

MOJAVE AUDIO MA-100 & MA-200

They might be warm like the Mojave Desert, but not that warm.

Text: Greg Walker



MA-200

► If, as many believe, recording technology achieved a kind of musical perfection in those hallowed years between the early '50s and late '70s then we must surely have entered into a new golden era with many distinguished designers and manufacturers reinterpreting that technology for the modern recordist. Dave Royer, already a designer of various modern classics under the Royer Microphones banner, has taken a step sideways and rekindled a previous love affair with old valve condenser mics, designing and releasing some hybrid microphones through a new company called Mojave [pronounced Mohavee].

The Mojave MA-100 and MA-200 incorporate low noise sub-miniature vacuum tubes and Jensen output transformers into a signal chain that draws on '50s design practices and state-of-the-art modern components.

The MA-100 is a small-diaphragm pencil condenser with removable omni and cardioid capsules while the MA-200 is a large diaphragm fixed cardioid condenser with a one-inch gold-sputtered transducer. Both use a 5840 pentode tube wired for triode operation and ship with heavy-duty external power supplies. Curiously, the smaller MA-100 has a significantly larger power supply due to the fact that the Jensen transformer won't fit in the mic. This supply feeds the mic via a custom seven-metre five-pin cable. The MA-200 utilises a similar length five-pin cable for its PSU connection.

IT'S ALRIGHT MA, I'M ONLY TRACKIN' -

THE MA-200 - While unpacking the MA-200 my initial impressions were positive. The whole package comes in a slick aluminium flight case that houses all the accessories, while another smaller case of the same style protects the microphone itself. The MA-200 is a nice, weighty mic with a real sense of style about it - the black body with silver capsule looks pretty cool (though I wasn't so taken with the engraved logo) - and the professional power supply and chunky suspension mount look like they mean business. As I set the mic up for the first time I was disappointed to find that, while the body of the suspension mount is solid enough, its threaded sleeve is of the thin steel type that always wears out quickly (a trait shared by my Octava M53 mount). Sure enough, there was an uncertain feel to screwing the mount on and off the first time I used it, and signs of fatigue in the thread were quickly apparent - a trifling issue perhaps, but somewhat annoying given the otherwise pro package.

I took the manual's advice and let the valve warm up for a while before putting the MA-200 to work. At first I found the tone of this mic a little difficult to get to grips with - the high end was almost *too* 'valvey' and glassy for some applications, but as I used it I grew to like the MA-200 more and more, and I wonder now if those initial impressions might have been to do with the new valve

settling in (Mojave does a 24 hour burn-in of all its valve mics apparently, but this one seemed to want several days of use to really come to life).

The MA-200 has a classic valve tone to it with a lush warm bottom end balanced by a velvety high end that's very forgiving of harsh transients. It gives a definite flavour to the source material and, as such, is more a 'character mic' than a 'precise facsimile'. While not overbearingly bright, I found that when I wanted real top-end fizz, such as on certain vocals or in percussion roles, the MA-200 could do wondrous things. With a bit of my Chandler preamp's high EQ boost the results were often spectacular. Other highlights came from recording a '50s-style tremolo electric guitar solo, an over-compressed room mic on a snare overdub, a hyped up vocal double and several female lead vocals, where the MA-200's smoothness and shine beautifully articulated the singer's character in a very natural way.

As I say, the more I used the MA-200 the more I liked it. I found the flattering top end made it ideal for brassier, harsher sounds where my other condensers would provide a much less musical result. On acoustic guitars and drum overheads the Mojave really added a new dimension to my available sounds and soon had me checking my bank balance wondering whether I could keep it in my studio on a permanent basis. While its lack of roll-off and attenuation switches stop it from being classed as a fully-featured valve mic, its relative affordability and lush sound certainly warrant some investigation if you're in the market for this kind of valve experience.





MA-100

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HE AIN'T HEAVY, HE'S MY BROTHER

THE MA-100 – The little brother to the MA-200, the pencil condenser MA-100, also comes in a solid aluminium flight case and offers the enticing feature of two swappable heads: one omni, one cardioid. It's a standard size for this type of mic – around 14cm long and thick as your thumb – so it's capable of slotting into some pretty tight spaces. It's designed to handle the extreme SPLs of snare drums and guitar amps comfortably, although, like the MA-200, it lacks roll-off and attenuation switches, presumably to keep the price down. The two mic capsules screw on and off easily, and I enjoyed swapping them around (having powered down first) to suit the occasion, though, once again, the MA-100 was let down by its mic clip – this time a rubber one that was clearly not tight enough for the job and made certain mic placements very unstable. In use, the MA-100 performed well and I got good results on hi-hats, snare drums and my Fender Tremolux amp, as well as on various percussion and acoustic instrument applications.

In a shoot-out with my AKG 451 the differences in the two mics were very pronounced. The Mojave gave a detailed and lush sound on acoustic guitar while softening and smoothing the upper-mids and highs considerably whereas the 451 was quite 'hard' in these frequencies and lacked the MA-100's overall finesse and character. Both the cardioid and omni capsules were eminently useable on a great number of sources and there's no doubt that if you had a stereo pair you could do some great things with drum overheads and room mics, pianos and so forth. Like its larger sibling, the MA-100 strikes a nice balance between top-end presence and bottom-end warmth, and delivers the kind of valve character that makes it a very attractive option in many situations. Unfortunately, my time with the MA-100 was brought to a premature close when it started emitting a loud hum, which I couldn't rectify, and my remaining sessions had to plough on without it. I've since been assured that this was an occasional fault amongst the first batch of MA-100s manufactured (the result of a bad contact between the reovable capsule and the microphone body, apparently) and I'm hoping this is now rectified.

THE VALVE SOUND

The Mojave sound is quite noticeably 'vintage' on many applications and has the kind of built-in 'lens' which sees your sounds in a distinctive and character-laden way. If you haven't got a valve mic in your cupboard, these mics will really add a new dimension and spark to your recordings. There's no doubt many people will be keen to hear what the brain behind Royer microphones can do with valve condenser design, and for the price of admission I'd say the Mojave MA-100 and MA-200 (a few teething problems aside) are destined to become regulars with home and studio recordists. ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price

MA-100: \$1250; MA-200: \$1495

Contact

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Pros

Very good sound, with valve character to burn.
Well built and stylish looks.
Sturdy aluminium flight cases.
MA-100 ships with omni and cardioid capsules.

Cons

Poor mic clips/suspension mounts.
Lack of attenuation and bass roll-off controls.
Valve sound not suitable for all applications.
Reliability?

Summary

The MA-100 and MA-200 (which come courtesy of Mr Royer) are well-designed and affordable valve condenser mics. They deliver smooth character-rich sounds with good tonal balance. They lack features such as bass roll-off and attenuation controls and are let down somewhat by poor mounts but are otherwise very good value. Both mics are stylish and well packaged and the MA-100 ships with swappable omni and cardioid capsules for greater flexibility.