

Interview: Immersive Conversation with Alt-Folk Artist Dick Prall (A.K.A DICKIE)

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Vanguard Audio Labs

V14

A homage to an Austrian classic with multiple voices and advanced tone shaping

REVIEW BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Last year in our May 2024 issue, I had the pleasure of reviewing the Vanguard Audio Labs V24, a no-expense-spared, modern take on the mythic and rare AKG C24—a stereo version of the equally legendary AKG C12. Now just shy of a year later, we get to check out the company's similar take on the C12 as we introduce the Vanguard Audio Labs V14.

A Look Back

The story of the famed AKG C12 is a well-told tale. This now iconic Austrian tube condenser, built around the original AKG CK12 capsule, was released in 1953 and featured nine selectable polar pattern options on a remote external box. As learned last May, the stereo C24, while utilizing dual C12 capsules, altered its tube circuit to a cathode-bias design similar to the one used in the Telefunken ELA M 251 (a CK12-based mic made by AKG for Telefunken).

Like the Vanguard Audio Labs V24, all of the above contributes to the new V14, which, while certainly C12-inspired, is actually better thought of as a mono variation of the V24 rather than a copy or clone of the C12.

Once again, Vanguard has used the original C12 design as its foundation but has updated it with modern design features, upgraded components, and the implementation of a new patent pending for variable tube voltage circuit.



Meet the V14

The V14 is constructed similarly to the V24 and earlier Vanguard models, such as the company's V13 tube condenser, with which it shares a body. The overseas-made precision-machined stainless steel body measures 8.2" (l) x 2.05" (d) and weighs 1.2 lbs. Like the V24, it is stripped of its burgundy-wine finish and hand-polished to a #4 grained finish. It then gets its badge and is laser engraved in-house.

On the Inside

The mic's internal bracing is machined locally in California, and the hand-populated and soldered circuit is propagated at Vanguard HQ with audiophile-grade components, such as PRP resistors, from around the world (USA, Germany, Japan, France and elsewhere). Most of these are cryogenically treated to increase stability and longevity and also helps to lower the noise floor.

Like the V24, the V14 uses a NOS GE 5-star 6072 tube, and the company kindly includes a second spare Electro-Harmonix 12AY7/6072. The transformer is a Cinemag T14, based on the vintage Haufe T14 transformer used in the original C12, C24 and 251. Vanguard says that the larger core of the Cinemag T14 has the benefit of allowing a better, extended, low-end response than the older Haufe T14—more specifically, the larger core allows for

more low frequency amplitude before the core starts saturating.

Australian (Not Austrian) Capsule

Also, like the V24, the Vanguard V12 uses an Australian-made BeesNeez CK12 Capsule with a 1.04" diaphragm. This capsule is a modern, painstaking recreation of the original brass, edge-terminated AKG CK12 capsule design. It is housed behind an open mesh grill designed to minimize reflections.





Vanguard Audio Labs V14

Choose Your Voice

One of the highlights of the V24 was its two-position voice switch, which offered a choice between the original sparkly, airy C12 flavor or, by engaging the capacitor-based high-frequency filtering originally found on the Ela M 251 which was designed to tone down the mic's brightness and impart a gentler top-end signature. The C12 and 251 voicing options remain, while V14 adds a third "ribbon-mic" voicing that tames the high-end further.



Power and Patterns

The V14 ships with a robust 7.5" (d) x 3" (h) x 4.75" (w), 6 lbs. stainless steel power supply. The thick, heavy enclosure is machined stem to stern in eastern Pennsylvania. A 0.5" overhang protects the switches and I/O.

A power switch and IEC socket live on the back, with a 7-pin and 3-pin XLR I/O on the front.

Also on the front are two red aluminum 9-position switches. The bottom switch changes the mic's polar patterns from omni to cardioid to Fig-8, with several steps in between that cover hypercardioid and supercardioid positions.

The second switch controls the patent-pending Variable Voltage Selector. This boosts or starves the input voltage to the tube, affecting the sound of the mic by altering the tube's inherent harmonic distortion. The 1 O'clock / O' position represents a normal high operating level, while the 12 O'clock

/ -0.4 indicates a normal low operating level. Turning the switch clockwise increases the voltage, into increased transformer drive, while turning it counterclockwise reduces the tube up to a full -12dB. You will find a handy chart for each setting engraved on the underside of the power supply, or you can simply turn the dial until you find your sound.



The Kit

The V14 comes in a high-quality Pelican-style case made in California by SKB with a thick multi-pin Neutrik+TMB cable, a wooden mic storage box, a satin bag and one of the company's high-end C-style shock mounts.

Sound and Use

I'm not trying to intentionally skimp on this part, but every sonic observation I made when reviewing the Vanguard V24 remains here, especially in the realm of the C12 and 251 families of sound. Is this a 1:1 match to vintage or even modern specimens of each? While I cannot empirically say yes or no, in my experience, both voicings are easily in the ballpark.

I will also say the same about the added ribbon voicing—no, this does not sound exactly like any of my high-end ribbon mics; however, this mode tames the top end enough to give the V14 a more neutral, smooth, controlled, slightly rolled-off high-end response that can sound quite "vintage" toned and ribbon-esque without being overly dark or heavy-handed.

What is more important to me in a mic of this quality is that, like its stereo sibling, the V14 offers a full and clear capture that sounds good regardless of distance. I often get asked the difference between inexpensive entry-level mics and their boutique and vintage cousins, and more so than their close-up, on-axis sound. The key is

that they exhibit a consistent sound whether right up in the grill or multiple feet away. The V14 shines in this arena with a solid sound and imaging that never collapses.

Versatility and Vibe

In addition to the C12, 251 and "ribbon" voicing options, the V14 pulls ahead of the "me-too" clone pack thanks to its Variable-Voltage Tube Control. The practice of tube exciting and starving has existed in guitar amps for decades, and even some tube-based mic pres, but this is the first time I have seen it implemented in a microphone.

The thing to note here is that its effect, while noticeable, is subtle—if you are hoping for "broken" sounding overdrive, this is not that. Its sonic effect also manifests more in a level change and, more importantly, the feel and reaction of what's being recorded. The effects will vary based on the source and its level—drums, acoustic guitar or voice can all react differently even on the same settings. You can use it to chill out and subtly pull back an aggressive drum kit, or add a hint of body to an acoustic or tailor the response of vocal in either direction.

A final reason why it is so hard to nail down the effect of the variable voltage is the broad interactions of the polar pattern choice, the high-frequency filter, and the variable voltage, all of which give the V14 dozens of possible sonic outcomes. As such, this is a mic where, if possible, I would recommend keeping the power supply close at hand so you can expertly dial in the tone as the performer plays.

Wrap Up

As you may recall, saying I was impressed with the stereo V24 would be a significant understatement. That said, the V14 might be an even better microphone, primarily because stereo mics are a specialized item for specific use cases.

The Vanguard Audio Labs V14 ticks a lot of boxes. It offers not one but three classic vintage flavors with zero compromise. It is built to exacting standards, and best of all, it injects a fresh new take on tone shaping that is versatile yet never strays far from the core C12, 251 family of sound.

No, the V14 is not cheap, It is one of those serious investment pieces that can cover a lot of ground for many years to come. ➔

Output Impedance:	200Ω
Max SPL:	approx. 126dB @ 0.5% THD (normal mode)
Frequency Response:	20 Hz–20 kHz
Equivalent Noise Level:	≤13dBA (A-weighted)
S/N Ratio:	≥81dB (Ref. 1Pa A-weighted)
Sensitivity:	-41dB @ 1kHz (9mV/Pa)

Price: \$4,999
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