

Electronic Musician - Editors Choice Edition

Category: Microphone (ribbon)

This is the first time we've included a category for ribbon mics, and for good reason: the Royer Labs R-121 is the first new ribbon mic to hit the market in a long while (excluding Audio Engineering Associates' replicas of the vintage RCA 44B and 44BX). Of course, that alone isn't sufficient cause for a new category, especially one in which there's little or no competition. What matters is that the R-121 is one of the coolest, most useful new transducers released in 1999. That's reason enough to single out this mic for an award.

The merits of ribbon mics – smooth, warm, realistic sound; rich midrange; outstanding transient response; and phase linearity – are well known. But so are the traditional drawbacks: low output, high self-noise, nominal high-frequency response, off-axis coloration, and inability to handle high sound-pressure levels. Impressively, Royer Labs has employed advancements in magnetics, materials, and mechanical construction to address several of these liabilities. The result is a ribbon mic with hotter output, lower self-noise, higher SPL handling, and improved high-end response that extends, according to our reviewer's tests, all the way out to 18 kHz.

We found the R-121 useful in a wide range of applications, but we absolutely loved it on electric guitar amps, violin, cello, upright bass, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, and various percussion sources. We were also impressed that it could safely handle the sound pressure from loud amps and even a kick drum. (In case it doesn't, Royer Labs offers one free re-ribboning, as well as a lifetime warranty, to the original owner.) For the recordist who already has a good selection of dynamic and condenser microphones and is looking to extend the tonal palette, we highly recommend the R-121. It will prove a first-rate introduction to the sweet tones that only a ribbon mic can provide.

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