

HHB FlashMic DRM85

Sound acquisition for a generation on the move and workflows that want it fast and easy puts special demands on the design of the medium. **ROB JAMES** finds a solution that's smart, slick and small enough to slip into his handbag.

NO MATTER HOW much the purists may hate it, pro audio has to embrace the 'grab and go culture'. Nowhere is this more evident than in radio journalism and, thanks to the rise and rise of podcasting, there is healthy growth in the genre. The question is, how to ensure that inexperienced journos come back from an assignment with something at least technically acceptable for broadcast. HHB's answer is to marry a decent Sennheiser omni mic capsule with a near idiot-proof solid state recorder for the princely sum of UK£699 (+ VAT). If I sat down and specified the ideal tool for this job, indeed for anyone with the imperative to acquire audio in pressured situations with minimum grief, I would probably come up with something very similar to the DRM85. Easy for me to say now that HHB has already done it and this is the key. FlashMic is one of those products that fundamentally change perceptions. It has that quintessential air of obviousness that only comes from having a great idea followed by a great deal of patient development work. HHB considers the FlashMic to be one of the most important products the company has ever developed and I agree.

Size is well judged. Big enough to impose some gravitas, but small enough to slip into a decent sized handbag (*What message are you giving out here? Ed*). Power is two AA cells. You should get 3-5 hours from alkalines or high capacity NiMHs. A software switch enables the battery meter to accommodate the characteristics of either. There is a switchable 100Hz 12dB/octave filter, manual level control or AGC and a real-time clock that time-stamps every recording.

Flash memory is fixed at 1Gb. A good thing, one less connector to go wrong with enough capacity for 3 hours of uncompressed 48kHz 16-bit or over 18 hours of 32kHz compressed.

Controls are ridiculously simple and a lot of thought has gone into making them as intuitive as possible (at least to the generation brought up on iPods and digital cameras). Three decent sized buttons cover Record, Play and Stop. The latter is labelled 'M', logically enough since this is the way into the menus when in stop. A short press



on the Record button while recording embeds a marker in the file which can be read by CoolEdit, Audition and SoundForge, etc. A longer press locks the controls, useful when door-stepping in a crowd.

Menu text, battery and level meters are displayed on an LCD screen, backlit by a green LED. On the bottom of the DRM85 a 3.5mm jack connects headphones and there is a miniature USB socket for audio transfers and uploading presets and software updates. Also on the bottom is the 'jogswitch'. A short press turns the DRM85 on, a long one turns it off. Movements up or down alter headphone volume and, in combination with presses, navigate the menu structure and change parameters.

For simple transfers, the DRM85 appears as a USB Mass Storage Device. HHB also includes the FlashMic Manager application for Windows and Mac. Up to 9 presets can be stored in the FlashMic's configuration file and these presets are defined and uploaded from FlashMic Manager.

A number of features mark this out as a product suitable for organisations as well as the lone operator. The mic records Broadcast WAV/MPEG files and the six characters of the mic name become the first six characters of the recorded file names. Each preset can have a different file name so recordings made by different operators can be easily identified.

The PreRecord buffer can be set in one-second increments from 0-10 seconds. The backlight can be permanently on or off or set to 'energy save' mode in which it comes on for a few seconds whenever a button is pressed. The real-time clock can be manual or synchronised via the software to a computer's internal clock.

Manual adjustment of level is possible while recording but personally I wouldn't attempt it. Only those with the lightest of touch should apply. Realistically, AGC is going to be the default option with bass cut enabled. The good news is that this mic actually sounds rather good. The AGC is unobtrusive in most circumstances and although there is a hump in the response around 6kHz this will only serve to enhance intelligibility. Although handling noise is well controlled, fiddling around with the jogswitch while recording is asking for

trouble. FlashMic Manager allows many parameters to be locked out from alteration on the mic itself. Correctly programmed, the operator is left to point it in the right direction and to keep half an eye on the batteries and remaining record time.

HHB includes the word 'rugged' in its claims for the DRM85. I wasn't quite so sure. While the main barrel is a hefty chunk of metal, the bottom section casing is plastic. Admittedly, the buttons are rubber encased but the vulnerable USB socket on the base isn't protected from the ingress of dust or moisture and the tiny multifunction jogswitch control didn't fill me with confidence. In practice the jogswitch is tougher than it looks and the USB socket is after all pointing down so with reasonable care, it should be fine.

This is a genuinely innovative, dare I say exciting, product. The only problem with being first is that people immediately spot loads of possible improvements. Often these just over-egg the pudding and spoil the elegant simplicity of the original concept. That said, I still cannot resist adding my two pence worth. Good though the AGC is, I would have really liked a limit option for the manual record level mode. I would also have liked a screen indication of manual or AGC recording when in Expert mode (this caught me out more than once.)

If HHB plays its cards right, there is plenty of mileage in this model and future developments. I'd like a stereo version for starters. FlashMic will be bought by the vanload. It replaces a bag full of kit, can be set to be as near idiot-proof as any recording device I can think of and crucially, it fits effortlessly into a variety of broadcast, podcast and other workflows. ■



PROS True innovation; sound more than adequate for the job; professional workflow features; intuitive.

CONS No Record mode indication; jogswitch feels a bit fragile; no protection for USB socket.

Contact

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