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Countryman I2 Instrument Microphone

By: Mark Johnson



Countryman Associates is the quintessential pro audio family business. Its products are designed, built, and tested in its Menlo Park, California-based facility. The beginnings of the company are rooted to the Northern California connection to the Grateful Dead's legendary Wall of Sound system. The Dead's quest for high-quality live sound was well-known within the industry (among professionals and fans alike), and other iconic names and organizations as well have been associated with the Dead's "long, strange trip" in search of high-performance sound systems. In the early '70s, Carl Countryman designed and built the piano pickup system used by the Dead's piano player, Keith Godchaux. In the words of Owsley "Bear" Stanley, the Dead's soundman, the pickup system produced "truly brilliant" sound.

Countryman became the founder, president, and chief engineer of Countryman Associates, Inc., with one of the initial products being the Type 85 direct box, which was developed in 1985. (The Type 10 DI was introduced in 2010. Anyone beginning to see a trend?) The Type 85 is considered a classic but is still in demand as one of the most durable and good-sounding DIs on the market. Countryman also developed the E6 earset microphone, which was nominated for a TEC award in 2002. The E6 was at the forefront of the whole market niche of ear and head-worn microphones. At a time when technology becomes obsolete or out of vogue relatively quickly, these two products have remained relevant and strong in their respective markets.

Today, Carl's son, Chris, is president of the company. Over the years, Countryman has kept its product line manageable and continued to focus on its strengths. And while Countryman Associates is still a relatively small family business, it continues to have a big impact in the pro audio world. Basically, the company specializes in designing and manufacturing two seemingly disparate products: direct boxes and ultra-miniature microphones. So, following the age old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," the company offers a few variations on the theme, with both its DIs and mics. Overall, its product line is limited to 12 ultra-miniature microphones (earsets, lavaliers, hanging mics, podium mics, and microphones for musical instrument pickup), and four direct box models. And, in all cases, the family resemblance is evident.

Countryman's latest product, the I2, is one of two instrument microphones in the model lineup. The I2 is available in



Countryman I2 instrument microphone with case, clips, and windscreen.

three versions: omnidirectional, cardioid, and hypercardioid. Aside from the difference in pickup patterns, the omni version features a frequency response of 20Hz – 20kHz, while the directional models go from 50Hz – 20kHz. The directional mics are also capable of handling higher maximum SPL than their omni brethren. Like all microphones from Countryman, the I2 is available with two sensitivity options: high gain or standard gain. The high-gain version has a maximum SPL of 130dB, while the standard, or low-gain,

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Clockwise from top: Saxophone/horn mount, black clip, violin/viola mount, windscreen, cello/bass mount, white clip, flute mount. Center: Acoustic guitar mount.

version is capable of handling sources of greater than 150dB. The review kit provided to me included a high-gain hypercardioid mic terminated to an XLR connector, although other termination options are available if you plan on using the mic with a specific wireless system.

The I2 requires 6V – 50V for phantom powering. If the voltage applied is less than 24V, the SPL at which the mic will overload (ordinarily 150dB) will be reduced.

Form follows function

With its workmanlike appearance, the I2 is all business. The mic is basically a small rectangular block that is slightly less than 1/4" wide by about 1/2" long and about 1/8" deep with a strain relief and cable coming out of the end. The front is clearly labeled "Front." (There is a silver grille on the front and a black grille on the back). There is also a capital "H" (presumably for high gain) as well as "Hyper," denoting the mic's pickup pattern. The back is labeled—you got it—"Back." The strain relief on the mic helps to secure a 10'-long, 2mm cable terminated to a long Neutrik XLR connector that has a small circuit board with electronic components mounted on it and nestled inside. The mic comes in a zippered case. It's not quite hard shell, but offers a fair amount of protection. Hook-and-loop and elastic straps secure the mic in the case. A net pouch in the lid of the case contains clear plastic pockets for accessories. The I2 comes with the case, foam windscreen, and basic clip, which allows the mic to be attached in different positions.

The basic kit runs \$349, which includes the mic, foam windscreen, and two clips packaged in the semi-hard-shell case.

Accessories galore

Speaking of accessories, there are a lot of them. They include an instrument mount for attaching to saxophones, brass, and other instruments (\$49); viola and violin mount (\$35); acoustic bass and cello mount (\$49); flute mount (\$16); acoustic guitar mount (\$16); and a stage mount (\$22.23) for using the I2 as a boundary mic. The foam windscreen is \$11.09. It kind of makes one feel like Bubba from *Forrest Gump*, listing all the multiple accessories available.

In addition, Countryman provides documentation that shows how to use the mic for different applications. In the world of pro audio, it is commonplace to want to use a specific product for a specific situation; however, people will almost always create applications that were not considered when the product was designed. Having guidelines for various applications will help those looking for a solution for a particular problem or situation. All the provided info serves as a helpful starting point for more creative applications of the microphone.

The toughest decision is where to try it first. Most of my experience with Countryman mics is with the E6; designed as an earset mic, it can be used in many different situations, from presentations to singers. I've always had success with it no matter the situation. So I was looking forward to trying out the I2.

Big sound, small mic

Initially, I listened to the mic by itself. Then, for reference, I compared the I2 to another well-regarded miniature mic. Right away, one thing I noticed was the solid low-frequency response of the I2. Overall, the response is pretty flat, though the mic does exhibit a slight rise centered around 10kHz.

The mic was used on an acoustic guitar during a rehearsal, and then on an alto saxophone for a performance. On the guitar, one performance feature that was noted was the extended high end, with a colleague of mine mentioning the "air" in the sound, though not finding it to be harsh or brittle in any way. For the saxophone, the mount allowed easy attachment to the sax, as well as the ability to aim the mic for optimal pickup, providing the flexibility to aim either at the bell of the sax or at the keys, depending on the sound desired. The mount for the sax also incorporates a clever cable-management system. The foam windscreen was called into action for the saxophone application. The little red dot on the foam ball windscreen helps in orienting the mic properly (since the microphone does have a fairly directional pickup pattern, and the wind-

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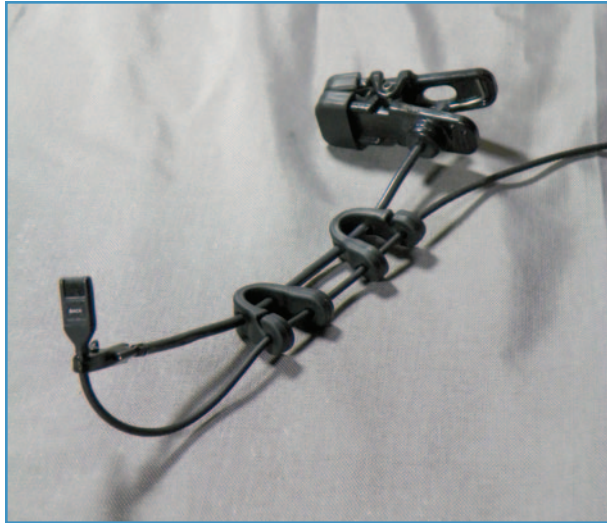


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Countryman I2 attached to saxophone/horn mount. Note cable-management system.



The front of a high-gain, hypercardioid version.

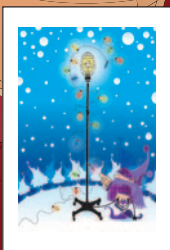
screen hides the orientation of the mic). Speaking of the directional pickup pattern, the I2's tight hypercardioid pattern provided excellent gain before feedback. Even though the sax player was in close proximity to the loudspeaker system, the I2 provided for more than enough gain.

In order to succeed as a mic for all reasons, the mic has to be neutral-sounding, so it can reproduce the character of the designated instrument, whatever it might be. The I2 sports a utilitarian appearance and outstanding performance. The latter was impressive in both applications, successfully capturing the nuances of both instruments. The solid performance of the mic is such that it makes you want to try out the I2 on other potential applications.

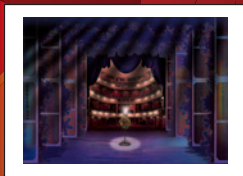
Other than the sound quality, another thing the I2 has going for it is its size. Coupled with the bazillion available accessory-mounting solutions, you could use it in just about

any conceivable application, which I guess is the point. The small size, well-engineered and precise pickup pattern, and mounting options allow for use in tight spaces such as orchestra pits and nightclub stages, or applications when you would like the mic to be visually unobtrusive, like film or video production work. The precise pickup pattern allows the mic to be used for stereo miking techniques such as M-S or X-Y.

The I2 follows what seems to be the pattern for products developed by Countryman—well-thought-out and engineered for its intended application. And while both the Type 85 DI and the E6 could arguably be called classic products, they are still eminently viable today. It appears that the I2 will be following in their footsteps: It's rugged, good sounding, and cost-effective. 📶



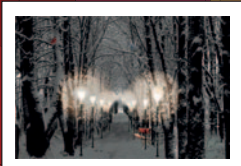
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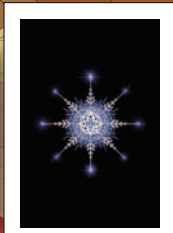
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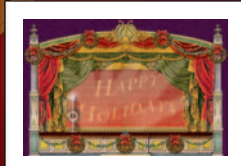
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