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Christian Henson



Warm Audio WA-47 and WA-47jr

JON THORNTON warms to two new takes on a classic design

Founded in 2011 by Bryce Young, Warm Audio's tag-line (Serious Gear, Seriously Affordable) explains much about the product mix and design philosophy. Concentrating exclusively on the analogue side of the signal path, the company's first product was the WA12 discrete mic pre-amp. The brash orange colour scheme of this little box matched its intent to provide creative colour as well as simple gain to the signal path — but using the highest quality components to achieve the best balance of price to performance.

The following five years saw the range expand to include more mic-preamps, compressors and EQ combinations, some of which bear more than a passing similarity in both design and looks to some familiar classics. And that sincerest form of flattery continued when Bryce first turned his attention further up the signal path. The WA87, launched in 2016, was the first of Warm Audio's mic offerings — no prizes for guessing the inspiration there — followed swiftly by the WA14, inspired by the 1970s iteration of a certain Austrian icon. It's interesting that Warm Audio has focussed on the

classic incarnations of what were really studio workhorses, rather than anything more exotic. Their latest offerings do, in a sense, continue this school of thought. Because, whilst Neumann's U47 often has an almost revered status attached to it, it was just as much the workhorse of its day.

Two flavours of U47-inspired microphones are offered by Warm Audio, differentiated chiefly by the electronics and the physical size. Both microphones feature the same capsule. This is a custom (Australian) manufactured design, based on the centre terminated, dual diaphragm, shared back-plate K47.

WA-47: nine polar patterns

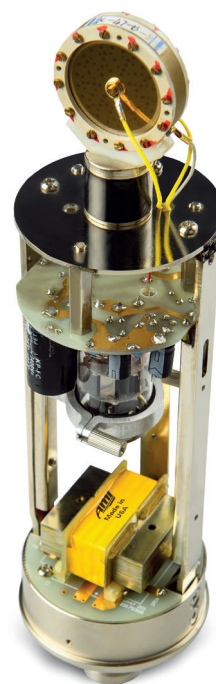
In the 'full-fat' WA-47 this capsule feeds a valve based electronics stage with transformer coupled output, and the whole thing is packaged in a hefty, solid looking body that closely mirrors the size, look and feel of the original valve U47. There are some differences of course. Unlike the original, polar pattern selection is via the external supply, and nine patterns (omni, figure-eight and cardioid with six intermediate steps)

are available.

The manufacturer's literature goes to great lengths to stress the care taken in component choice for the internals. A Slovak Republic JJ5751 valve is employed, offering a deliberately lower gain than other choices might in order to emphasise the sonic effects of the interplay between valve, capsule and TAB-Funkenwerk output transformer. Even the supplied 7 pin cable that connects the mic to the power supply hasn't escaped scrutiny in its effect on overall performance, with Gotham Audio cable and connectors used here.

The WA-47jr dispenses with the thermionics, instead utilising FET based transformer-less electronics mated to the same capsule. The 'junior' designation is entirely appropriate here. Unlike the WA-47, which bears a striking visual similarity to the original, the U47jr doesn't ape the form factor of Neumann's U47 FET. Instead it looks for all the world like its larger brethren that has somehow been shrunk in the wash (and shed a few pounds in the process). Three polar patterns are available via a stubby toggle switch at the front of the mic, with further switches at the rear providing a -10dB pad and a 70Hz high pass filter.

Both microphones ship with a familiar looking suspension mount, the only significant difference being that the WA-47 has sprung clamps to hold the microphone, whilst the WA-47jr screws into the base of the mount. The WA-47jr also comes with a solid clip, and whilst this does actually fit its bigger brother, I'd feel a little nervous using it support such a weighty microphone.



/ JJ Slovak 5751 tube

Tube vs. FET designs

So how do they sound? Before we go there, it's worth getting a couple of things out of the way. First the price. The WA-47 retails for £899, and the WA-47jr £299. Not cheap, but by no means stratospheric pricing either. The second thing is just what to compare them to. I don't have an original U47 or U47-FET, so can only rely on the sonic memory I have from the times I've been fortunate to use both microphones. And added to that, there's a bewildering array of U47 clones / replicas / homages out there at all price points. You could go mad trying to compare and contrast the subtle and not so subtle variations between them all, and all the while we need to bear in mind that no two original U47s are likely to sound exactly the same either these days. So I'm just going to evaluate these mics for what they are, whilst simply acknowledging the broad sonic signature of their inspiration.

Set up side by side in the studio, the first thing that strikes you is that the WA-47 has a much hotter output than its junior counterpart — with the WA-47jr needing substantially more gain for an identical source. A walk around each mic set to cardioid with spoken voice is immediately revealing. On axis, at about 20cm distance, the WA-47 sounds immediately pleasing. Rich and full in the low end — even at this distance you hear a little gentle proximity lift. There's plenty of resolution in the mid-range, with a slightly larger than life quality, but never gritty or harsh. And it doesn't sound overly dark either — in fact there's more than a hint of breathiness in the high end. By comparison, the WA-47jr sounds a little bit more reined in, slightly harder and, dare I say it, a touch more 'Germanic'.

Both mics have very smooth off axis responses in cardioid, although the WA-47 seemed to exhibit a slight rear lobe at around the 180-degree mark. But on speech, the WA-47 is immediately compelling and eminently tuneable with working distance to different voices.

WA-47jr... smoooooth!

What was surprising, then, was just how different both microphones sounded when switching to sung (male) vocals. Admittedly, the singer in question has an unusual tonality that challenges almost any microphone — a lovely thick chest voice coupled with some really quite harsh resonances in the high-mids. And here, you still get a beautifully rich low end, and plenty of mid-range detail, but almost a slight 'spikiness' to the high-mids at higher vocal levels. And

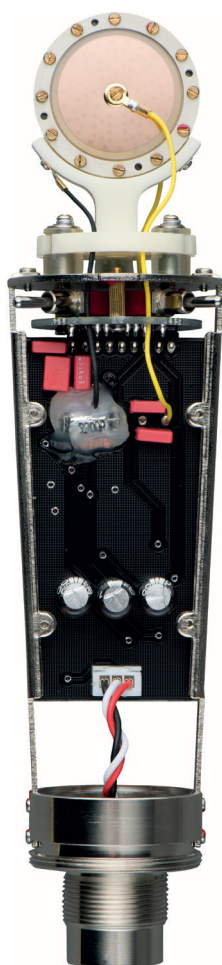
“ They both have bags of character — what's surprising is that there's so much difference in that character

the WA-47jr, whilst not quite as 'big' sounding here, seemed much smoother in that frequency range. Switch to a different singer though, and the WA-47 sounds wonderfully smooth in that register again, and the WA-47jr much the same as before.

Both mics take EQ in both directions very well though, so dialling out a troublesome resonance, or adding a little more air is easily done, and doesn't have the effect of immediately taking the life out the vocal or sounding overly harsh as can be the case with some cheaper valve mics I've encountered. But I do wonder whether the full-fat WA-47 is just a little bit more of a diva than its FET based stable mate.

Moving to acoustic guitar, and the pendulum swings back towards the WA-47 on first listen — it just seems to pull an almost 'mix-ready' sound of the instrument. Listen closer though, and that high-mid zippiness still comes through at times — not that it's at all unpleasant. Switching the WA-47 to the omnidirectional pattern opens up the sound quite a lot — it's a little less 'larger than life', and some of the slight tubbiness to the low end disappears when used close in. Meantime, the WA-47jr carries on fairly consistently — that slightly harder quality delivering a more precise, if slightly less full tonality.

One of my slightly less than scientific measures when evaluating microphones is whether they bring a smile to my face or not — and I have to say that both of these microphones did, almost straight away. And on the right source, the WA-47 turns that smile into a full-on grin. They both have bags of character — what's surprising is that there's so much difference in that character. And in terms of value for money, I have to say that Warm Audio have done an astonishing job here. Are they as good as or better than other U47 clones? Who knows. Do they sound similar to original U47s? Probably — but that's not really the point. What you have here are some really nice, characterful microphones that won't cost the earth, but will bring a smile to your face every time you get them in front of something. Good job. **P**



/ WA-47jr: K47 dual diaphragm



resolution/VERDICT

PROS Well put together; both represent a lot of microphone for the money; bags of character and a tonality that will put a smile on our face.

CONS WA-47 can suit some sources much more than others — perhaps a bit of a diva; WA-47jr doesn't deliver quite the same richness as its big brother..

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