



The TLM 103: A Desert Island Microphone

February 1999 by Larry Bentley

For me, one of the most enjoyable moments during a session is finding that perfect match between the microphone and the instrument I am recording. It is a real pleasure when the microphone does all the work for you. One such occasion was my first experience with the Neumann TLM 103. Suzan Stroud is an extremely talented singer and songwriter with whom I've done quite a bit of recording. Her voice has a beautiful timbre, but so far, I have not had a microphone that matched up quite the way I would like. There are other mics in my collection that came close, but there would usually be a couple of problematic frequencies being accentuated in the upper midrange. To tame the problems, I would either have to use equalization or compression with an equalizer patched into the side-chain and set so the compressor is more sensitive to the offending frequencies.

In December of 1997, I was fortunate enough to acquire a TLM 103 just after they became available. Serial number 0058! During my next session with Suzan, I was anxious to hear how my new Neumann would sound on her. I put the mic up and ran it into a Peavey VMP-2 transformer coupled tube preamp, followed by a Distressor compressor. For the initial listening tests, the Distressor was bypassed. The moment she started singing into the 103, my jaw dropped. I had found *the* microphone for her. It had such a nice, open quality with a solid bass and a beautiful top end, all of which truly complemented her voice. And those upper midrange problems simply disappeared. The proximity effect of the microphone worked nicely to add some reinforcement in the low end without becoming muddy. This was the sound I had always wanted to achieve on her recordings. We have successfully used the TLM 103 on her voice in songs consisting of just piano and vocal as well as those with full instrumentation. In both situations, the vocal just shines with little or no equalization. I find that when less equalization is needed on individual tracks, the mix tends to come together easier and generally ends up translating better to other speaker systems.

I feel that the TLM 103 is one of the most versatile mics I own and it sits very nicely next to my M 149 Tube despite the difference in price. In addition to Suzan Stroud's vocals, I've used the 103 very successfully on male vocals, snare drum and electric guitar. I even had a drummer say that it was the first time he heard the true sound of his snare drum make it to tape. The 103 really captured the entire sound of the drum which was a refreshing change from the same old one dimensional snare drum sound he was used to hearing. I recently purchased a second TLM-103 for stereo work, but also because they sound good on such a variety of sources. There is never going to be one microphone that sounds great on everything, but I really do think that the 103 is one of the more flexible microphones available. It is most decidedly a "desert island" mic!

To download audio samples of Larry's work with the TLM 103, please visit ▶ www.cellardweller.com!

