

"The bottom line is that the TLM 103 is a phenomenal microphone. Five stars go to Neumann on this one... it's a keeper!"

April 1999 by Jeff DiBartolomeo

When I received my TLM 103, I was really excited to check it out and see how it stacked up to the mic that I'd been using (a popular project studio-level condenser mic). I decided my first test would be to re-track vocals on some existing Unholy Water Men (UWM) music with both mics, and then A-B them to see: How did the TLM respond versus my familiar mic on different vocal approaches? How did the TLM handle am-bient (room) noise? Did the TLM "color" my voice at all, as compared to the old mic?

I started out by tracking UWM's "Alive." This song combines both soft, dynamic, subtle vocals in the verse, and loud, high-octave vocals in the chorus. And the final chorus features a high A-flat that holds out for about ten seconds with heavy vibrato. On playback, I immediately noticed that on the soft verses, the TLM seemed to have more depth or dynamic clarity than my mic. I also noticed that the TLM was on par with the old mic in its resistance to ambient "room" noise. Moving onto the chorus, the TLM handled the powerful chorus parts with absolutely no distortion. The old mic's distortion at high volume was something I had to be constantly aware of when tracking in the past, yet the TLM erased this issue! It was almost impossible to overload this mic!

Next, I tracked vocals with both mics on "What I'm Like," a more hard rock-style song, with gritty, bluesy, raucous rock vocals. I was sure the TLM would distort on this one, but not so. My vocals aren't as strong on this tune, because the raspy approach isn't one of my strong points. I was surprised at the TLM's results here, because it actually made me sound great! It seems that the competition's mic had actually been adding a distortion to my vocal that highlighted the fact that I was straining on the song! It's strange when you realize that a mic's response can actually accentuate the problems with your performance and squash the good things. The TLM, on the other hand, added a David Lee Roth-type vibe to the piece, where you can hear he's straining, but it's intentional and well-suited to the song as opposed to a weakness.

The next test was on "Little Conflict," which starts out with an acoustic guitar and vocal. This song is a breeding ground for ambient noise and strange off-axis colorations, even feedback, with the competitor's mic. Instead the TLM sounded tight and clean, despite the fact that I was singing in a construction site (my studio was half-built at the time) with no soundproofing and cement walls! Again, the soft, subtle vocals (for example, the "why stay away?" at the end of the song) sounded deep and... I guess "emotional" is the right word here. Finally, in an effort to produce something ugly sounding from the TLM, I just wailed into it for about five minutes without any backing music. I only found a couple of ways to make the mic perform under par: Remove my pop filter and get so close to the mic that the shock mount is touching your nose, and sing (or, perhaps scream is a better word) as loud as you can.

Sing from 90 degrees into the mic, which seemed lose a lot of the depth and bass, and got kind of midrange sound that made the vocal sound weak. I suppose this could be useful in some cases, but for my vocal type, it isn't happening. A few other things I noticed about the mic were: the optional shock mount is much better than the competition's shock mount, as it seems more resistant to things like footsteps when the mic stand is on a wood floor. Moreover, at one point I accidentally hit the mic stand while tracking "Alive," and thought for sure that I'd need to re-track the line, but it was fairly unnoticeable (unless you knew exactly where it was and you listened very closely for it) on tape. With the old mic, hitting the mic stand produces a thump that's pretty obvious and will generally require a punch to fix it. Overall, here's my ratings on the TLM 103, versus the competition's mic. Note that some of the competition's grades have gone down since I experienced the TLM!

	Neumann TLM 103	The Competition
Real loud, high-octave vocals	A	D (distortion)
Soft, dynamic vocals	A+	C
Ambient noise rejection	A-	C
Feedback rejection	A	B+
Pop/wind resistance	B+	C
Impact resistance (shock mount)	A-	D
Appearance	A+	B+

After my vocal tests, I decided to check out the mic's performance in recording guitar, so I fired up my guitar rig, close-miked one Mesa Rectifier 4x12 cabinet with the TLM 103 and the other with my standard guitar amp mic (the mic that everyone uses to mic guitar cabs!). I basically noodled for a while, playing both lead and rhythm guitars. Then I played back the recording, A-Bing between the TLM and the standard mic. I found that the TLM provided the same depth and presence that I'd noticed on the vocal tests. I've always had trouble recording guitar, because some mics make a \$1000 Mesa tube amp through an \$800 cabinet sound like a \$200 pawnshop solid-state combo (this is probably in part due to my inexperience as an engineer). With the TLM, my guitar didn't take on that harsh, unnatural, solid-state sound that I often get.

The bottom line is that the TLM 103 is a phenomenal microphone, and the price/ performance ratio is outstanding. I've used it on quite a handful of varying material since I conducted these tests, and it's performed flawlessly! Five stars go to Neumann on this one... it's a keeper! Say bye-bye to my old mic!

So, you ask, how does the TLM 103 stack up in the real world? In the month or two since I performed the above shootout and review, I've had several real-world experiences with the '103 that confirm my findings in the A-B tests.

I've been using my TLM 103 on pre-production demos for my recently reformed progressive metal project, Dark After. Essentially, we're taking a 74 minute piece of music that we wrote five years ago and we're reworking it to incorporate my stronger vocal skills (I've come a long way in five years) and a more modern, Y2K feel. After about eight hours of vocal sessions, I'm still thrilled with the '103. It's really performed beyond my expectations in the sessions, and the other guys in Dark After (a typical bunch of prog metal perfectionists) have complimented me on my voice and the TLM 103 several times.

As if that wasn't enough, here's the real kicker: In November, I showed up early for a vocal session gig at a New York studio, and relaxed in the waiting room for the producer and engineer to show up. The engineer arrived a few minutes later, and we went into the studio to begin setting up. But there were no mics around... apparently they were all locked up in a closet, and the receptionist told us that we'd have to wait for the studio owner to come down and unlock the door. I suggested that I warm up with my TLM 103, and the engineer began dialing in some rough vocal sounds for the session.

After about ten minutes of warmup, my pipes were sounding good, and the engineer seemed pleased with the sound and the studio setup. Soon after, the studio owner arrived and unlocked the door to the treasure trove of multi-thousand dollar mics. The engineer selected two mics: a Neumann U 87 and a non-Neumann mic. He decided to start with the competitor's mic, wired it up, and returned to the control room.

With the session's sheet music, I began warming up again to give the engineer a chance to dial in the sound. After about five minutes, the engineer came into the vocal booth shaking his head and sporting a nasty frown. He explained that the new mic that he'd chosen wasn't as "warm" with my voice as he'd heard during my earlier warmups (during which I had used the '103). So he ditched the competitor's mic, wired up the Neumann U 87, and went back to the control room.

As I continued to familiarize myself with the sheet music, I noticed the engineer shaking his head behind the glass. So I was thinking, "Jeez, this guy really isn't digging my voice." Within a couple of minutes, he came back into the vocal booth and said, "You know, why don't we use your TLM 103?" To that, I replied, "My voice isn't happening for ya?" His response: "No, no, no! Your voice is fine! It's just that I really liked the sound we were getting during warmup, so why not just use that mic?"

Wow! This guy chose my thousand dollar TLM 103 over two \$3000 mics! Enough said! This mic is a major engineering achievement! I don't know how Neumann pulled it off, but keep up the good work, guys!

Jeff DiBartolomeo is a very busy New York guitarist and vocalist who is currently working with several bands and has done numerous sessions in the New York Area. In addition to his Neumann endorsement, Jeff uses ▶ Ernie Ball Music Man guitars and ▶ PreSonus microphone preamps and compressors exclusively, among others.

