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Classic Gear: The Shure SM58 Microphone

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry...

Ask a child to draw a microphone and the chances are pretty good that what they'll come up with looks exactly like the Shure SM58. What better sign can there be of something acquiring classic status than for it to be familiar even to people who can't possibly know what the product is?

Shure was founded in 1925 by Sidney N Shure, selling radios in kit form. When the depression hit in 1929 their market dried up; instead, the company became the exclusive distributor for a small microphone manufacturer, eventually beginning the development of their own microphones in 1931, supplying mics to the US military during the Second World War, and then branching out into other areas, notably the supply of phonograph cartridges.

Introduced in 1966, the SM ('Studio Microphone') 58 was designed by a team led by Shure engineer Ernie Seeler, using the Unidyne III microphone element he'd developed earlier in the decade and which was also used in the SM57, 565 and 545 models.

The goal was to build the ideal vocal microphone - one that offered high quality sound, but, just as importantly, was rugged and dependable. It was this approach that means the mic's specifications (it has a

cardioid pick-up pattern, a 50-15,000Hz frequency range, a pneumatic shock-mount system to minimise handling noise, a pop-filter, weighs 298g and is available with or without an on/off switch) are only part of the SM58 legend.

The rest is that along the way, the development team subjected their new product to the roughest of treatments, with samples being dropped, thrown, cooked, frozen, sprayed in salt and even immersed in water and expected to continue working. It's likely the engineers thought that those tests represented the outside extreme, punishments the microphone would never actually encounter in real life. They probably hadn't figured on the behaviour of a new generation of rock stars who would make microphone abuse part of their performance: The Who's Roger Daltrey taping SM58s to their cables then swinging them out in huge arcs around the stage, the mic often colliding with other equipment along the way - and yet still coming up fighting.

Instantly recognisable, the SM58 combines a comfortable, tapered handle with a distinctive rugged ball-shaped steel-mesh grille - Shure's website even includes a detailed entry covering the process of dent removal from the ball grill,



noting that 'with time and patience, most dents can be removed or improved.' The company claims that it is the most popular vocal microphone in the world, used over

the years by everyone from Janice Joplin to Jethro Tull.

Plus it's a working classic - still available today, four decades on, and still popular despite the presence of many competitors and even newer and supposedly technically superior equivalents in Shure's own product line-up, such as its near-namesake the Beta 58A. And though its design hasn't changed, neither has it stayed stuck in time as manufacturing processes, glues and plastics have changed. "Do all cymbals sound the same?" Shure's very entertaining on-line support retorts when asked about this - a good reflection on the SM58's position as a musical, rather than a scientific, tool.

The SM58 online:

>>> www.shure.com/proaudio/products/wiredmicrophones/us_pro_sm58-cn_content



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