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REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Back in our August 2013 issue we introduced you to a microphone named Edwina, from Philip Graham's Ear Trumpet Labs. One quick look around the Ear Trumpet Labs website will show you firsthand that these microphones look like no other mics you have seen or used before.

Yes, there are a few other "colorful" companies (Blue being the first, followed by Violet and JZ) who make microphones with futuristic-meets-art-deco body designs, but none of them utilizes Philip's *bricolage* aesthetic and building techniques. Before you run off to look it up, I'll define that word for

Look! 'Tis Mabel!

Mabel starts with the same body as the rest of the line, and makes use of the same pivoting yoke assembly as the Edwina. The lollipop-style head enclosure, however, is different than Edwina's—it is larger and in many ways the most "traditional"

—Ear Trumpet Labs Mabel Microphone

Audio elegance meets bricolage in a steampunk multipattern mic



you (I have a feeling I'll be defining it in every Ear Trumpet review I ever do!).

Bricolage (bri-ko-lazh) is a fancy word that describes art made from stuff that happens to be laying around, usually what normal folks would call "junk." But like any skilled *bricoleur*, Philip takes said "junk"—like copper pipes, screen mesh, springs, metal tidbits, wires, tubes, and even bicycle sprockets—and finely crafts it into a line of microphones that would not be out of place on the set of *Firefly* or any steampunk-inspired movie.

The court of nine sisters

If you nose around the Ear Trumpet Labs website, you will be greeted by nine copper-tinged beauties made up of the abovementioned materials. Each one has a distinct female name that was probably quite high on baby name lists in the mid-1800s.

Each mic is built upon the same 4" by 1 1/4" copper pipe body and then topped off with a variety of head dressings featuring those bicycle sprockets, vintage-style spring suspensions and swivel yokes. A few of them are so unique that they are either only available when the right parts can be found... or are gone for the foreseeable future, like Helga and Doreen.

The previously-reviewed Edwina is one of the most readily available, reproducible—and as such, popular—members of the Ear Trumpet Labs family. As a quick refresher, Edwina is a large-diaphragm microphone with a 26 cm, 6-micron-thick electret condenser element and a cardioid polar pattern.

I'm mentioning the Edwina mic again here because the new model we are reviewing this time around is essentially a multipattern version of the Edwina... with some sonic differences, of course. Her name is Mabel.

head assembly Philip makes. Of course it still has the Ear Trumpet flair.

It measures 2 1/2" across and 2" from front to back, with a bulbous shape held in place by a large brass ring with small functional and decorative screws. On its top is a 3-position toggle switch for pattern selection: Omni, Cardioid and Figure-8.

Inside, it houses a dual version of the 26mm capsule found in Edwina, suspended in a special internal shockmount that makes use of Sorbothane™ for its internal damping. [If you recognize that word, it's probably because Sorbothane—the viscoelastic polymer that's used in everything from running shoe soles to acoustic isolation products—features heavily in Bruce Black's *DIY speaker isolation* article from March 2014.—MM]

Mabel uses a transformerless fully balanced FET circuit design. Mabel's electronics are hand-wired and built with the highest quality film caps, precision resistors, and hand-tested and matched transistors. Like Edwina, Mabel ships in a red metal foam-lined toolbox with a standard mic clip.

Mabel's measurements

Like Edwina, Mabel has a 20 Hz–16 kHz frequency response that's fairly flat from 20 Hz up to 3 kHz, with a gentle high end rise around 9–10 kHz. As such it is a forward-sounding microphone, but not crisp and bright like many "12 kHz and up up UP" modern condensers.

Philip has not published graphs or specs for Mabel, as most of his mics are hand-tuned by ear, but I assume Mabel also offers a 150 ohm impedance and has a self-noise figure not too far from Edwina's 22 dBA. To my ear, the two were pretty similar. While not as low-noise as many mass-produced modern PCB-based mics, Mabel's noise floor is still lower than that of many vintage mics and their clones.

Mabel sings

Of course I was expecting Mabel to simply sound like a multi-patterned variation of Edwina, and while they have a similar forward weight, overall I found Mabel to be a tad smoother and warmer, less crisp than her sibling. Not that Edwina is a bright, crisp mic—it's just that Mabel is a tad rounder.

Where I found Edwina to be blunt and forward, I would call Mabel round and solid. Moving between the patterns, Mabel's sound gets crisper and less punchy in Omni mode, which (like any omni mic) exhibits little or no proximity effect. In figure-8 the sound gets a touch thicker and, dare I say, almost vintage-flavored.

The off-axis rejection and side null points in figure-8 are exceptionally smooth and tight, as is the off-axis rejection in cardioid mode. Interestingly, in omni mode there is still a hint of side rejection; it is not as seamless an omni sound as that of many modern mics.

Even though the capsule is of Chinese origin, Philip has done a great job of tuning it, both on the component level as well as in the materials and design of the head basket. As a result, there is none of the cheap brittleness often found in overseas condensers. It both feels and sounds like a handmade microphone... because it is.

Mabel goes to work

Mabel is a mic with a sonic vibe to match her look. While not necessarily "vintage" in nature, she treads similar sonic ground to many classic FET-style mics. As such, Mabel excels on acoustic guitars and mandolins, and after a live bluegrass session the banjo player wanted to know where he could buy one and how much it would cost, proclaiming it "the best mic he has ever used on banjo!"

My favorite use of Mabel was on guitar cabinet for everything from classic rock and blues tones all the way to dirty punk distortion. Right in the grille or a few feet back, Mabel loves guitar amps!

On vocals, Mabel will be singer-specific, depending on the tone and weight you are after. As such, I preferred Mabel on strong vibey rock vocals, Americana, folk, and country, rather than jazz, pop or modern R'n'B. I will note that Mabel, like Edwina, works great as a live mic on drums, guitar and percussion, and can even be used as a handheld vocal mic. She has a bit more handling noise than your average SM58, but not so bad as to be a nonstarter.

On drums I found Mabel is a great, full front-of-kit mic, but too smooth and weighty for general overhead duties unless you want a subdued vintage cymbal weight. I also preferred Edwina on toms and kick, as she is a slightly brighter and faster-sounding mic than Mabel.

Yes, 'tis Mabel!

I mentioned in my last review that while I loved the sound of Edwina, I stopped short of labeling her an "all-around workhorse mic" due to her specific tone and nature, which may be too colored and unique for some. With Mabel I need to amend that statement.

I found that in side-by-side listening comparisons, Mabel sits comfortably alongside both the Shure KSM44 and Audio Technica's 4047MP. Not that it is a clone of either of those mics, but it has the same natural smoothness and solid sound that they exhibit and that has made them modern classics.

While most *bricolage*-style mics are typically lo-fi specialty types, Mabel is a fully fledged pro studio mic of the highest order, and is priced accordingly and even appropriately at \$1000. The only real decision that you will need to make with respect to Mabel is whether you like her visual style... sonically, this girl holds her own with any other mic in her price class! 🍷

Price: \$1000

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