

ALISTAIR MCGHEE goes roving
with this new reporters dream.

HHB FLASH MIC

MICROPHONE



In some far distant future audio archaeologists will ponder over the evolution of the HHB FlashMic. Some will no doubt trace its ancestry back to the genus dictaphone – I've got an Olympus micro cassette version from the '80s that was better value as a kids toy than most of the coloured plastic available in toy supermarkets everywhere, and it was a decent dictaphone. Other paleoaudiologists will point to the rise of digital as providing higher data density and the crucial leap away from moving parts. But whatever the future holds HHB has turned the portable recorder market on its head with the first product to overturn the balance between recorder and microphone. While several companies offer recorders with built-in mics (dare I say glorified dictaphones? No, I daren't) this is the first microphone with a built-in recorder.

The FlashMic is the result of HHB's close collaboration with Sennheiser and the capsule and mic body are standard Sennheiser items while the recorder is HHB's own design. The FlashMic is firmly aimed at journalism or anywhere that needs simple, yet rugged, mono recorders. So if you want stereo, this is not for you. If you want to change mics this is not for you (the capsule fitted is an omni), if you want to record from a line output or indeed any output this is not for you. If you want flexible recording media, this is not for you as the FlashMic comes with one gigabyte of fixed storage.

If that list seems somewhat restrictive think about the "grab and go" culture of a busy newsroom. If you want the epitome of simple recorders, this is it. If you can't be doing with trucks with faulty or missing cables or mics that have gone walkabout, this is the recorder for you. If you want to record on media you can't lose (unless you lose the whole thing of course), then this is for you.

The FlashMic is laid out for simple operation, three major controls are all you get on the side panel. Record, Play, and Stop/Menu. There's a small but readable monochrome LCD screen which offers transport confirmation and level indication alongside set-up, battery and menu information.

Headphones plug into a 3.5mm jack on the base alongside the mini USB port and selector wheel.

Boot Camp

One short push on the wheel switches the FlashMic on and the software displays the firmware version, the name of the mic (yes, each mic can be named and all the files

recorded on that mic are labelled with the six-letter name code) and the active preset before it settles into "idle" where the display alternates between the time remaining and the number of tracks. During the start-up sequence a green LED provides back light for a few seconds allowing you to get your bearings in the dark.

Playback

Press Play and playback of the last recorded track will commence and the green light comes on to light up your listening experience. To navigate to an earlier track just use the jog wheel to select the one you want, again as soon as you touch the jog wheel the back light is fired up. The headphone socket can be used as an analogue line out for audio transfer if you don't have a computer handy to use the USB facilities, but more of that later.

Record

Press the red record button and no matter what mode you are in the FlashMic will drop straight into record. Stopping is just as easy, a single press on the stop key (labelled M – I presume for Menu as it also enables access to the menu when you are in the stop mode).

The FlashMic's one gigabyte of storage is good for up to three and a quarter hours of linear 16-bit recording at 44.1kHz (48kHz and 32kHz are also available) and if you want to save on time or drag your files straight into your radio playout system without conversion there's the option to go MPEG 1 layer 2 which will get you to over 18 hours of storage.

In Use

The first outing for my FlashMic was down to Swansea University to record some vox pops from the student radio station award ceremony. I gave the mic to Rich and Clive who were going down to present some awards and bask in some completely unmerited adulation. I gave Rich the mic, we spent two minutes with the book, and off they went. Next morning I came in and Clive had already transferred the recordings straight to the computer via the USB, not even bothering to install the control panel. So it's very easy to use, albeit that these are hardened radio junkies suffering from serious Tech Addiction.

The first thing we'd done is turned off the automatic record gain and set the mic up manually. This seemed to work fine, although it's a bit tricky to do on your own as you have to speak into the end while trying to read the level display which is on the side! I picked up a Sennheiser Evolution radio hand-held and the metal work feels identical – and incidentally very solid. The FlashMic has an omni capsule which is the right decision for this sort of application. Handling noise is very low – a tribute to the elastic suspension – and wind noise is surprisingly well controlled. This can be attributed to that omni, the foam lining inside the metal basket shield, and the high-pass filter which is switchable (12dB per octave below 100Hz) but I guess you should set it on and forget it. You can

THE REVIEWER

Alistair McGhee began audio life in Hi-Fi (and has the Linn Sondek to prove it!) before joining the BBC as an audio engineer. After ten years in Radio and TV he moved to production. When BBC Choice started he pioneered personal digital production in television. Alistair is now Assistant Editor, BBC Radio Wales, but is allowed out occasionally.

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▶ hear that amount of bass cut, but with it in place the FlashMic is quite useable in pretty windy conditions without resorting to any added windshields.

In terms of mic quality for fairly close speech in a rough tumble news world it's not bad at all. I compared the FlashMic to our standard Sennheiser M46 reporters mic (only the cardioid unfortunately) and as you might expect there wasn't much to choose between them. I added a beyerdynamic M88 and MCE 93 to the mix and while the 93 was noticeably smoother the FlashMic held up very well. Check the documentation and you'll see a big top end bump which does add a fair amount of zip and if this is going to misbehave it'll be in the direction of thin and edgy. But of course you're


not supposed to record an orchestra with it. Though I'm sure journalists probably will.

I suspect that most of these kits will be set up with AGC and in use it performed very well in the pumping department ie. very little audible pump but, if anything, it was too generous with the gain and I would prefer a little bit more safety margin. Battery life is quoted at eight hours and that seemed about right when using alkaline batteries. If you want to be sure not to miss the scoop of a lifetime then there's a pre-record buffer of up to ten seconds, but if you want to enable it you need to do so from the FlashMic manager software.

Interface

The FlashMic is quite useable without any software but it does come with a custom control panel (PC and Mac) that allows convenient naming of the device along with comprehensive control over the type of files you record and all the onboard settings. Here you can quickly design and name up to nine presets and fire them off to the connected FlashMic. This is a much quicker way of navigating the options than by flicking through the menu on the mic itself. And from here one click enables file transfers from the mic to the computer. My FlashMic was very nearly the 'one for the shops' although I had some software problems with MPEG BWAV headers. By the time you read this I expect it will be tickety boo.

Final Thoughts

To be honest, I didn't want to like the FlashMic – I kind of like inputs, buttons, and settings where I feel like I'm getting more for my money – but I have been won over. This is a great tool because of its simplicity. Many people want to reliably capture speech with the minimum of fuss but in decent quality and, for them, extra facilities are a negative not a positive. For them this is the tool for the job – hats off to HHB. 

INFORMATION

Ⓜ HHB Communications FlashMic £699+ VAT; \$1399 + Tax.

HHB Communications (UK).

☎ +44 (0)20 8962 5000.

🌐 www.hhb.co.uk

US Distributor: Sennheiser.

☎ +1 860 434 9190.

🌐 www.sennheiserusa.com/newsite/

FlashMic

The world's first digital recording microphone



Forget tapes, discs, cards and cables.

Just pick up a FlashMic and go.

Combining a broadcast-quality Flash recorder with a Sennheiser mic capsule, HHB's new FlashMic is perfect for interviewing, journalism and any type of voice recording.

One button press is all it takes to start recording in either linear or MPEG 2 formats. 1GB of built-in memory stores a massive 18 hours/999 tracks of recordings and it's easy and quick to transfer files for editing or onward transmission via FlashMic's built-in USB interface.

Power comes from standard AA batteries and the included FlashMic Manager software makes it easy for individual users or news organisations to configure single or multiple FlashMics for particular applications and file naming protocols.

FlashMic is all you need for broadcast-quality recording.

So just pick up a FlashMic and go.



HHB Communications Ltd

T: +44 (0)20 8962 5000 E: sales@hhb.co.uk

In the USA and Latin America:

Sennheiser Electronic Corporation

T: 860 434 9190 E: HHBSales@sennheiserusa.com

In Canada: HHB Communications Canada Ltd

T: 416 867 9000 E: sales@hhbcanada.com

www.flashmic.info

