

Edirol R-09

It may look like a Dalek/Cyberman hybrid (a *cyrillic Doberman?* Ed), but it's Edirol's latest digital SD card recorder. **ROB JAMES** battles the latest invader in a gallant attempt to change its batteries.

IN MY EARLY teens I bought a small reel-to-reel recorder that took two half-inch spools of quarter-inch tape and ran at whatever speed it felt like (although it was supposedly 1 7/8ips). It was built like a tank with a metal case and chassis and looked very smart in military green crackle paint. Erase came courtesy of a permanent magnet, the mic supplied was a crystal, and there was a built-in speaker. However, the record quality was execrable, with wow that must have approached 50% and I only attempted to use it a few times. The moral of this sorry tale is simple: just because something is well built and looks the part doesn't mean it will deliver the goods. But can the converse be equally true?

Roland's Edirol division has a lot of experience with recorders; in recent years we've seen products that move well beyond the multitrackers and out onto the road. The R-1 and R-4 are good examples, and the most recent R-4 Pro shows just what they can do when they're trying; it's functionally excellent and conservative in appearance with only a few minor defects. So, just when I'm feeling well disposed towards Edirol, the R-09 drops (literally) through my letterbox.

First impressions are unpromising, with no sign of that conservative design; the R-09 (UK£254.47 + VAT) looks too flash and feels too light. The mics, screen and cursor controls conspire to make it resemble a demented mini-alien, like a Cyberman crossed with a Dalek. And fitting the AA cells so I can fire it up doesn't improve matters. The cover to the compartment housing the SD card, USB socket and batteries is fiddly, flimsy and annoying. First you have to slide it a bit, then move a minuscule catch while sliding it further, and finally fold it up out of the way. There's a real danger of snapping it off as you do this; even the manual cautions you to take care. Why on earth design something that is going to be in such frequent use with all the robust qualities of a Kinder surprise?

The control labels on the sides are all but illegible, being cleverly composed of black letters embossed on black plastic. I eventually managed to find the tiny Power button, causing the screen to spring to life, although I needed my wife's more powerful glasses to read some parts of the display. After finding a suitable pair of phones I pressed the Rec button to put the machine into record standby. The flashing red LED surrounding the button only served to reinforce the idea of a chatty Cyberman. It was time to explore a little more seriously.

Sensibly sized transport controls double as cursor keys and are laid out accordingly around the Record/



Select/Enter key. Above these, three small buttons invoke Menu, Reverb and Repeat functions. A small Peak LED sits below the tiny screen. On top, between the Cyberman's ears (built-in mics), two 3.5mm jack sockets cater for mono or stereo mic and line inputs. On the right-hand side there is a Hold switch, monitor volume +/- buttons and a dual analogue headphone output/mini optical digital output. On

the left we have the recessed power button, input level +/- buttons and, under a rubber flap, the DC in jack. The back has four slide switches: automatic gain control on/off, external mic type mono/stereo select, low cut on/off and low/high mic gain. There are also four little rubber dots: a nice touch to stop the machine sliding off a table.

The R-09 can record WAV files in 16 or 24-bit resolution at 44.1kHz or 48kHz. It can also record MP3 at rates from 64kbps to 320kbps. I question the sense of fitting a reverb effect and several of the play options, but nobody is compelling you to use them.

Things now take a turn for the better. Despite its science-fiction appearance, the R-09 actually makes a decent fist of recording using the internal mics. Although the R-09 is somewhat subject to wind buffeting, handling noise is well suppressed and the high-pass filter, despite being a mite vicious, does a good job of diminishing wind noise. The mic is a tad harsh but not unpleasant, the Gain switch offers a wide range of adjustment, and the headphone level is fine, at least with the ones I used. The automatic gain control is unobtrusive, although it does reduce the level somewhat in the interests of playing it safe.

Navigating the menu is easy and logical and operating the R-09 quickly becomes instinctive, so reading the legends is soon irrelevant and the important bits of the screen are in larger print anyway. You should get around four hours' use from a pair of decent AAs and, of course, the use of AAs is sensible because they are the most common cells around. With the exception of the bottom flap the unit is a lot more robust than it looks, and well up to any treatment it should receive. There's no hard disk to damage when you drop the unit, since everything is recorded to SD cards, which are so cheap that a few 2Gb ones won't break the bank; you'll get 110 minutes of 24-bit 48kHz stereo per card. By contrast, my review R-09 was only supplied with a measly 64Mb card, although as I was writing this review,

UK customers were being offered a free 1Gb card as a 'launch offer' if they bought their R-09s from the Edirol web store.

The analogue circuitry seems reasonably quiet and you can use it with external mics if you want or as a back-up recorder for something with line outs. But the R-09's real strength is as a standalone recorder. Although you can plug in external mics or even connect it to a mixer, you then lose its primary virtue. In terms of quality, this is a halfway-decent recording set-up in its own right. All you have to worry about is batteries and memory cards. ■

PROS A good, simple, affordable WAV recorder, with better built-in mics than the price implies.

CONS The badly designed battery compartment cover; the faintly risible appearance.

Contact

EDIROL EUROPE, UK:
Website: www.edirol.co.uk