

GOLDEN AGE PROJECT R1 ACTIVE MKIII

Try a golden ribbon from an old time Swede.

Text: Andrew Bencina



▶ The philosophy behind the Golden Age Project comprises equal parts Ban Ki-moon and Pappy O'Daniel. The Swedish company, with over 20 years experience in the pro audio field, seems determined to democratise what it refers to as 'vintage-style audio recording,' by freeing the old-timey sounds from the clutches of the pro-audio cliques and empowering the people with an affordable brand that delivers classic performance at prehistoric prices. Its latest addition to an ever-expanding range of Chinese made/Swedish modified microphones and preamps is the R1 MkIII Active Ribbon.

STEEPED IN OLD TIMEY

No attempt has been made to disguise the heritage of the Golden Age Project R1 MkIII Active. The dark racing green and chrome chassis closely echoes the 'classic ribbon' form, and it's not hard to imagine yourself ported to another time as you prepare to croon a fresh take into its ample grille.

Beneath this classic (albeit generic) exterior, the R1 employs a two-micron thick, 50mm corrugated aluminium ribbon, tensioned within a magnetic field. Both ribbon and magnet assembly are mounted within an internal shockmount, but don't let this fool you, the shockmount does little to protect the mic's delicate mechanism from rough treatment or misuse. (Golden Age Project hammers this point home with a ribbon warranty that extends no further than your 'initial inspection!') Rapid movement, exposure to wind or breathy plosives, and horizontal storage may all result in damage to the ribbon alignment (which is the case with most vintage ribbons). To combat this, Golden Age Project provides a padded material case that's rugged and surprisingly stable when resting upright on its flat base. The case can also slide over a stand-mounted R1 when not in use or during repositioning – whether that be across the room or into the cupboard. Unfortunately, only a small screw secures the U-shaped frame to the threaded stand mount, which leaves the mic feeling decidedly wobbly, particularly in the standard upright position. It's not unusual to find design compromises like this in an entry-level product but this is one that would seem so easy to resolve.

It almost goes without saying that a ribbon mic should never be used without a pop shield, but

despite its susceptibility to a mighty wind, the R1 MkIII Active is more than capable of handling high sound pressure levels (up to an impressive 160dB @ 1kHz). Its Figure-8 polar pattern is characterised by wide front and rear lobes and the usual 90 degree off-axis null points, making it far more forgiving of a vocalist's sideways movement than many various large diaphragm condensers. Conversely, its vertical axis is *very* narrow at high frequencies. The limited length of the ribbon means that shorter wavelengths will be partially ignored if they're not channelled *directly* into the microphone. While something to be aware of, this limitation can also be musically employed to good effect. Hand percussion instruments like tambourines and shakers, for example, can effectively be filtered on-the-fly by simply playing above or below the microphone.

ACTIVELY AGED

What sets the R1 MkIII apart from the tickertape parade of ribbon mic designs is its active circuitry. The mic utilises a FET/bipolar discrete low-noise current amplifier that raises the output of the microphone to a level similar to that of many condenser mics. During testing, in fact, I found the active ribbon design of the mic generally *exceeded* these levels. The active circuitry, powered by standard 48V phantom, also buffers the ribbon and gain makeup transformer from the inconsistencies of preamp impedance and interference caused by long cable runs, which can often wreak havoc with a ribbon's tone. The active component of the R1 MkIII therefore ensures that the mic will perform consistently with any preamp (including the company's very own Pre73 – reviewed on page 68). In addition, it broadens the application of the microphone to include a whole new range of quieter sources.

I have long enjoyed the smooth top end and full bottom of ribbons on sources like drum overheads, horns and guitar cabs. Their downfall has been their common fragility in the face of high-level SPLs, and the paranoia that surrounds their use in these situations. Thankfully the R1 MkIII Active is more resilient in this regard thanks to the welcome addition of a -10dB pad. Compared directly to a Sennheiser MD421 on a bluesy lead recording, for example, the R1 MkIII achieved a big midrange and controlled top end without the overt sense of

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low-end filtering that the dynamic microphone delivered. Better still, it didn't blow up, nor could it be damaged by phantom power – where many a ribbon has been reduced to a mute courtesy of the dreaded 48V feed, the R1 MkIII won't work without it!

It was on quieter instruments that a whole new world of sound capture opened up. On acoustic guitar, for instance, the R1 MkIII leant an open and detailed ear to recordings while easily controlling the unwanted zing of the steel strings. On quietly sung baritone vocals I discovered an extension and clarity to the bottom-end that I'd previously never managed to record with such ease. The ample body and subtle top end of the R1 MkIII also offered welcome respite from recent trials capturing an often screechy solo violin while the added gain enhanced the mic's ability to control and fill out smaller female vocal performances.

A NEW CANDIDATE

Golden Age is certainly not alone in its return to the smooth simplicity of ribbon mic design. In recent years the market has been utterly deluged with ribbon options ranging from the cheap and cheerful to frighteningly expensive. Golden Age Project does, however, claim to have produced the first low-cost active ribbon on the market, and a quick search online adds weight to these claims.

The R1 MkIII is marketed as an entry-level microphone for those wishing to explore 'vintage style recording,' a claim that actually sells the mic short. The R1 MkIII Active is an affordable microphone that delivers on the classic smooth ribbon tone but *without* many of the limitations that plague passive designs. Its price makes it perfect for those straining for flexibility on a limited budget. If you ask me, its time is now. ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$369

Contact

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Pros

Active circuit solves usual ribbon limitations. Delivered excellent detail with full, rich tone in a range of applications. -10dB pad and Low cut increase the mic's flexibility. Outstanding bang for your buck.

Cons

Incorporated mount flimsy, and not easily substituted. Restrictive ribbon warranty means handle with care.

Summary

Whether you're recording the Soggy Bottom Boys or the Pussy Cat Dolls the Golden Age R1 MkIII would make a worthwhile addition to any mic arsenal. The active FET circuitry addresses many of the classic ribbon shortcomings while maintaining smooth and detailed performance. Add to that its bargain price tag and you've got a mic that can both inspire newcomers and tempt even the most frugal fogie to embrace the ribbon renaissance.