

RØDE NTG-3

Looking like a round of ammunition in a metal casing, the NTG-3 seems primed for battle.

Text: Mark Davie



Rode has waded strongly into the fiercely protected waters of the film and television industry in recent times with the launch of the NTG-1 and NTG-2 shotguns. Now the powerbase is complete with the arrival of the impressive new NTG-3, a shotgun that's aimed squarely at its 'legendary' competitor – the Sennheiser MKH416. Housed in what looks like a shell casing, Rode clearly means business in the battle ahead.

When reviewing shotgun microphones, it's inevitable at some point that they'll be compared to the 416, the benchmark of the 'booming' industry. But with the Rode NTG-3 looking so uncannily similar, comparing the two is unavoidable.

STANDARD ISSUE?

The NTG-3 is a little more 'industry standard' than either the NTG-1 or NTG-2. But the NTG-3 also takes into account the shifting sands of the industry towards more modern, on-the-fly mic techniques. Film and television productions are far more demanding and diverse than they were when many of the 'standard' shotguns were developed. Today there's far greater emphasis on versatility, ruggedness and a 'capture it at all costs' mentality. In short, the mic needs to be a little more forgiving, and that means *width*.

In many ways the NTG-3 is the stunt double of the 416. It weighs about the same (the Rode the 'biggest loser' by two grams, coming in at 163g). They're about the same length (the Rode an extra half centimetre longer at 255mm). They both handle 130dB of SPL and offer a frequency response of 40Hz – 20kHz. Both have anti-glare finishes and both are RF biased. So how do they differ?

Well, apart from the obvious difference – the NTG-3 is silver and the 416 is black – the main distinction is in the Rode's aforementioned 'width'. Reality TV has changed television sound considerably – the action usually only happens once and it can happen in the Amazon jungle, thousands of miles from the closest sound stage. The

Rode NTG-3 caters to this pressure-cooker environment by giving boom operators a greater chance of capturing Take 1, by providing a more relaxed polar pattern. It's this spontaneity of action, and the limitations of a single take, that calls for an increased angle of high frequency capture. Although more dialogue is being captured by wireless microphones these days, the boom operator's job remains critical as ever.

The Sennheiser MKH416 has a very tight pattern, picking up high-frequency detail to about 12 degrees off axis, before rolling off in the high-end quite quickly. The Rode NTG-3, by comparison, spreads itself a little wider, reaching about 20 degrees before there's any noticeable drop in high-end detail. What this means is the NTG-3 will likely deliver better consonant articulation between spaced sources, making it a formidable dialogue mic when you can't afford to miss a beat. It's also a little more forgiving on set when the boom drifts on a single source. The trade off, however, is that the mic captures a little more spill in noisier environments.

BLIND FREDDIE

As for the tone of the two competitors, the NTG-3 is uncannily similar to the Sennheiser. In a shootout between the NTG-3 and two 416s conducted in an overdub booth, virtually no difference could be detected between them. Both offered the same degree of voice articulation and deep bottom end. In the wash up, blind tests proved that no-one could pick one mic from the other with any confidence. All that could be noted was the difference in the aforementioned width. Indeed, switching between the mics left everyone in the control room scratching their heads, one engineer even suggesting that if he hadn't known beforehand, he would have thought he was listening to but one mic.

It was clear from this test that any tonal distinctions between the Rode and the Sennheiser are subtle indeed. Rode has obviously developed its NTG-3 with the 416

NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$999

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Pros
Wide capture to suit reality TV.
Uncannily similar to the Sennheiser MKH416.
Weather/travel resistant.
Low handling noise.
Slim and sturdy storage cylinder.

Cons
Less focused pattern may result in more 'spill' into the mic – won't suit everyone

Summary
The Rode is significantly cheaper than the standard Sennheiser 416 shotgun, offering a slightly wider pickup pattern to suit on-the-go dialogue or reality television. Its anodised aluminium waterproof cylindrical case makes transporting it laughably simple without adding virtually any weight or space to the backpack.

The anodised aluminium case that protects the NTG-3 from the rigours of life on the road is a fantastic additional design feature: strong, classy and functional.



squarely in the cross-hairs and it's done a remarkable job matching this tone.

WARM STEEL

The Rode NTG-3 is RF biased, meaning that unlike a DC-biased condenser microphone that has a fixed charge across its plates, the NTG-3 uses a comparatively lower RF voltage. This results in a lower electrical impedance capsule that won't short out when condensation appears, unlike a DC-biased microphone. So when Warren Miller is shooting his 80th Anniversary skiing film and wants to capture the sound of an avalanche cascading around his latest hapless protégé, he can record it at a distance, safe in the knowledge that the shotgun isn't going to leave him out in the cold, as it were. It goes without saying that, in situations like this, there is no Take 2.

Condensation occurs when a surface gets so cold its temperature is cooler than that of water vapour. Being winter, what better time to test the NTG-3 to see whether or not it can work under the plummeting night-time temperatures of rural Victoria?

The night of the second experiment saw the mercury drop to a perky -2°C – far colder than the cushy confines of the overdub booth. To expose the mic to the maximum cold and condensation, the NTG-3 was left outside on a stand for several hours to suffer in silence. When the mic was retrieved it was freezing to the touch but still worked faultlessly, showing no signs of developing any of the spurious noises that condensation on a capsule sometimes causes. I couldn't help but test the handling noise either; my hands were shaking so much. Again the results were good. It seems the mic is far more capable than any boom operator of standing out in the freezing cold, and long before the mic showed any signs of failure, the operator's clattering of teeth would probably stop the shoot.

The NTG-3 exhibits very low self-noise and physical handling noise. On the end of a boom, it can quite happily record without generating thumps and bumps, even *sans* the suspension mount. A proper suspension mount is preferable, of course, and in that situation the Rode is a silent operator. The mic also comes supplied with foam pop filter and this cuts down wind noise as well, but again, a proper windshield is always preferable. An interesting point to note here is that, while the rival Sennheiser 416 has a slight accentuation of the high frequencies at 90 degrees off axis, the NTG-3 does not, making it more resistant to intelligible side interference.

The aluminium storage cylinder supplied with the NTG-3 is one of the best storage devices for an application-specific microphone I've seen. It almost *screams* to be taken out in the field. Adding only a centimetre to the mic's radius, the canister stows snugly in the kit bag of any field recordist. Inside this housing the mic should be safe from all but the grossest maltreatment. If a rhino sits on it while filming on location in the Serengeti... well, I guess nothing would have saved it in that situation anyway.

TALK IT UP

Like any recording situation it's a case of picking the microphone for the application. The NTG-3 is a great option for quick dialogue. It's a sub-\$1000 mic that sounds great and can get you out of a jam. Anyone recording sound for film and television would do well to check this out. ■