

Soundking SKEA002W

A valve that's seen but not heard is nowhere near as interesting as one that's heard but not seen. Greg Walker gives the Soundking a right-royal going over.

I'd never heard of Soundking microphones before, so when this review mic arrived at my door I opened up the package with some trepidation. Of course, we should all have got over our antiquated western snobbery of Chinese manufacturing by now with so many affordable and good sounding mics coming out of China's Special Economic Zones in the last few years. Nevertheless, old habits die hard and I was quietly surprised to find a solidly built mic replete with chunky PSU, shockmount, foam windshield, and heavy-duty cabling tucked inside a rather stylish silver briefcase.

Physically the Soundking SKEA002W is a hefty and decent-sized mic (about 190mm long and 60mm wide). The model I tested came in a classy silver finish (black's an option as well), compromised only by the rather too prominent branding across the front of the mic – personally I'm not into having a large brand name two inches from my nose while

I'm singing. The microphone utilises a one-inch gold diaphragm and a vacuum tube that's 'selected' for its low noise characteristics. Below the diaphragm housing you'll find –10dB pad and low frequency roll-off switches front and centre for easy access. The separate power supply is equipped with a single rotary pot for variable control of pick-up patterns from omni through cardioid to figure-eight, and an excellently long and stylish five-pin 'kettle-cord' connects from external power supply to mic. A standard XLR cable is also supplied to reach your preamp – very thoughtful!

My first (and only) real difficulty in using the mic came when initially trying to plug the five-pin connector into it – at first a seemingly impossible task as pins and sockets appeared out of whack – but, having managed it once I found that after a few sessions the socket and pins got to know each other and their awkwardness passed.

Having turned up just before I started a 10-day recording session, the Soundking was used on a fair number

of different sources during the lockout and ended up being a very handy mic to have around. Tonally it is a bright microphone, with a noticeable scooping out in the midrange and a modest bottom end. But the strength of this mic lies in its top end where you can really hear the valve at work – creating a saturated and slightly grainy image which stands out in a mix (provided you've got some other darker tones happening around it of course).

When testing the SKEA002W I often had it up alongside a Neumann U87, which is my go-to mic for any number of tasks at the moment. And while it would often come off second best in these comparisons (as you would expect given the price difference) it really shone on some sources. On a Gibson semi-acoustic through an Orange amp the warmth and hi-end sizzle did wonders and became one of the key guitar tones on the album we were making. It also did a great job on acoustic instruments (mandolin, violin, banjo) where a bright, slightly more flamboyant tone was needed. On vocals it suited mellow voices best where detail needed to be magnified, and on drums it was useful as a souped-up room mic source or as an overhead. We were also able to get some really retro '60s-style sonic signatures out of the Soundking on a couple of guitar solos – think bright and warm (two adjectives that don't often sit together well in the audio world).

Overall I'd say the Soundking SKEA002W is a well-built and handy performer. An all-rounder it ain't – being too coloured and top-end biased to provide the body of a mix – but as an extra flavour it has much to recommend it, including distinctive sonic character and the versatility of several pick-up patterns. If you're in the market for an affordable valve condenser to spruce up your mic cabinet the Soundking SKEA002W is definitely worth checking out.




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