



NEUMANN TLM 49

With the release of the TLM 49, are we now just one step away from Neumann releasing a new-generation '47'?

Text: Andy Stewart

► The 'retro' design of the new Neumann TLM 49 is unmistakably reminiscent of the legendary Neumann M49, with its bulky girth, its chunky 'open' grille and its substantial weight and size. (I've used an M49 quite a bit over the years and there's no doubting its doppelgänger credentials.) But when I first took this superbly-crafted object out of its box and placed it in its equally well-built suspension cradle I got to thinking: why does a company like Neumann release a new mic that's so referential to the past? Is it because when we picture a classic 'vintage' mic in our minds we always conjure up the same image – in this case an M49 – and that has compelled Neumann to release a similar mic 50 years later? Or is this instant association between form and sonic fame simply money in the bank for the illustrious German manufacturer? I guess the answer to both these questions must be 'yes'.

Now, I don't want to sound cynical here. I'm not begrudging Neumann the right to 'dress' its microphones in whatever retro clobber it likes. And frankly, I love the aesthetic of Neumanns (old and new), so I'm hardly going to be critical of the TLM 49's physical similarities to the M49. My main concern is to understand what all this vintage regalia means *sonically* to the end-user, and ultimately, the audience – after all, no one outside the studio is going to *see* the mic, they're only going to *hear* it. The simple fact of the matter is that when Neumann chose to outfit the TLM 49 in the M49's vintage attire

and derive its name from its famous forbear, they were inevitably inviting comparison... with an out and out legend.

TRANSFORMERLESS M ICON?

In many respects the new TLM 49 (the TLM acronym being derived from 'TransformerLess Microphone') is something akin to those Chrysler roadsters that came out a few years ago... its design is 'cool' and 'retro' but everything under the bonnet is hi-tech – with one significant exception: the main component the TLM 49 has in common with the original M49 is the legendary K47 capsule. This capsule has been used over many decades in several classic Neumanns, including such 'm-icons' as the tube and FET U47s, and the aforementioned M49. However, although a significant component, the K47 capsule is but one among many in the circuit, and to this end, the TLM 49 bears little electronic resemblance to an M49. For starters, it's not a valve mic and therefore doesn't have any of the sonic characteristics a valve produces, nor does it have multiple polar pattern configurations. And, perhaps only slightly less significant, is the transformerless nature of the design, which tends to open up the mic and intentionally minimise its harmonic overtones.

The TLM 49 is a clear microphone with a modern sonic 'attitude' and 21st century specifications. It's not quite the luxurious, delicious mic I had suspected it might be, but something rather more clinical. I compared it to a number of other Neumanns across several 'generations' to get a sense of where it nested in the family tree, and during this process I was once again reminded of the overall tonal similarities amongst the 'relatives'. It's important to understand, at this juncture, that what I'm trying to draw, from here on, is a fine distinction between the various tonal 'fingerprints', not a coarse one. Any distinctions are subtle, not radical...

There is little or no harmonic distortion to be heard in the TLM 49; transients, like sibilance in vocals and the detail of a firmly plucked acoustic guitar, are thus accurately represented almost to the point of sounding 'hard' or 'edgy'. As always, the 'horses for courses' cliché immediately comes galloping into the picture whenever the sound of a mic is discussed – after all, mics don't *make* a sound, they only *interpret* them. So the TLM 49, like all others, only suits sounds that dovetail with its tonal character.

The TLM 49 sounds remarkable on spoken-word dialogue, offering a clear and strident midrange detail. It's when the mic is sung into, however, that this characteristic borders on the 'analytical'. My overall impression of the mic is that it's beautifully suited to vocalists who sing with a 'smokey' or 'soft' timbre. Its upper midrange detail and round bottom end complement the characteristics of a singer with a reluctant midrange tone. However, I was less enamoured of the mic when it was placed in front of a 'hard' voice, as the combined midrange of the source and the mic's own character tended to take over (several compressors I slipped into the equation only seemed to exacerbate this).

To balance this tendency, I immediately looked to change the Neve 1093 preamp I was using to test the mic; one of the important things to consider when listening to a mic is to be aware of the significant effects a preamp (and its associated impedance match) has on the sound. I eventually chose a 'softer' Amek preamp from the variety

of different pres I had with me, which included Neve, API, Quad Eights and a custom valve preamp. This pulled back the aggressive midrange I'd created with my selected recording chain (which, incidentally, was based on my experience of a preferred preamp for an M49 recording main vocals).

BIG IN GERMANY

As a way of focusing in on the actual tone of this particular Neumann, I'd say the TLM 49 is a little 'bigger' and more 'open' sounding than its smaller sibling, the TLM 103 (and physically bigger too). It has more of an upper midrange kick to it than the 103 (although the frequency response graphs don't seem to support this impression). Compared to my Neumann U67 (which, like the M49, is a valve mic) the TLM 49 is more strident in the upper mids and clearer in the top end, while the 67 has much more 'punch' and 'density' in the lower midrange, and also tends to be less sibilant. To me, an original M49 sounds sweeter, more glamorous and more sophisticated than the TLM 49, exhibiting extended bottom end and tastier tops – virtues that transformers and valve components bring to the table. Conversely, the TLM 49 is more accurate and less exaggerated... once again, it's horses for courses. Finally I compared the TLM 49 to one of my favourite Neumanns, the U47FET, which was different again. The 47 had less extension in the bottom end than the TLM 49, less upper midrange presence and more 'power' in the low midrange – although to reiterate my earlier assertion, these differences are subtle.

One thing's for sure, the TLM 49 is every bit a Neumann. It's exquisitely built and finished in the company's ubiquitous fine matte nickel regalia, and the well-crafted elastic shockmount (that ships standard with the mic) is an added bonus. Sonically, it's not necessarily the vintage glamourpuss you might imagine it to be if you've experienced the sound of an original M49, and in some ways the association is an unfair distraction, but unfortunately the '49' in the name demands this comparison to be drawn. In hindsight, I wish Neumann had just called it the TLM 825 (after its hefty weight, in grams) so that it could be judged independently of its famous relatives. Certainly, in and of itself, the TLM 49 is one of the most affordable in Neumann's transformerless range and, as always, worthy of serious consideration. ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$2499

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Pros
Fantastic build quality.
Competitively priced.
Quality suspension mount included.

Cons
Single polar pattern.
Sound borders more on the 'analytical' than the 'vintage'.

Summary
As is the case with all Neumanns, the TLM 49 is a superbly manufactured and well-presented mic, sporting the 'famous fenders' of the legendary M49. Like so many classic Neumanns before, the TLM 49 has a K47 capsule at its heart, which is married to a transformerless circuit design. Not necessarily 'vintage' in its sound, the TLM 49 nevertheless demands scrutiny.

