those who buy the old ones feel a need "to justify their decision to themselves or to the studio owner who laid out the money," says AKG marketing executive Norbert Sobol.

As euphonious as they are, the old mikes are also temperamental and apt to break down, raising a sticky question: What's the best way to fix them?

Some purists want to make as few changes as possible. Others, including Mr. Van Halen, love the handiwork of Stephen Paul, a musician and pioneer in offering a custom line of microphone capsules and precision modification work. He seeks to enhance the old mikes while maintaining their character—as a car buff might soup up a '57 Chevy.

Scratching out diagrams on a deli napkin, Mr. Paul launches into a lengthy monologue on resistance and capacitance, ohms and angstroms. The lesson is leavened by wild memories from his own up-and-down recording career. At times, it's Mr. Wizard meets Jerry Garcia.

Finally, after five hours explaining "the alchemy of microphones," Mr. Paul agrees to show a visitor the room where his work is done. "You are about to see the treasures of Solomon," he says, ascending the stairs of his small Sherman Oaks, Calif., shop, where pictures of John Lennon and Albert Einstein grace the walls. Here, according

to Mr. Paul, art meets science. "I tell my people: 'You are not building microphones. You are making sculpture,'" he says, as two technicians labor over a couple of old Neumanns.

Mr. Paul and others argue that some of the deficiencies of modern microphones can be blamed on the takeover of Neumann and AKG in the early 1990s by big corporations—Sennheiser Electronic and Harman International Industries Inc., respectively. "The bean counters" have been "just horrible," says Mr. Paul.

But the companies say that something else is going on: good business. In the past 10 years, Neumann and AKG have successfully tapped more of a mass market—amateurs with small home-recording studios. The amateurs don't necessarily demand the same mikes that the pros do, nor are they willing to pay as much. "The truth is, the new stuff seems to satisfy an awful lot of people," says Karl Winkler, brand manager for Neumann's U.S. unit.

Meantime, the value of the vintage mikes continues to soar. AKG's ELA M251—so mellifluous that Sony Music Entertainment executive David Smith calls it "God's microphone"—cost less than \$300 when it first came out in 1960. Now one from that era goes for as much as \$15,000. (By comparison, new high-end mikes typically sell for about \$3,000 to \$5,000.)

For many, though, money isn't the only reward. After he finishes painstakingly repairing a mike at German MasterWorks, his Corbett, Ore., company, Mr. Heyne tests it out by putting on his headphones and listening to his own voice.

"I talk into it, and there's a sensual payoff," he says. "A feeling of well-being comes over you that is indescribable."