



THIS THING'S ON

**Ear Trumpet Labs creates mics
with meaning**
by Allison Hussey

Ned Luberecki

MOST MUSIC FANS CAN'T rattle off all of the equipment their favorite artist uses; the amplifiers, microphones, and all the attendant stands and cables are merely accessories to the main attraction. But there are some pieces of gear whose appearances command a second look, like microphones that appear to have time-hopped to the stage from the early 1940s. A casual listener may not immediately be able to hear a difference, but they can at least see it: Bands gather around these modern-built but retro-looking mics to sing and play together. For a growing coalition of musicians, they make a world of difference in conveying the best sound they can possibly deliver.

Those bespoke microphones are the work of Philip Graham, who runs Ear Trumpet Labs in Portland, Oregon. Since 2011, he's built gear that has earned adoration from rockers like Elvis

Costello and The Decemberists, bluegrass elder statesman Del McCoury, and many more artists in many more genres.

Graham has taken an unusual path to making these beloved condenser microphones — mics that are more technically and electrically complex than their basic modern counterparts, but produce more natural sounds. He was previously a software programmer, but as he grew more and more tired of his day job, he turned his attention in his leisure time toward tinkering. He built pinhole cameras and tube amps, and when his singer-songwriter daughter became interested in recording, Graham taught himself how to build microphones.

"I was getting increasingly frustrated with programming, and just kind of reached a snapping point with my job," he says. "I just kind of up and quit, and then was sort of looking around like, 'Well, what can I do now? I have these

weird microphones that I've been building, and people seem to like them, so maybe that's a business.'"

At first, Graham was looking to develop an excellent condenser microphone that would be used as a studio mic. But from some of his musician friends, he realized that in live settings, acoustic musicians were using gear designed for loud rock music. Microphones meant to convey the bombast of a squealing electric guitar at high volume won't always meet the needs of a quiet acoustic artist. It's the gear equivalent of trying to eat soup with a fork.

"My design attention was on satisfying that problem, of making the best kind of acoustic sound [so] that people wouldn't have to use pickups in their acoustic instruments, and to get a kind of vocal quality that I'm pretty convinced you can only really get if you give a little distance from the mic," Graham says. "The vocal instrument

SHELLY SWANGER

Andra Day

actually resonates over a fairly large part of your body, and close mic-ing that — literally from a couple of centimeters off of your lips — is no different than jamming a microphone an inch from the face of a guitar. It's going to sound terrible, and you're really not capturing the full sound of the instrument."

The distance principle of Ear Trumpet mics also means that musicians have to stay a little more aware as they're playing.

That translates into musicians doing a little mixing of themselves live by moving closer to or farther away from the mic as they play, which some musicians, including mandolin maven Sierra Hull, enjoy.

"It's really fun to kind of be a little more in control of [your] dynamic versus having somebody at the sound board turning you up and down and riding your solos, if you're just plugged in or using a clip-on microphone or something," she says.

COURTESY OF EAR TRUMPET LABS

Edwina and Friends

Graham essentially stumbled into his microphones' distinct visual aesthetic by way of his tinkering. He was building his first microphones from pieces he found in his basement or in hardware stores, like shiny copper pipe. Simultaneously inspired by the aesthetics of the industrial design boom of the 1930s and '40s, Graham realized he could make a product that looked as special as it sounded. He gave his earliest models what he calls "old lady" names — Josephine, Edna, Edwina — and it all just stuck.

Graham found early Ear Trumpet devotees in Portland's Foghorn String Band, friends of his who fell in love with the Edwina model and took it out on the road.

"That first couple of years, they basically built the company," he says. "Everywhere that they went on tour, I'd get calls the next day. I could tell exactly

where they were going on tour. I'd get calls from the sound guy, and I'd get a call from a couple of people that had just seen them."

Audiences for old-time and stringband shows are frequently made up of other musicians, which fueled interest in Ear Trumpet far outside Portland. Word began spreading about these special microphones.

"It's a great marketing demonstration every time any artist uses them," Graham says with a laugh. That was true for Hull: After embarking on a duo tour with singer-songwriter and former Della Mae guitarist Courtney Hartman, who brought along her Edwina, Hull bought an Edwina and a Louise of her own.

Soon, Graham had made fans out of The Milk Carton Kids, whose delicate acoustic songs necessitate a crisp clarity in a live setting. Within a couple of years, celebrated Dobro player Jerry Douglas had gotten wind of Ear Trumpet Labs,



Del McCoury

too, and got a mic of his own. That snowballed into Graham outfitting one of Douglas's many projects, the Flatt & Scruggs tribute act The Earls of Leicester, with a full complement of microphones. As the bluegrass community fawned over the Earls, it took note of the band's mics, too.

"The thing is, in the bluegrass community, they all talk to each other. Word spread really fast there," Graham says. "As soon as people see somebody of that caliber that thinks that something works for them, they're certainly willing to give it a try."

Once the bluegrass community found something that worked for them, they latched on tight, Graham says. He posits that his wares fill a void in that music that other microphones simply weren't meeting.

"I think they've just been frustrated for a long time and have been wanting something that's designed to work well live. There haven't been a lot of great

options for people. They'd been trying to use studio mics for ages and really wanting to do a single mic or minimal-mic setup, and just not had any good options," Graham says.

On Stage, In Studio

Of course, a handcrafted piece of music equipment doesn't come cheap: A new Ear Trumpet Lab mic ranges anywhere from \$550 for the Chantelle, Edna, or Edwina models to \$1,200 for an Evelyn or a Mabel. A custom setup costs even more. (But artists on a tight budget can turn to certified resellers that stock used devices at a lower rate.) Even for up-and-coming bands, an Ear Trumpet mic can be a worthwhile investment toward getting new ears to tune in.

Steph Stewart fronts Blue Cactus, a country band based in Carrboro, North Carolina; prior to that outfit, she led Steph Stewart and The Boyfriends with guitarist and now-partner Mario Arnez.

Stewart and The Boyfriends had tried a condenser microphone from another company, but found that it was a little too finicky, and the band struggled with feedback at shows. Arnez did some more research and found Ear Trumpet Labs, eventually settling on an Edwina.

Because Graham had originally imagined his microphones as studio tools, they work just as well for recording as they do on stage. For Stewart and Arnez, having the Edwina means that they can make quality recordings of material they're working on.

"When we do demos, we plug it in to Mario's computer, which has all of the recording equipment on it. We can record live that way, just duet demos, and get really good sound quality for a simple setup. It's so versatile," she says.

As Graham has grown Ear Trumpet Labs, he's added more models to his lineup, like the Nadine, which is designed specifically for an upright



Becky Buller

bass. He's thrilled that the company has been able to grow to the point that it has — Ear Trumpet Labs has a staff of five, including Graham, and a steady stream of business — but unlimited expansion isn't the goal. That's part of the appeal for artists like Hull.

"You know you're supporting this small, personal company of this group of folks that are hand-making these things. That's kind of cool as well, rather than just not really knowing where your microphone comes from," she says, adding, "It's pretty cool to know that there's a lot of love and care that goes in to building these things."

That type of rabid support from

performers, who place trust in the equipment's story as well as its craftsmanship, is what puts Ear Trumpet Labs' mics at the top of performers' wish lists. But Graham doesn't want to get production to a point where he has to forgo the careful making of every microphone. Don't expect to see a massive factory line of Ear Trumpet mics hitting the shelves at big-box music retailers any time soon. That dedication to quality control and attention to detail has helped Graham corner the market. As musicians around the globe keep singing the brand's praises, Ear Trumpet Labs makes sure that audiences hear every note. ■