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Westlake Village firm's mikes help novices record music like pros

By Bob Strauss, Staff Writer

That iPhone sure does a lot of amazing stuff.

But one thing it, or its sister device the iPod, couldn't do for a long time was record live music well enough to sound like, well, music.

But Blue Microphones has changed that.

A leader in developing high-end equipment for musicians and audio professionals, the Westlake Village-based company recently released the Mikey, a small, very powerful microphone that enables anyone to capture studio quality sound on Apple's pocket-sized portables.

"We had noticed that microphones in the consumer field were designed just to give some sound," said Martins Saulespurens, Blue's co-founder and head engineer. "They thought it was just fine if you could understand words. If the voice was distorted, who cared?"

"On the consumer side, there were just \$9 utilitarian microphones," added Skipper Wise, a musician and former recording studio owner who started Blue with Saulespurens in 1995. "What I think that we've done is take the artistry of our (microphone) capsules from the pro side and translated it to the consumer."

Blue first started doing that three years ago with its popular Snowball, a round, USB-connecting condenser mike designed for use with Mac computers and their GarageBand application. With a suggested retail price of \$99.99, Snowball has sold hundreds of thousands of units.

"I've had home studios and owned a couple of Blue microphones myself," said Craig Malcor, microphone

buyer for the 214-store Guitar Center musicians retail chain. "Blue makes innovative, artsy, very good quality, great-sounding microphones for the industry. We're actually having a very good year with them, even in this down-trending economy.

"The main virtue is how passionate they are about the products they design and create," Melcor added. "I think their advantage is that it matters to them how people experience music."

At Blue's headquarters, musician Oystein Greni laid down a song on an iPhone using the Mikey (\$79.99) and the FourTrack recording app. Played back through a powerful sound system and excellent studio speakers, listeners could hear richly resonant acoustic guitar chords, Greni's earthy but sensitive singing and an ethereal, choirlike backing vocal, all distinctively crisp and pleasingly mixed.

"It's a good tool," Greni said, "You can do multitracking with it."

But how enthusiastic will recording studio operators be about a device that virtually puts the power of their six- and seven-figure set-ups in the hands of any aspiring pop star?

Perhaps not very. But even with creative expression economically equalized, making quality art will never be a democratic process.

"What Skipper and Martins started and what we're doing here now makes it that much easier for the individual artist to get their music down somewhere that sounds good," Blue's CEO John Maier said. "But now, to make a record and actually get it on the radio, there's a whole other level of talent that has to happen."

Wise said that it's up to individual recording engineers to fill that niche, and to change with the times and the technology. The fourth-generation Californian did something like that after running his own sound studio in Sherman Oaks for many years.

Wise met Saulespurens at an Amsterdam music event in the late 1980s. The son of Latvian musicians, Saulespurens was refurbishing and swapping rare Soviet and East German mikes with Westerners at the time. Some of Wise's clients liked their sound so much, they asked to purchase them.

When the U.S.S.R. dissolved and Latvia became independent, it paved the way for Wise and Saulespurns to work closely on developing their own line of impressive devices. They mixed digital and analog technology for the best results, and designed specialized mikes for different instruments and voices.

Blue – the company name is an acronym for Baltic Latvian Universal Electronics – still does some prototyping in the East European nation. Components for the mikes are manufactured in China and the U.S. and assembled at the Westlake Village office and a nearby facility in Agoura.

Coming up next: The Yeti, a super USB microphone, the first ever certified by George Lucas' THX sound company; and Blue FiRe, a Wi-Fi-using field app for optimum Mikey recording anywhere.

Once you've heard the future, though, it's hard not to like how it sounds.

"The revolution was the advent of digital technology," Wise said. "The evolution is bringing it to a lower price point. The big change we're seeing right now in our industry is that that price point has become so low that the consumer side is now picking up that technology that once was professional, and is proliferating it to millions of people."