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Extinct Audio BM9 and Black Ops ribbon microphones

*A new line of ribbon microphones
made by hand in the UK*

REVIEW BY PAUL VNUK JR.

From Xaudia to Extinct

Located in Great Britain, Extinct Audio manufactures handmade ribbon microphones. The Extinct story is a well-trodden tale of a recording engineer/microphone enthusiast, who out of necessity turns repair person, hangs out a shingle and starts a repair shop dubbed Xaudia. Thirteen years and more than 4,500 repairs later, Stewart Tavener has earned a reputation as the ribbon repair guy in the UK. In 2017 he partnered with Adam Watson, and Extinct Audio was born.

The BM9 Trinity

The Extinct Audio locker contains three models: Viking, Black Ops, and Valkyr Stereo. All three are a variation of the Viking or BM9. The BM9 is a passive 6 1/4" x 1" bi-directional ribbon microphone with a symmetrical figure-8 pickup pattern. The Black Ops is a BM9 on steroids, made for louder sources. Valkyr is a stacked pair of BM9 units, fixed at 90° for stereo applications.

All Extinct Audio products are handmade inside and out with chiefly British parts, at the company's headquarters in Yorkshire, including the gorgeous, dark stained wooden box that accompanies each microphone.

For review, I was sent one pair of BM9 mics, a single Black Ops, and a set of Extinct Audio 'Fenrir' vibration mounts.

You look familiar...

At first glance, the BM9 might look familiar. If you're thinking Royer R121, you're at least partially right. The R121 and the BM9 both pay homage to the 1950s Danish-made Bang and Olufsen BM3 ribbon mic. The BM9 even retains the domed cap of the B&O. Unlike the

BM3 and R121 however, the grille slots on the BM9 are vertical. Also, note that the 'wings' on these microphones are not just for looks—they're the magnets of the motor assembly that protrude from the body. The BM9 features an orange badge and a silver mesh grill protecting the ribbon. The Black Ops has a black badge with an extra layer of thin black fabric covering its metal mesh grille.

The element

Inside the BM9 is a 1.8-micrometer aluminum ribbon transducer element and a custom in-house wound permalloy core transformer on the output. The ribbon element of the Black Ops is 2.5 micrometers thick and is designed for louder sources with a propensity for pushing a bit of air, most notably a cranked speaker cone, kick drum, or loud vocalist.

Specs

The specs of each mic are similar, with a frequency range of <30 Hz – 15 kHz @ ±3dB, a maximum SPL of 135dB @ 20 Hz, a sensitivity of 3.5 mV/Pa, -49 dBv/Pa, self noise of -130 dBv at 20°C and a signal to noise ratio (1kHz at 1 Pa)

of 81dB. Like most passive ribbon mics, the BM9 is relatively flat across the board. There's a minimal low end bump at around 115dB, a +1.7dB bump at 3.15 kHz and a -2.8dB dip at 10 kHz.

Sound and comparisons

Despite similar specs, the Black Ops has a more controlled proximity effect, resulting in less low-end extension and improved clarity and focus on sources where you want to tame low end build-up; guitar amps, acoustic guitar, and vocals come to mind.

I made some comparisons between the BM9 and Black Ops alongside a Royer R121, AEA R44CE, and an sE Electronics VR-1, all passive ribbon mics. The R44CE was neutral and full with a beautiful silky top end, the R121 showed off its well-known midrange-forward presence and constrained low end, and the VR-1, while tonally even, had the most pronounced low end push. The BM9 exhibits the characteristic midrange smoothness, with a low end that's full but not overdone, a controlled top end, and a gentle upper-midrange thrust. As such, it's sonically a blend of the low end of the AEA, and a hint of the mid presence of the Royer, but with just a touch more top end. The Black Ops sounds like the BM9 with a highpass filter added, moving it more into R121 territory, but in no way a clone.





Fenrir Vibration Mount

Fenrir is an in-house custom-made vibration mount from Extinct Audio. Made of CNC-machined aluminum, the clamping system surrounds and firmly grasps the microphone and is tightened by a rear thumbscrew. The mic is held by eight rubber O-rings to dampen vibrations and resonances. Two sizeable quick-release levers allow the mic to tilt vertically for proper placement. Not just for use with the Extinct models, Fenrir will work with any 27mm (1", give or take a millimeter) body, such as most Royer and vintage B&O models.

Price: £165.83 (approx. \$205)

Overheads

The BM9 is a gorgeous drum overhead mic with a very clear, neutral, and non-hyped sound. It has lovely cymbal taming qualities, but never once did it come across as too dark. Except for some highpass filtering to stay out of the kick rumble range, the BM9 needed little else in the way of EQ. The BM9 is a great choice when you want your overheads or front of kit mic to represent the drum sound with spot mics added for detail rather than the other way around.

Guitar amp

On electric guitar, the controlled proximity effect of the Black Ops was a great fit. It worked well inside an iso cabinet equipped with a 12" Celestion Vintage 30 connected to a 1992 hand-wired Vox AC30. It never once sounded too boxy or boomy. Later I used it on a re-issue Fender Princeton amp about two inches from the grille in conjunction with a Shure SM57, and it performed admirably here as well to fill out the more nasally and forward 57.

Acoustic

I tried all three Extinct mics on acoustic guitar. I placed the BM9 pair in a Blumlein configuration three feet away, with the Black Ops as a mono mic about 8 inches from the 12th fret

and angled toward the soundhole of an Epiphone EJ-160E. This guitar has a slightly aggressive nature, and both ribbon mics did well to add a touch of fullness and warmth. In the mix, I favored the controlled proximity effect of the Black Ops, which kept the booming body of the guitar in check, and then I peppered in the BM9 pair for a touch of dimension.

Electric bass

On a small bass amp with a 10" speaker, I settled on the BM9 as my choice, set about 3" from the cone with a pop filter in place to protect against moving air. The natural low bloom of the BM9 did not disappoint. The sound was full, natural, and detailed. Overall, it delivered a vintage, laid back bass tone more so than a more modern, in-your-face kind of sound.

Kick drum

I had a similar result on a vintage 20" Slingerland kick drum. Despite the robustness of the Black Ops, I again preferred the fuller low end proximity effect of the BM9 about 6" outside the head (not near the soundhole), and keeping the pop filter on it for safety. If you're after more punch than thud, or if you're using a bigger kick drum, the Black Ops would be a great choice.

Vocals

Both Extinct Audio mics can work as a vocal mic (again, pop filter a must). It comes down to the sound you're after and the desired proximity effect. For an exposed vocal that needs to fill the spectrum, I preferred the BM9, but if you want your vocal to cut through a dense mix, then the Black Ops is a better choice, and the added blast protection of the Black Ops is hard to argue with.

Conclusions

Whichever model you choose, the Extinct BM9 and Black Ops are a great blend of classic ribbon tone, built and tailored to the modern studio. They're well made, classy looking, and despite being from a young company, they will quickly feel like tried and true friends.

More good news: the BM9 and Black Ops are a respectable \$617 each. This is a great deal for quality, UK made, hand built ribbon mics. ➔

Price: £540.83 (approx \$617)
+ Shipping from the UK
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