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MORTON KICKTONE MICROPHONE

BY GENOVEVA WINSEN

Hi all, before we can really understand the KickTone bass mic, or any “sub kick” mic for that matter we, need to have a little physics lesson and a history lesson.

Microphones and speakers share something important in common, they have a thin piece of material connected to a positive and negative cable set which when voltage is passed through will move in accordance with that voltage. When we use a microphone, the movement of the “diaphragm” is translated into +/- electrical current to the wires and signal is created. In a speaker, these same connections are attached to a “voice-coil” and the electrical current goes into the material resulting in the same sound recorded by the microphone; physics lesson complete.

Now, let’s have our history lesson; here’s where it gets interesting... Somewhere in a recording studio in the ‘80s—no one knows where—a mythical recording session happened; an unknown engineer said, “The larger the diaphragm in a microphone, the lower the sound I can capture.” This same engineer then said, “The largest diaphragm would be a speaker.” This led to the mythical man saying, “Why don’t I mic a bass drum with a speaker?” And behold, an unrecorded piece of recording history took place.

Much like when man invented fire or the wheel, we don’t know who or when it was done, but it changed us forever. Again, it was the ‘80s and at that time, the most used and respected near-field monitor was the Yamaha NS-10 speaker. That said, it’s logical to say when our mystery engineer was looking for a speaker to use, it was probably the NS-10 that was most readily available. As rumor would have it this process didn’t go so smoothly, many experiments were attempted, first hooking up an entire speaker inside its box. I can tell you this has several problems we won’t address.

Mystery engineer’s next step would have been to remove the woofer and try to mic the bass drum. But wait, how? It’s just a speaker it doesn’t have a stand or any kind of mount. I imagine many crude experiments were attempted. I can tell you by the time I entered my professional recording career in 1999, the now standard for this creation was either zip-ties or (as I preferred) gaff tape with the speaker suspended from the boom arm of a short mic stand, along with a hand made XLR-to-speaker cable attached directly to the speaker, with the speaker itself out in the open exposed. This creation would grace many hit records, even to this day; it was a “secret” of engineers.

I have a fond memory of my first mentor showing



me this handmade creation along with several others in a recording session where he taught me many unconventional ways to record drums (a story for another article). The whole thing was like some sort of masonic ritual where I had been passed a torch and baptized into some sort of secret recording lodge, no matter...

In I believe 2004, Yamaha got around to making its own commercial version of the product—the Yamaha SubKick. Research for this article led me to find out it is credited to Russ Miller for inventing it. I will now credit Russ Miller with monetizing an idea that was sitting in front of us all, which makes Russ a very smart man. Creating potential, not seeing it, is more impressive to me. Anyway, since Yamaha made this commercially available version, a once secret is now common knowledge and many companies have made their own version to capitalize on it.

Frankly, they’re mostly the same design as our caveman engineer example except for the fact the material used in an original NS-10 woofer is no longer available (as such, I personally carry around an original NS-10 from the ‘80s in a box), until today.

A NEW DAY

With the introduction of the Morton Microphones KickTone, a series of revolutions have occurred. Terry, the inventor, is clearly a pragmatic individual who not only solved the age-old mystery of why the complete speaker-in-a-box didn’t work in the ‘80s, he also has added a lot of very logical and useful practicality to the design. Let’s start with the practical.

MOUNTING

The KickTone is designed to work along with a KickPort if you choose [you can attach it directly to a bass drum's resonant head with a proprietary slide bracket, supplied with each mic, that quick-connects it to any KickPort]—let me call this a marriage made in heaven. There are so many advantages to this design—it makes the recording more isolated, frees up a mic stand, for live applications it looks cooler, and finally, it allows for the closest mounting to a bass-drum head without the fear of head resonance being picked up as noise in the microphone.

I can tell you when placing a typical bass-drum mic, such as a Shure Beta 52, inside the ring of a bass-drum head, there's a 50/50 chance the tuning of the drum will lead to this problem and frankly most engineers often have "bass mic-ing issues." Engineer Andy Johns, a man I respect, once told me one of his secrets to getting sounds was very quickly putting things in a place that worked. He told me paraphrased, "It doesn't matter if it sounds the best, it matters that I get sounds up quickly, giving the artist confidence things are going well, and with it sounding pretty good, they'll play better. That will make a hit song, along with good writing and performances, not where you put a mic." He continued, "Engineers have delusions of grandeur." I want to say Andy's philosophy isn't a one-size-fits-all approach that's right for every situation and that mindset isn't how *Dark Side Of The Moon* got recorded, but nonetheless, he had a point and this is where we come back to the KickPort mounting option. While it is limiting in your ability to search for more sounds, it is a very fast way to get a good sound and I like that... And in live situations, simple is usually better, and this is simple, period. Terry has got his head screwed on right when it comes to this logic and the KickTone will allow people without custom modified drums to benefit.

Also worth noting is how lightweight the KickTone is. As opposed to the SubKick, which is quite heavy, the KickTone mounts, sits and stays in place—allowing for placement in tricky positions on any mic stand.

THE WHOLE 'BOX' PROBLEM

One of the innovative and unique parts of this mic is it has a second "mid-range" driver in the middle, not just

the woofer; this results in getting a more rounded sound out of one mic. The typical use of a "Subkick" is to only capture very low sub-harmonic sounds. It still requires an inside mic for the beater sound and if you like classic 70's drum sounds like I do, a "resonant head mic" on the outside. This means, typically back in our 80's caveman days you were using three mics on a bass drum. Let's just say this is a luxury not afforded by many. Further, I know a lot of drummers and engineers who also like a second outside mic on the beater side for a total of four mics on a bass drum... The KickTone, helps eliminate this issue and what was once done with three or four mics, can now be done with two or three. I don't have exact specs for the midrange driver and its cross-over settings but what I can tell anecdotally is this—Terry has created a musical circuit, combined with components that can handle constant low end sound and high volumes for extended periods of time. This is what a NS-10 was not designed for and as such, the tweeter would blow out very quickly and get damaged. Terry solved the problem and opened the world up to a bevy of new recorded bass-drum sounds. Thank you Terry.

IN USE

I tried the mic in a series of settings with 20", 22" and 24" kicks. Let's just say it did the job. One thing I greatly enjoyed was its foot print is smaller than its competitors and usually floor space in front of the bass drum is limited.

As for its sound. It is unique. It has all the qualities I would expect from the SubKick, *and* has that added high end. To be honest, having the luxury of a studio with many mics, I don't need to give up my inside beater mic and I have my reasons, but I think I also would need to use it in many sessions to get reacquainted to a different technique. For anyone on a budget, looking to get more done with less, or playing live, I would absolutely take the KickTone over the inside beater mic. A special note for drummers: if you get a sound you like, I know it's typical to want to find ways to easily bring that sound from gig to gig. If you recorded with the KickTone mic, replicating that sound live would be easier than any other mic'ing technique ever!



CRAZINESS

Being experimental is something I like to do. Here are a series of ideas for this mic, some of which are obvious and some aren't (thank the mentor).

First, use it as a bass amp mic. Sub mics are sometimes cool for this but without the high end, you still had to put all the same mics on. That made using the SubKick on bass amps not a popular choice. With KickTone having the added high end, using it on a bass amp is a logical conclusion and here's a good idea for live settings. I would modify an Ampeg 8x10 by mounting a KickPort to it. Then the KickTone mic could always go back to the same place. Voila! Thank me later world...

Here's a second idea, put the mic under a piano facing upwards and under the bass keys; sounds weird I know. But this, along with top mic'ing makes for some very interesting options.

Next, floor toms—again position under the floor tom facing upward towards the head... the deepest 18" I ever heard! Finally, here's a modified bass drum use. Instead of using it on the bass drum. You can get a resonant kick head (I used to cheat this with an old blue sparkle Slingerland 26x12 from the '50s), move the resonant head into position in front of the bass drum by starting about 6 inches away, and then sliding it back until it has a sympathetic ring, then add the KickPort and KickTone to the resonant head. When doing this I would still place the typical two to four mics on the first kick. That's right you heard me five mics on a bass drum! WHY NOT?! *

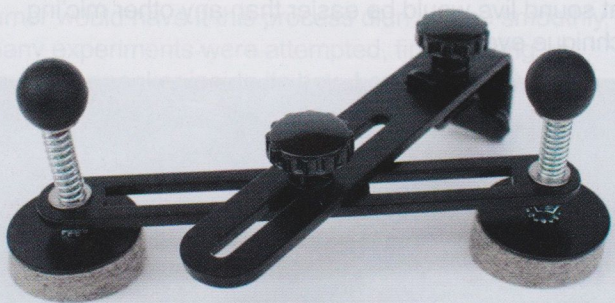


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