

Rode NT2-A

Simon Leadley finds a mic that's well suited to even the barest of mic cabinets.

When you're looking for a new microphone, particularly in circumstances where the existing mic cabinet looks a little bare (which is often the case with smaller home studios), you typically want one mic that will work in a number of situations on a variety of instruments and, ideally, one that offers a number of polar patterns.

The venerable Rode NT2 has been a popular mic in that regard since its release over ten years ago and since then Rode has released an army of alternatives to choose from. Now, its successor (perhaps in name only), the Rode NT2-A has arrived, offering more polar patterns, a new dual-diaphragm capsule (identical to the transducer found in the Rode K2) and superior sound quality to its predecessor.



Character Reference

The NT2-A is a front-address studio FET condenser microphone with switchable patterns (omni, cardioid and figure-eight), a dual high-pass filter (active at 80Hz and 40Hz) and a -5dB or -10dB pad, all of which are controlled via easily accessed switches found on the front of the mic just below the grille. Beautifully constructed from nickel-plated cast metal in a fashion typical of the new breed of Rodes, the NT2-A mounts to your stand of choice with a sturdy clip that fixes to the screw thread at the bottom of the mic. This setup is simple and effective, but for those of you after a more sophisticated suspension mount, the SM2 shock-mount (which screws to the base in the same fashion as the clip) can be purchased separately from Rode.

Rode Noise

The self noise and electronic noise of the NT2-A are excellent both in practice and on paper, so you can be sure this mic will never contribute noise to your recording chain.

Like the other 'new breeds' at Rode, the electronics of the NT2-A are constructed using modern computer-assembled surface mount technology designed to minimise noise and hum, the results of which are reliability, improved

specs and whisper quiet operation. With a self-noise of a minuscule 7dBA, this mic produces virtually no audible electronic noise whatsoever; even at very high gain levels you have to strain your ears to hear it. The on-axis response of the mic, on paper, is also good, with a gentle rise above 10kHz that adds presence.

I've had the NT2-A for a good period of time now, which has allowed me to test it in a variety of configurations with a number of sources, from vocals and choir to acoustic guitar and harmonium. I've also compared the mic to a few of the old favourites in my mic cabinet (yes, I actually have a mic cabinet now, and it's likely it will be getting bigger and better over the coming years). However, back to matters at hand...

Armed with an NT2-A I've recorded as many musical, vocal, dialogue, and exotic instruments as I've had the need to capture over the last few weeks, comparing and getting to know the mic in a number of situations. Interestingly, there were virtually no situations where I put up the mic and went, 'Oh well, better get out the old blah, blah, blah... this just isn't cutting it'. The NT2-A sounded great on all sources. It was quiet and accurate and the different polar patterns allowed me to use it in circumstances where a fixed-pattern mic would have been far less effective. The mic has a nice smooth top end (thanks at least in part to the newly developed capsule) that doesn't sound too sibilant on vocals, and a tight and accurate bottom end, which exhibits none of the 'wooliness' common in the lower harmonic register of many large-diaphragm condensers, even when placed close to the hole of an acoustic guitar. For vocals it's accurate, without possessing the 'character' afforded by some tube mics. There again, depending on what you're recording and the sound you're after, accuracy can either be a shortcoming or a benefit. But for mine, the accuracy of the NT2-A equates to versatility and is therefore in no way 'limited' by this characteristic – quite the contrary. So-called 'character' of tube mics can actually be a problem when you're trying to capture the 'real sound' of an instrument without any colouration. To this end the NT2-A is excellent.

Enlightening Comparisons

Comparisons with other mics were also very enlightening. Without 'naming names' or 'mentioning the war', the NT2-A held its own against every mic I compared it to. Sure, there were differences, and I could throw stupid audio comparisons like 'warmer',

'airy' and 'open' into the mix but the main thing is that the mic was damn close to other benchmark mics we all hold dear to our hearts. The NT2-A performed admirably in the studio regardless of whether it was 30cm away from a drum (the NT2-A can actually handle up to 157dB with the pad engaged – handy when recording jet engines during takeoff...) or picking up the nuance of a wind instrument. For vocals it was equally convincing.

I really tried to find fault with this mic for the sake of this review but couldn't, in the end, find a single one – it really is a great performer in its own right. My only criticism is that it doesn't come in any other colours. No, I'm not kidding. We were recording an Indian orchestra live for a DVD release at Trackdown recently and the art director asked me if I could replace the NT2-A "with a black one" as the silver mic was too conspicuous for the camera! I called Rode some time later and they said, "Sure, although the nickel finish is our trademark, we could get some black bodies made up for you!"

Which brings me to one final point to mention regarding service. All electronic equipment will get damaged at some point in time, either by the user or as a result of general wear and tear. From my own point of view (living in Sydney) it's nice to know that Rode is just down the road (no pun intended) and they can, and will repair the mics that they sell at a very reasonable price. I had a couple of dynamic mics from another well-known manufacturer recently that I sent off for repair, only to be told that they would cost more to

repair than to buy new – and these mics aren't cheap either! So I got them back and pulled them apart (as they were apparently worthless anyway) and found that two wires needed re-soldering to the capsule. Ten minutes and 10 cents worth of solder saved the mics and simultaneously sunk the reputation of the mics' representatives here in Australia.

Backyard Science

In conclusion, I would recommend the Rode NT2-A to anyone looking for a well-priced, no-compromise multi-pattern condenser microphone. It sounds great, is well constructed and is made right here in our own backyard, making it cheaper for Australians to purchase than our US and European compatriots (for a change!). I would like to see Rode manufacture a companion pop filter that could use the screw mount on the bottom of the mic at some point in the future – if they did it would be icing on the cake. The NT2-A is an all-round winner that's versatile enough to take on the innumerable miking tasks that the world presents. 

Distributed by

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Price

• \$895; SM2 Shockmount: \$107.80

A Second Opinion – Terry Manning of Compass Point Studios, The Bahamas

At Compass Point Studios, I have had many great microphones available to me over the years, including Neumann U47, U48, M49, U87, U47 fet, U89, KM84, AKG C12, 414, Telefunken ELA M251, Sennheisers of various models, Beyers, Sony, Shure, EV, Soundelux, Gefell, and more. In other words, some of the best, most respected, and yes, most expensive, microphones in the industry...

I've certainly enjoyed the luxury of having such great mics around, and have relished each for their various strengths. However, there have been times when I've found myself using an unfamiliar microphone, either because someone has brought a 'new' microphone into my studio, or I've been working in another facility with a different mic collection. And once or twice I've been 'forced' into using a newly designed or manufactured lower cost mic.

I was always disappointed when I compared such microphones to my trusted old friends, the Neumanns, et al. Highs were often artificial or 'fizzy', frequency response ragged, and quality sound character lacking. Because of this, I had developed a preconceived bias against all inexpensive microphones, whether I had tried them or not. I already 'knew' what sound these mics would give me (or rather, what they would not), so there was no point in

using them. I had become a microphone snob. And really, I didn't think this was a bad thing to be, and in most cases, I still don't!

So when I travelled to Australia recently to track a new production I was initially disappointed to find that the mic closet at the well-appointed Sydney studio had only a few of my old friends in it, and none of them were the high-end tube or condensers! But there were lots of Rode microphones... my choices obviously were to either hire in some mics, or try out what the studio had to offer. I already 'knew' that Rode mics were less expensive than my old favourites, and therefore of lesser sound quality. But they looked nice, so I figured there was no harm in at least trying them out. I put two Classic IIs on drum overheads, two NT5s on (drum) room, a K2 on bass amp, an NT1000 on rhythm guitar, and another K2 on (lead guitar) room. (There were a few mics other than Rode employed, including a Shure SM57 on snare and close lead guitar, an AKG D112 on bass drum, and Sennheiser 421/441s on toms.) Immediately I was pleasantly surprised at what came through the monitor speakers. No fizzy highs, a smooth frequency response, and plenty of 'character' in the sound quality. These weren't the 'cheap' mics I had expected. They sounded very much like my old and trusted friends. What was going on? As I continued

with overdubs, I employed several of the Rode models in different situations and they never disappointed. The Classic II and K2 tube (valve) models had true 'tube warmth,' yet lower noise than I was used to with my older tube faves. The NT5s seemed every bit the equal of the KM184, and the NT1000 was a quality, versatile performing condenser that was at home in almost any situation.

So I have to admit that I was indeed a microphone snob. I was prejudiced against any mic that I wasn't familiar with, especially ones that were inexpensive to buy. And I will also admit that I was wrong. While I still believe it's true that many currently made low-cost microphones are inferior in quality to the well-known vintage models, it's not true of Rode. So Compass Point Studios now has its own set of Rode mics in the closet! Of course I won't completely replace all of the old favourites, but I now have another quality, viable option to try on any given singer or instrument.

Terry Manning has engineered and/or produced albums for Booker T & The MGs, Sam & Dave, Led Zeppelin, George Thorogood, ZZ Top etc. For more on Terry Manning and his engineering work with Lenny Kravitz, check out Issue 3 of AT.

MIC TEST

RØDE NT2-A

TESTED BY MITCH GALLAGHER

One of Rode's recent ads claims there are 150,000 of its original NT2 mics in use around the world. Now, give or take a few thousand, and you're still talking about lots of microphones. So when the company decided to update this recent-vintage "classic" with the NT2-A (\$699 retail/\$399 street), they weren't looking at an easy task.

WHAT CHANGED?

There are three primary areas where the NT2-A differs from the NT2. When you open the box, you'll notice the first right away—there's way more control built into the microphone itself. Three-position slider switches are offered to select the mic's polar pattern (omni, cardioid, or figure-8), high-pass filter (flat, 40Hz, or 80Hz), and pad (0dB, -5dB, or -10dB). The NT2-A follows in the footsteps of other recent Rode mics by posting a low self-noise spec of 7dBA. It is also substantially heavier than the NT2, because of its cast-metal housing and steel grille. Finally, the NT2-A is built around the Australian designed and manufactured Type HF-1 dual-diaphragm capsule—the same transducer used in Rode's wonderful K2 large-diaphragm tube condenser. (Search for *EQ*'s December '03 K2 review at eqmag.com. The K2 currently streets for about \$699.)

STUDIO TEST

Since the advent of the Type HF-1 capsules, Rode mics have all had a markedly different sound from their predecessors. The recent generation sounds smoother, more even, and richer, and that goes for the NT2-A, as well. While there's a gentle high-frequency lift, this tends to open up the sound, rather than make the tone harsh. On male vocals, the NT2-A has a fat tone with round mids and full low frequencies. The top is open

and detailed, with plenty of presence, but without harshness and hyped treble.

As I received a pair of NT2-As, I set to work stereo miking a variety of sources, including nylon- and steel-string acoustic guitars. The imaging was excellent. The sound was full, open, and detailed, and the dynamics followed the sound in the room nicely. I hate to repeatedly and redundantly repeat myself again and again, but I keep coming back to the word "smooth," because it's an apt descriptor of the top end of the NT2-A. Another would be "natural." On crunchy electric guitar, the NT2-A was chunky sounding—with plenty of low-end thump and thick midrange presence—without any top-end "fizz."

THE NEW DEAL

Forget what you've heard from Rode mics in the past. It's not that the older models don't perform very well in their own right, it's just that the new generation of Rodes are simply stellar performers that provide excellent, smooth, dynamic sound with lots of control capability, lots of flexibility, and literally no self-noise. It would have been nice to include a shockmount—rather than a stand mount—with the mic, but this is a minor complaint. Whether you're looking for your first pro-studio mic, or are searching for the best model to fill out a microphone locker, the NT2-A bears strong consideration as it excels in almost any application. A winner? Oh, yes.

Rode, (877) 328-7456; rodemic.com



SPECS

- Large-diaphragm condenser
- Omni, cardioid, figure-8 polar patterns
- High-pass filter and pad switches
- 20Hz-20kHz frequency response
- 157dB maximum SPL
- Includes stand mount, zip pouch

Rode NT2A : March 2005

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Rode NT2A £269**pros**

- Three polar patterns with switchable pad and low-cut filter.
- Clean, classy sound.
- Nicely engineered.

cons

- Shockmount not included.

summary

Rode have managed to produce a very sweet-sounding and highly specified multi-pattern microphone at a very affordable UK price. Definitely one to try if you need multiple patterns, but also worth it just as a cardioid vocal mic.

information

£269 including VAT.
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Rode NT2A

Multi-pattern Capacitor Microphone

Reviews : Microphone

Published in SOS March 2005

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Rode redesign their well-known NT2, and achieve a class-leading noise floor in the process.

Paul White

While many companies are building mics in China, or simply importing standard Chinese models badged with their company names, Rode can honestly say that they've been there and done that — and moved on. They were probably the first successful mic company to use Chinese manufacturing, but over the past couple of years they've finished moving all their manufacturing to Australia, where state-of-the-art automated machines and circuit-board assembly devices have taken over from cheap labour. Even parts of the capsule manufacture traditionally done by hand are carried out using high-precision machines. Doing things this way means you have to sell a lot of mics to make the sums add up, but Rode have gained a strong reputation for building high-quality mics at medium to low prices, so that doesn't seem to be a problem for them.

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From NT2 To NT2A

The NT2A replaces the original NT2, which was the very last mic Rode had built in China. Apparently this was a difficult decision, as the NT2 was still selling very well. It seems that Rode wanted to sever the last ties with Chinese manufacturing so that they could put Made In Australia on their mics and distance themselves from the other 'Made In China' brands.

Rather than just update the design of the original NT2, the NT2A looks radically different to its predecessor, with a very distinctive inset panel housing the pattern, filter, and pad switches. It's also very different inside. This FET, transformerless mic can be switched between figure-of-eight, omni, and cardioid modes, and has a choice of 80Hz or 40Hz low-cut filter frequencies as well as a filter-bypass switch position. Similarly, there's a choice of 5dB or 10dB pads.

One factor many manufacturers seem to ignore is the effect of the acoustic properties of the housing on the sound. How many mic baskets ring if you tap them? Rode used mathematical modelling to reduce the interaction between the capsule and its housing, and employed the same dual-diaphragm, one-inch capsule they developed for their excellent K2 tube microphone. The NT2A body is made from solid cast metal that is machined, polished, and bead blasted prior to nickel plating to provide a very high level of finish. A locking ring on the bottom of the body accepts the optional Rode shockmount. Heat-treated steel mesh protects and screens the capsule. To keep costs to the user down, the mic is supplied in a simple zip-up pouch with a mic stand adaptor.

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Technical Spec

If the build quality and appearance are impressive, the technical spec is no less so. When I last spoke to Peter Freedman, Rode's founder, he confided in me that one of the electronic designers had a background in audiology, which I took to meaning hearing-aid design. While hearing aids and studio mics might not seem to have a lot in common, hearing aids require extremely low-noise circuitry. Certainly Rode mics are amongst the quietest available at any price, and the equivalent input noise of the NT2A is just 7dBA (measured as per IEC651 and IEC268-15), which works out around 10dB quieter than the typical competition. What's more impressive is that this figure, which works out at an 87dB signal-to-noise ratio at 1kHz (reference 1Pa), isn't at the expense of maximum SPL. In fact the NT2A manages a spectacular 147dB maximum SPL without the pads switched in, and up to 157dB with the 10dB pad in. Nothing outside NASA makes that much noise!

The frequency response of the mic, with no low-cut switches engaged, runs down to below 20Hz and extends to in excess of 20kHz, with a moderate presence rise above around 3kHz rolling off again above 15-16kHz. The mic is also pretty sensitive, yielding -36dB (reference 1V/Pa), and the dynamic range is an incredible 140dB with a maximum output level before clipping of some +16dBu. So far, then, the NT2A looks impressive, both mechanically and electrically, but the really important thing about any mic is how it sounds.

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In Use

It is difficult to describe the sound of the NT2A because, subjectively at any rate, it is very neutral, with a smooth tonal balance right across the spectrum. In cardioid mode it sounds detailed at the top end without being harsh, and the lower end of the vocal range comes over as solid and well-focused with the required degree of depth and authority. Clearly the broad, subtle presence peak helps bring out the detail without allowing the sound to become aggressive, but the use of the sweet-sounding K2 capsule must also contribute a lot to the sound of this mic. Like the best classic large-diaphragm mics, the NT2A gently assists the natural sound, but not in a way that makes itself obvious.



Photo: Mark Ewing

As an acoustic guitar mic, the NT2A also delivers in style, though its tonal contribution in this area is quite similar to some other cost-effective mics I've tested, as some of its competitors also handle this task extremely well. Where the NT2A really shines, though, is in its very low background noise, so even quiet instruments come over cleanly provided that you use a reasonable mic preamp. Similarly, the extraordinary headroom means you can stick it in front of the loudest guitar amplifier and it will handle everything you can throw at it without distortion, though the same may not be able to be said about some mic preamps, which is why you get the pad switches.

The figure-of-eight position has nominally the same tonality as the cardioid pattern, but switching to omni allows more of the room sound to contribute, so in most cases the tonality will change according to the character of the room you're working in. As expected, the omni pattern sounds slightly more open, but in cardioid mode the NT2A's design is still pretty airy, whereas some cardioids can sound noticeably congested.

Overall I liked this mic a lot, especially given its very attractive price. It has a classy sound that comes over as both rich and natural, it is extremely quiet, and it is put together very nicely, with neatly built surface-mount circuit boards and minimal wiring. Some mics try to use coloration to cover up their shortcomings, but here the mic's natural sound is tweaked only inasmuch as it has a gentle presence peak. It would have been nice to get an included shockmount, but I can see the logic in packaging the mic to make it as affordable as possible. In a project studio with a solid floor, a shockmount may not be necessary, though a pop shield is, as always, an essential for recording solo vocals. There are few multi-pattern mics at this price that could challenge the NT2A on sound, and none that I know of that could beat its low noise floor. **SOS**

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