



Blue Microphones: Microphones As Art!

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Blue Microphones, with their distinctive designs, unmatched versatility, and inspiring audio quality, have attracted a stellar list of users, including Sting, Trent Reznor, Weezer, Pink, and countless other well-known performers. Superlative quality doesn't come cheap, and at one point, the community of Blue mic users was as limited as it was distinguished: at \$6,000, a Blue Bottle condenser mic is beyond the reach of most musicians. However, at the coming NAMM show, Blue will present a different profile to the m.i. distribution channel. Backed by new investors and an expanded management team, the one-time "boutique" manufacturer is making a concerted run on the mainstream market with the introduction of the Encore series of dynamic live performance microphones. With a blend of elegant cosmetics, stellar audio specs, and retail prices starting at the magic \$100 level, the Encore series promises to have a significant impact on the entire mic market. John Maier, the newly appointed CEO of Blue, states, "Instead of one more microphone that looks like a gray stick, we're giving people a powerful audio tool that has the cosmetics of a fine watch. It's a new concept that will add an entirely new dimension to the market."



Blue studio microphones look like nothing else on the market. They come in bright colors and the interchangeable capsule designs have a functional retro look that exudes quality. To further burnish this quality image, they come in velvet lined wood boxes. The new Encore mics are similarly striking. The entry-level 100 features an elegant nickel chrome wind screen and a textured handle. The 200 has a rose gold wind screen and boasts a subtle dark orange LED on the back so the sound engineer can see if the phantom power is on. The flagship 300 boasts a distinctive claw-shaped bracket that holds the capsule as well. An illuminated Blue logo serves as the Phantom power indicator. All three use Blue's highly versatile proprietary dynamic capsule and deliver top flite audio performance.

"We knew we had to sound great, we knew we had to be rugged, and we knew we had to hit the right price points just to get in the door," states Maier. "We've done all that, but we've also added fun to the mix. Guitar players and drummers get the fun of buying beautiful instruments, vocalists have only been able to buy a gray stick. We're changing that."

From a strictly logical standpoint, the new Blue product launch is not without risk; it puts the company in direct competition with a handful of dominant microphone makers that are distinguished by both their efficiency and their aggressive sales and marketing efforts. Maier puts it bluntly. "If a year ago someone said to me they were going head to head with the big mic companies, I would have said, 'you're nuts. Try something else.'" He changed his mind after testing the prototype. "I wanted to buy it," he says. "It's that good."

Over the past 15 years, Blue has consistently managed to beat long odds and win over skeptics by putting audio artistry before pragmatic business calculations. A top-selling jazz artist, Blue co-founder Skipper Wise articulates the company's unorthodox approach. "In my musical career, I learned that if you want to be successful, you have to

create a distinctive voice that is true to who you are. It's the same in audio. You can't set yourself apart if you follow the 'safe' route building gray microphones with 'flat' audio response. You have to offer something that reflects your opinion of sound."

The distinctive Blue "opinion of sound" reflects the complementary talents and life experiences of Wise and co-founding partner Martin Saulespurens. With a finely tuned ear, an artist's eye for visual cues, and decades of experience in the studio, Wise developed the concepts that define much of the Blue product line. Translating the concepts into workable microphones fell to Saulespurens, a skilled engineer with unique practical insights into what can best be described as the "black art" of microphone design. These complementary talents have provided the foundation for a R&D team that also produced successful consumer products, most notably the "Mikey" and "Snowball" USB microphones that are currently the top-selling microphones in the Apple stores.

Wise and Saulespurens forged a friendship in the late '80s based on a shared fascination with audio. With more than 100 albums to his credit, Wise was continually searching for "new sonic colors" to help shape his sound. Saulespurens was an audio engineer working in his native Latvia. Necessity being the mother of invention, the acute product shortages throughout Eastern Europe forced him to learn to repair, refurbish, and enhance old Eastern European mics, just to be able to work. When the two first met at a jazz festival in Amsterdam, Wise was so taken with the sonic quality of some of Saulespurens' enhanced microphones that he purchased a few. After returning to the U.S., he began buying more for studio work and his musician friends. In 1995, after Saulespurens immigrated to the U.S., the two turned their shared interest into a business, forming Blue.

The Blue trademark reflects the pair's collaborative style. Saulespurens wanted a name that paid homage to his Latvian heritage, while Wise said they needed something that was short and memorable. As a compromise, they achieved both objectives with the acronym Baltic Latvian Universal Electronics, or Blue for short. Initially, Blue operated out of Wise's studio, trading in refurbished microphones and doing consulting work for other microphone makers. A few years later, the company began producing its own microphones.

While most production operations are launched with a market assessment and a formal business plan, Blue was guided only by Wise's artistic instincts and Saulespurens' engineering know-how. "A drummer would come into my studio and the first thing he'd do is start thumping on the kick drum to get the mic in the right position. Two hours later, after we finally got all the mics in position and the EQ right, he'd be exhausted, and before he even played a note," recounts Wise. "I told this to Martin and said, 'this is what I'm struggling with. Design me application-specific mics for drums, vocals, jazz, and guitar that allow me to get the right sound without all the hassle.'"

This mandate to make great sound easier to obtain continues to guide product development at Blue and is evident in all the company's products. The flagship Bottle features a tube driven amplifier circuit and nine interchangeable capsules, dubbed Bottle Caps, with designed for a different sonic application. Thanks to a neat bayonet mounting system, capsules can be changed in an instant to achieve different tone colors in the studio. Interchangeable capsules are also available in more affordable Bottle Rocket Stage I and Bottle Rocket Stage II models. With other whimsically named products, including the Woodpecker, the Kiwi, the Blueberry, and the Dragonfly, Blue currently has a microphone to address virtually every studio application.

Basing product development on artistic instinct takes someone with extreme confidence in their judgment. When Wise introduced the Blueberry in 1999, some critics panned it for its lack of low-end. Although some of the comments stung, he fired back at the critics, explaining that "they just didn't get it." He explains, "One of the biggest challenges for any recording engineer is trying to get an instrument or vocal solo to fit into the mix, so it stands out without being overpowering. I was in the Enterprise Studio in Burbank when they were mixing a Sheena Easton track. Her vocal sounded great over a slamming drum and big backup band. When I looked at how they got the sound, I saw that they had trimmed some of the bottom end off her track and then added some compression." This revelation prompted him to spec the Blueberry to mimic the EQ patterns at Enterprise Studio. "People who just heard it alone through a monitor initially didn't like it," he says. "But when they heard it in musical context, they got excited and that's the product that turned us into a real company."

Most of the engineering effort at Blue is focused on designing high-quality microphone capsules. Wise explains, "If

you record great musicians in a great studio playing a bad song, you end up with bad music recorded well. The same with capsules. If the capsule isn't right, it's a bad microphone no matter what else you do." Saulespurens and his engineering team are continually experimenting with new configurations, not so much to improve the product, but to explore different sonic colors.

In a market cluttered with look-alike gray and black mics, audio quality isn't enough to get noticed. That's why Blue has invested so much effort developing unconventional cosmetics. As a professional performer, Wise was always conscious of pairing the visual cues of a show with the musical content to make the greatest impact on the audience. He also grew up with a fascination with industrial design, collecting antique Catalin radios, Wurlitzer jukeboxes, and antique microphones. These influences have come to bear on Blue Microphones. He says, "We've done original takes on some old designs and motifs. The goal has always been to be unique."

At first glance, the introduction of the Encore microphone line seems to follow a linear and time-tested marketing strategy: establish a premium product and then use the brand cache to enter lower price points. In their unorthodox way, on the way to making a more affordable dynamic mic, Wise and Saulespurens took a detour into the consumer market.

Watching his daughter record a song on an early copy of Apple's Garage Band multi-track program, Wise was appalled at the poor audio quality of the mic built into the computer. He promptly went out and bought her a \$39 Logitech mic only to find that it sounded even worse than the computer. Weeks later at his regular softball game, hefting a regulation Dudley softball, he had an inspiration: why not build a softball-shaped mic with a USB cable, to provide decent audio quality for Garage Band.

The notoriously finicky Apple design team was obviously pleased enough with the look and sound of the early prototypes that the finished Snowball microphone is now sold in all Apple stores and promoted heavily by the company's educational department. Apparently, they appreciate the dramatic improvement in audio quality as well as the fact that the Snowball looks good next to a Mac. On the success of Snowball, Blue expanded its line of computer mics to include the smaller "Mikey" which enables iPods to record, and the higher-end Yeti.

Supplying Apple with microphones provided a huge boost to Blue: well over 100,000 USB units have been sold to date. However, it also put a tremendous strain on the small company's internal systems. "We were artists, not businessmen, and we ran into a wall," relates Wise. In April 2008, he and Saulespurens sold a majority interest in Blue to Transom Capital, a Southern California-based private equity firm. In short order Transom expanded warehouse operations, refined supply chain management, improved all systems, and in the process doubled sales last year, despite the difficult economy. As CEO, John Maier has been tasked with sustaining the growth trajectory.

Although Maier is a new Blue employee, in a lengthy industry career, he's had the opportunity to see the company close up, first as the audio buyer at Guitar Center, and more recently when he headed TC Group Americas, which shared a building with Blue. "When Skipper was pitching me on a product at Guitar Center, you could tell he wasn't about the money," Maier recalls. "He cared about the artistry in the product and making sure others appreciated it. Watching them from my office at TC, I was continually amazed at how they kept coming up with great products that were carefully thought out and perfectly executed. I thought 'these guys are really on to something.'"

Maier was initially hesitant about joining the new Transom-owned Blue, in part because private equity firms have had a generally poor record in the m.i. business, but also because he wasn't interested in working at a company slated for a quick sale. What changed his mind, he says, is that "they get it."

Rather than typical financial types, Transom's principals include engineers with proven product development management skills. As one example, Brian Biggott, an electrical engineering graduate from Stanford, has moved in to head Blue product development. Maier says, "They understand the nuances of the business and they see the opportunity of using their skills to build a platform that allows Skipper and Martin to really be creative. I'm excited to be here."

A native of Illinois, Maier has taken a conventional career path. After playing professionally, he became a sales rep, then graduated to Alesis where he held senior sales and marketing posts, moved on to Guitar Center, and finally

headed TC Group Americas. With such a broad background, what does he see as the challenges to continued growth at Blue? "Margins and distribution policies are all important, but you can't get so caught up in them that you forget about the end-user," he says. "We've created a special relationship with our customers by producing a beautiful, unique product. If we keep that distinctive voice, I don't think there's anything that can slow us down."

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