



REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Aston Microphones Origin

A new manufacturer launches a mic that's anything but ordinary



Aston Microphones is a UK-based microphone manufacturer that launched in December of 2015. By way of pedigree, many of the Aston team helped build and shape the sE Electronics brand over the past decade.

I was fortunate enough to get a pre-launch introduction to the company at last October's 2015 AES show in New York, complete with a hands on hush-hush glimpse of the company's Origin microphone. By early December I had a pair in hand and was putting them through their paces.

Currently Aston offers a trio of products: The cardioid pattern Origin Microphone, the multi-patterned Spirit,

and a new mic-stand-mounted reflection filter called the Halo. Aston's James Young was one of the principal designers of the original sE Reflexion Filter.

Aside from the globally sourced capsules, the Origin and the Spirit are 100% built in the UK. Metalwork, internal components, and electronics are all fabricated on British shores. Pricewise, both models fall into the "entry level" category, with the Origin carrying a street price of \$249 and the Spirit coming in at \$399.

Elegant on the outside

The Origin sports a unique classy industrial look. It's not an odd-shaped sculptural conversation piece, like models

from a few other "colorful" companies. The mic itself is little more than a straight tube design measuring 5⁷/₈" long and 2¹/₈" in diameter.

What makes it stand out? It has a rugged "au naturale" look, with the body proper being made from 2mm thick stainless steel that is rough-tumbled for 4 hours to achieve its finish. All nomenclature and markings are laser etched into the body, and it sports a purple enamel Aston badge.

On top of this lives the truly unique part, a headbasket design that Aston calls a Wave-Form Mesh Head. This starts with a flexible compression spring with a copper colored patina. The primary benefit of this spring is that it shifts and moves without breaking.





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When the mic takes a tumble or gets hit with a drum stick, this spring assembly is easily hand-shapable back into form. Inside the Wave-Form Mesh Head is an equally flexible random-weave stainless steel pop filter. In addition to protecting against plosives and blasts of air, it can be easily removed and washed if it gets soiled.

The mic is topped out by custom molded steel end caps. The bottom one contains both the XLR socket and a built-in mic mount; when not in use you can simply set it on its base and it won't roll away. The mic capsule is internally shock-mounted and made to fit directly onto a mic stand, but if you are more comfortable using a shock mount, Aston offers a special Rycote Lyre-style shock mount (made in custom colors for the Aston mics) for an additional \$79.

The Origin ships in a reusable foam-lined storage box made from recycled materials. In other words, you're paying for the mic, not the packaging.

Elegant on the inside

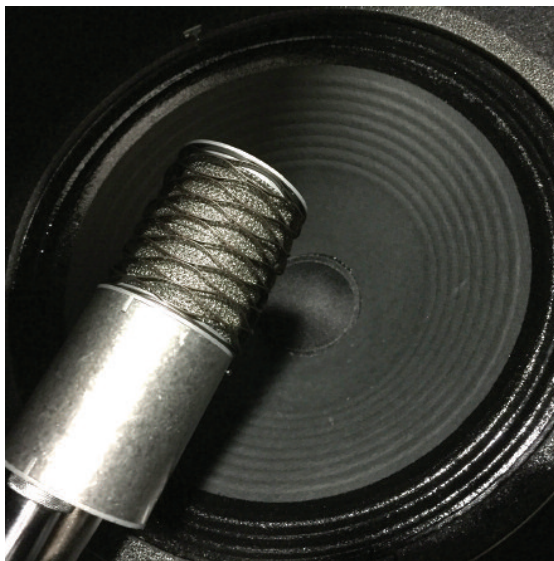
Internally the Origin is a transformerless design, utilizing both discrete components like US-made NCO (COG) capacitors and an integrated modern circuit board. The capsule has a center-terminated 1" gold-evaporated diaphragm and offers a fixed cardioid pattern.

A few specs of note: Frequency Response 20 Hz – 20 kHz; Equivalent Noise Level 18 dBA; Sensitivity at 1 kHz into 1 kΩ of 23.7mV/Pa; Maximum SPL for THD 0.5% of 127 dB; Signal-to-Noise Ratio (rel. 94 dB SPL) of 76 dBA.

The mic also features a 10 dB pad and an 80 Hz lowcut filter. Both switches are located on the front of the mic, just below the head basket.

On paper the Origin plots out as flat from 110 Hz to 2 kHz, where it rises gently about 5-6 dB up to 12 kHz and then rolls off. It also has a round tapered low-end rolloff at 100 Hz.

This offers a very good snapshot of the Origin's sonic signature. It is a mic that is overall quite natural with a very subdued low end, a gentle upper mid presence, and a clear but controlled top. It is a very smooth mic with no harshness or bite.



First impressions

One test I perform with almost every mic I review is to throw it up in a circular array with an additional 3–5 similar models. I then proceed to track an entire song with some combination of drums, percussion, acoustic guitars, electric guitars, bass, and vocals. Sources such as drums are done at a 5-6 foot distance, with other instruments getting appropriately closer, but not so close that any one capsule will be positionally favored over another.

I do this not to get overly scientific, but simply to discern a microphone's general sonic flavor in comparison to other trusted models I know well. It also gives me a feel for how a mic would stack in a mix if it was one's only microphone. I did this with the Origin alongside a pair of similarly priced new mics from Gibson's Neat brand (the Worker and King Bees), an AKG C314, the Lewitt LCT550, an Audio-Technica AT4047MP, a Shure KSM44, and a Roswell Mini K47. (You can see the picture in our February 2016 Fade In.)

Surprisingly in this initial test, I was not sure what to make of the Origin! While it shared a similar top end with many of the mics and lacked the often expected and excused harshness found in low cost condensers, my first impression was, "Whoa... where'd the low end go?"

Second, third and fourth impressions

As I continued to work with the Origin, I started to unlock its secrets and best uses. First and foremost, its proximity effect has a very fast drop with distance, yet one that's very workable. It's almost like what I experienced last year when I reviewed AEA's N22 ribbon mic, which I described as "a mic that works by inches rather than feet." Up close, at 3" or less, the Origin offers a very sweet, controlled low end. It's not a pillowy, over-the-top radio announcer-style boom, but still nicely full and present.

At 6" to a foot, the mic opens up and the low end fades out fast. This may sound like a bad thing, but actually it makes the mic very versatile and workable for a broad range of sounds and uses. Get in close for intimacy, move it back for openness!

The Origin also has a very nice off-axis rejection that is best described as both natural and gentle. From on-axis to about 90° off-axis, the low end disappears quickly but the mids and highs stay much the same in terms of timbre; they just drop by 6 dB or so. Beyond 90°, everything falls away sharply. What this does is to give you a mic that captures the space with and around the source in a very natural way.

With all this in mind, one of my favorite uses of the Origin was on drum overheads. It ignores boomy buildup while blending together the cymbals and the kit as a whole, with a great sense of the room and space the drums are in. For this reason I really liked the Origin in a Glyn Johns over/side setup, bolstered only by an additional kick mic. It's a very dimensional sound and nothing sounds hyped. As an aside, my most used session drummer is David Blascoe of the charting/touring band Citizen Way. David's a mic freak, and instantly loved how open, wide, and natural his kit sounded through the pair of Origins!

Still on the subject of drums, I also used the pair of Origins for an old-school country and western song with a brushed shuffle snare groove. I used one Origin over the kit, facing directly down at the snare, and I placed the other Origin about 10" in front of the kick drum. I was surprised at how good it sounded on kick; it was a natural non-hyped low-end presence that only needed a boost around 80 Hz and a slight low-mid cut at mixdown to sound great. This is to say that the Origin takes EQ quite well.

I finished the country song using the Origin as the only mic on all instruments. I then did the same on a '90s-style pop-tinged rock track, where the Origin did all of the heavy lifting aside from a fully-miked drum kit (where they were used again as overheads). In both contexts the Origin tracks stacked and blended quite well.

It makes a great vocal mic, especially on the female voice, being sweet and gently forward. It is not immune to plosives, but they are more controlled than on many vocal condensers. With a well-trained singer, I was able to forgo a typical pop filter for an up-close and intimate tone.

On acoustic guitars it captures the strums in a clear, round way, and you can easily control the instrument's boom through positioning and distance. There's that controllable proximity effect again!

On electric guitar cabinet, my feelings are mixed. Positioning up close in the speaker cone was the only time I found the mic on the harsh side, but moving the mic 6" or more back from the speaker offered better depth and again painted a nice picture of the guitar cabinet in its space. This may not be appropriate for all styles of music, but worked great on the tremolo-heavy slapback classic country tones we were after.

Conclusion

The more I use the Origin, the more uses I find for it and the more I appreciate it. One thing I like a lot about it is that it bears no resemblance to the usual tones of \$249 microphones—either the faux-47 variety or the nondescript ultra bright sound that we call "modern". Excitingly to me, the Origin is neither—in many instances it reminds me more of a gentle ELAM or C-flavored mic, which is a nice change of pace.

Let's review: An all-British-made microphone, unique design features, a broad tonal palette, all for \$249... I'd say that's a home run—Oops, sorry. I meant a "back of the net!" ➡

Price: \$249

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