

REVIEW

UKKO Contact Drum Mics



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It's not often that something unusual comes along, something you don't see very often... When it does, you wonder whether that's because it doesn't work or because it takes a very special team to pull it off properly

Heads Up

PRICES:

Complete Set (Snare, Kick, 3 x Tom Pre-amp, 5 x Pick-up)	£515
Pre-amp (Kick, Snare or Tom)	£125
Pick-up	£63

UPBEATS:

- ▲ Quick set-up
- ▲ Sturdy construction
- ▲ Good isolated sound

DOWNBEATS:

- ▼ Possibly not everybody's taste
- ▼ Pre-amp creates extra size for cases

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And what better team to develop a drum contact microphone than B-Band; expert in contact technology for guitars since 1991 and leader in the development of non-piezo based materials for stringed instruments. B-Band released the DM version of this product back in 2005 and now we have the brand new mic for review.

So, let's have a look at what we have here. Usually when we need to record or amplify our drums we rely on very old, very reliable technology to do it - microphones. Whilst there are several different ways a microphone works, essentially it is still sound in the air vibrating a membrane, not unlike what happens when we hit a drumhead with a stick, then that is converted into an electrical signal. And that's how it's been for, well, forever really... The contact microphone has a working relationship to a condenser mic except instead of air between two electrodes B-Band uses a material called Emfit, which is a permanent electrically charged film that insulates the electrodes, forming a capacitor. It's a very interesting idea that has been used very successfully with guitars and other instruments, but that's enough of the science as these are for drums, so let's get our hands dirty!

words: James Hester

Stick It...!

What I have in front of me in the studio are several boxes, five with the contact mics in and five with the pre-amps in. My first assumption, that the five-piece kit sent to me (snare, bass drum and three toms) would include a special pick up for each drum, is instantly proved wrong when I realise that it's the pre-amp that is specific to the drum and that the pick ups are all identical. OK, lesson one - assume nothing.

Attaching the pick up to the drums is the same in every case and is probably best explained by the photos, but suffice to say that you remove the batter head and stick the pick-up to the shell using the double sided 3M tape, 6mm down from the bearing edge (or just below the reinforcement ring), making sure there is enough cable to reach where the wire will be fitted to the pre-amp. The pre-amp comes with two mounting options for the toms and snare drum and one for the bass drum. The first (and only for the bass drum) is to feed the cable through the vent on the drum and attach it via a bolt inside the pre-amp. The second is to use the supplied rubber clip, which is very well designed and can be fitted to triple flange, die

cast hoops and also to RIMS-style mounts too. Of course, this way of fixing adds extra size to the drum, so cases may need to be checked before going down this route.

Once the pick up and the pre amp have been fitted you attach the cable along the side of the shell using double-sided tape (not supplied - come on guys, it's the only thing missing and how much would it cost to add a few strips of tape?), out through the vent and into the pre-amp. Job done. The instructions are very well written and include some clear photos to help you along the way.

Under The Microscope

So, now that's done, what do we discover? Well, for the mic to operate we need to supply it with between 15 and 48 volts via phantom power. Now, most desks can supply phantom power, but it should be worth checking that any desk you have, or may buy in the future, can supply this. Once I have the relevant XLR cables connected and the power supplied, I decided the only way I could really analyse what was happening was to put them up against some other microphones in a studio setting.

So, how to review something unusual? Well, you have to compare it to what you already know, so in this case I set up a four-piece kit (22" bass drum, 12 and 14" toms and a 14 x 7" snare, all maple shells) and put my usual mics on the kit (Beyer Dynamic Opus 87s on the snare and toms, an Opus 99 on the bass drum and a pair of Opus 83s as overheads). The bonus of this set up is that the 87s are condensers, which is what the UKKOs are closely related to. I then asked a student to play a groove with some fills, then some snare rolls and finally some fills around the snare, bass drum and



Fitting the pick-up to the shell is an easy task with the aide of double-sided tape

"These mics give a very clear and isolated sound; they really do cut through"

toms, recording the mics only. Then I rewired the drums for the UKKO mics and recorded exactly the same thing. The first thing I noticed was the difference in output. The UKKOs generated a much lower output compared to the other mics so the first job was to raise the level of the gains. This is not really an issue, but if you were running the mics through a cheapish mixer this could cause some unwanted noise. Once I had reset the gains the sound was not too bad, a little thin sounding, maybe boxy, but certainly very isolated.

Mini Switches, Big Difference

Each pre-amp has a pair of mini switches that are basically EQ switches. On the snare pre-amp we have -6dB High Cut shelving 8 kHz and +3dB Boost 500Hz, the tom pre-amps feature +6dB High Boost 5 kHz and -6 dB Mid Cut 1 kHz and the bass drum allows +6dB High Boost 5 kHz and -6dB Mid Cut 330Hz.

So I set all of the switches to the on position to see what difference that made. Instantly the 'boxiness' was reduced and there was more weight behind the sound. In isolation it's very different to a standard mic, but it's very rare that we listen to a drum kit through one mic in any case, so as a group of mics and with the overheads mixed in it produced very good results. The sound is different to what we are used to, with the mic being inside the drum, and that's where this becomes subjective, it all depends on whether you like the sound of the isolated mics. One other point to raise is that due to the fact that the mics are mounted directly to the shells, any rattle (such as a snare strainer or bass drum pedal) goes directly into the mic, so definitely something to watch out for, however, we should all be maintaining our kits to the highest level, so there won't be any rattling kits out there, right?! **I**



The trailing end of the lead extends out from the shell via the air hole



The pre-amp clip allows for the pre-amp unit to be fitted to a triple flange hoop, die-cast hoop or any tom support style system in the most convenient position around the hoop

Conclusion

The B-Band mics are well designed and built, and in operation work very well. The sound is different to what we might expect, but as I said earlier, assume nothing. By using the same techniques that I would employ with standard mics, I was able to produce some great results. The studio is a very unforgiving place so it was very much under the microscope. These mics give a very clear and isolated sound, and when combined with some good quality overhead mics they really do cut through, possibly at the expense of some body and tone, but with certain types of music this is what we need. There is a certain amount of practicality about having these mics always mounted on the drums which should decrease set-up times and I think that anything out of the ordinary and that might make your local sound engineer raise their eyebrows is to be applauded!

You can listen to audio files of these mics in action over on www.jameshester.co.uk - click on the Drummer Magazine tab for the files