The Usual Disclaimer:

I attend these trade shows both to hang out with old friends and to find new and interesting things that I might review for a publication in the future. My area of interest is primarily in recording equipment and accessories, so if you’re looking for something that’s not here, either it wasn’t on display, I didn’t see it, I saw it and I wasn’t curious enough about it to spend much time at the booth, or I knew it has been around for a while and has been adequately covered in the magazines and web sites. Now, on to the show.

Microphones and Mic Stuff

**KEL Audio**

I’m going to start off by violating one of my show report principles and report on something that isn’t brand new. There are so many microphones on the market today that I don’t spend a lot of time hunting for the holy grail. KEL Audio has been on the scene for a few years now and most of the popular magazines have carried a review of at least one of their models. I’ve never heard a KEL mic, and with an opportunity only to listen over headphones on the show floor, I still can’t say I’ve heard one, but I did take some time to chat with Kelly Dueck, the Kel of KEL Audio.

KEL offers line of very modestly priced condenser mics. Like all the budget priced condenser mics, these are assembled in China and use Chinese-built capsules. His philosophy is that the Chinese factories are capable of making decent capsules today, and that by marrying them to electronics with a straightforward design and high quality components, it’s possible to produce well controlled and consistent products. Open one up and you’ll find Wima capacitors, for example.

Kelly hasn’t attempted to make the $200 U-47 clone, but rather, each of his mics is designed to have its own sound, and has a range of applications for which it sounds best. While just about every mic manufacturer does this, it was Blue Microphones ten or so years ago (when we first started seeing sub-$1000 condenser mics) who successfully capitalized on the concept and each of their sometimes radical-appearing mics got a reputation for working particularly well for something. While KEL’s designs aren’t as varied or radical as some of Blue’s,
he recognizes that people now looking at mics for unique applications – a vocal mic, a drum overhead mic, a mandolin mic – and he’s tailored the frequency and polar response so that he can recommend a specific mic for a specific purpose. One thing that keeps the price down is that KEL doesn’t (yet, anyway) make a multi-pattern mic. They’re all cardioids, but differ in their polar and frequency response.

The newest mic in the line is the HM-3C, a large format condenser mic with a ¾” diaphragm with a very slight but smooth high frequency rise starting around 4 kHz. There’s also a rise in the rear (180° off axis) response in the 4-10 kHz range, so when using it for, say, a drum overhead, you’ll need to watch reflections off the ceiling. I suspect that it might work well for tracking a guitar-playing vocalist. Another model that’s been around for a while and seems to be gaining some friends among engineers like me who record acoustic string instruments is the HM-2D. Its frequency response is very flat between 100 Hz and 10 kHz with a fairly steep rolloff at the top end, with a hypercardioid polar response.

MXL
MXL is no stranger in the microphone business. In the early days of overly bright Chinese mics, MXL bucked the “put our name on it and we’ll sell it in the US” trend, designing their mics in California, having them built in China to their design and specifications, and making a major push toward quality control. Until recently, all of their mics have been condensers, but now they’ve added ribbon designs to their product line. The R44 is a budget-priced model while the R77 is designed to approach the classic RCA 77 mic in style and performance. Also new is the V89, a general purpose condenser mic with notably low noise performance.

Magneto Audio Labs
The VariΩhm (Vair-Ohm for the Greek-challenged) is the brainchild of Bob Reardon, an engineer whose regular business is distributing several audio-related products including Rain Computers. The VairΩhm is a passive box that goes between a mic and preamp and offers a switch-selectable load impedance for the mic, ranging between 50 and 2400 ohms. The load presented to a
microphone can affect more than just its output level, and this is one of the things that, with a given mic, makes one preamp sound different from another.

Bob says that the VariΩhm isn’t simply a switch that puts a fixed resistance across the mic, but it involves inductors as well to simulate the complex impedance of a transformer (but neither is it a tapped transformer as found on a couple of high end mic preamps). The input impedance of the preamp to which it’s connected will, of course, affect the actual load on the mic, but what the VariΩhm brings to the recording chain is a convenient way to change the sound of the mic-preamp combination in a way that may prove helpful for a particular application. It’s more applicable, I think, to the tabletop studio where the mic preamp is part of a computer audio interface, than to those who use boutique mic preamps. While it doesn’t supply phantom power, it does pass it from the preamp to the mic. http://www.magnetoaudiolabs.com/

**Microphome**

No, that’s not a typo. Microphome is a cleaner/disinfectant/deodorizer specifically designed for cleaning microphone grills. Performers don’t like singing into a “stinky” mic but it’s the rare sound company, open stage, or karaoke club that takes the time to clean their mics. Some may have thought about it, but simply didn’t know how to do it without endangering the mic. Microphome is a fast-drying foam based cleaner and disinfectant that, when used as instructed, won’t damage the mic capsule, leaves the grill germ-free, and rather than smell medicinal, has a faint cherry odor which dissipates quickly.

For a quick maintenance clean-up, all it takes is a quick shot of foam on a cloth wiped over the grill. You can carry a bottle with you and spruce up the mic before you start your set. For mics that haven’t been cleaned in years, Microphone also offers a complete kit which includes a bottle of the cleaner, a scrubbing brush, nylon scouring pad, and microfiber wiping cloth packed in a zippered microphone style bag. http://www.microphome.org/

**DAW Control Surface**

When most of us think of a DAW accessory control surface, we think of something patterned after the granddaddy, the Mackie HUI – a box with faders, rotary encoders, buttons, and often a display that (usually) communicates with the computer via MIDI. The RedLeaf TS Control-32 is a different approach,
simpler but still elegant. It's a 32" LCD touch-screen monitor that replaces (or supplements) the computer's monitor and mouse. It's built into a tabletop case designed to look and feel very much like a mixing console.

Because it uses standard interfaces (VGA/HDMI and mouse) to the computer, no special drivers or configuration files are necessary to use it with any DAW. Anything you can do on screen with a mouse, you can do with the RedLeaf TS Control-32. When mixing, you'll usually have a console view displayed, so you can just touch a fader with your finger and drag it. Touch a pan knob and move it. Open a plug-in and you can operate its controls by touching them. The limitation, of course, is that like a mouse, you can only point at one thing at a time, so you can't touch two faders and do a crossfade. For editing, you can get higher touch resolution by using a stylus rather than a finger. And of course you don't lose the keyboard for nudging, and entering alphanumeric data. When used with a computer that supports two monitors, I can envision leaving one window, perhaps a file browser or control panel for a multi-channel I/O interface, open on one monitor and the main DAW screen open on the Control-32. More than once I've said that if I had a monitor as large as my console, I could finally be comfortable working in the DAW environment. Maybe this is the solution I've been looking for.

http://dawtouch.com

Pocket-Sized Recorders

**Sony PCM-M10**

Following in the footsteps of the PCM-D1 and –D50 pocket recorders (for those with big coats), the PCM-M10 is Sony's least expensive and smallest pocket recorder, more oriented toward musicians and casual recording than professional applications, but it's still very much Sony. The PCM-M10 will fit in a shirt pocket with no protruding microphones, knobs, or buttons. It records directly in MP3 format as well as PCM up to 24-bit 96 kHz, has a built-in speaker, on-the-fly index marking, and comes with a wired remote control. It's quite similar in operation to the PCM-D50, but the menu has been reworked for easier access.
The built-in stereo mics are described as “more omnidirectional” than the X-Y pair on the D1 and D50, I’m thinking that in practice they’ll be a bit like a Jeklin Disk arrangement. Musicians using it for practice will appreciate the variable speed function. Like the other models, the M10 has 4 GB of memory built in but rather than a slot of the less popular Sony Memory Stick format, it accepts both Memory Stick and MicroSD external memory. Expect it around October, in time for Christmas for sure. They had production prototypes at the show, so there’s no official web site link yet. This one may be temporary: 
http://tinyurl.com/kneqd5

**Olympus LS-11**
Olympus is better known for cameras and pocket voice recorders, but last year they entered the music recording market with the tiny LS-10. The LS-11 is this year’s model (though the LS-10 is still being offered at this time), very similar to its predecessor. Like the –10, the –11 offers up to 96 kHz 24-bit WAV recording as well as MP3 and WMA formats. There’s 8 GB of built-in memory plus a slot for an SD or SDHC memory card. Battery life is claimed to be up to 23 hours, more than any other recorder of its type that I know of.

**Some Just Plain Cool Music Stuff**

*BreezeSong JamHub Rehearsal System*

I had some music friends in college who liked to have large jam sessions in their small apartment. They plugged their keyboards, guitars, bass, and drum triggers into a mixer, and with a splitter for their headphones, could jam into the night without bothering the neighbors. The JamHub takes that concept a giant step farther. There are three models, the BedRoom, GreenRoom, and TourBus, differing in the number of “workstations” as well as recording options.

Each player’s group has an XLR mic input and two ¼” input jacks for an instrument pickup or mono or stereo instrument (keyboard or such), and a headphone output. There’s also a set of controls so that he can add as much of
the other musicians’ inputs as he wants to hear in his headphones. There’s a common input that goes to all of the workstations for something like a guide track, metronome, or if you just want to jam to a CD. What about the drummer who can’t get knee-to-knee with the rest of the jamming crew? There’s a SoleMix remote that provides the full JamHub set of controls at the end of a cable.

In addition, there’s a stereo mix output for recording, or, if you insist, a set of speakers. The GreenRoom has a USB interface for recording direct to a computer, and the TourBus has a built-in flash memory recorder. There’s even an effect processor (everyone has to share the same effect) with a send level for each workstation. There’s nothing really new here, just a very well integrated package of existing mixer technology laid out in a way that musicians can easily understand how to use it. Any parent who has a teen-ager in a band should put a JamHub at the top of your Christmas list. 
http://www.jamhub.com/

Spinstigator

Yet another guitar cable, but with a twist. Or rather, without a twist. The Spinstigator has a slip ring assembly a couple of feet from the guitar end of the cable that keeps the cable from getting tangled no matter how you twist it up. If you’re not familiar with the term, a slip ring is a rotating electrical contact assembly. They’re commonly found in things like radar antennas that are constantly spinning around, and the alternator in your car uses a form of slip ring assembly. Good ones don’t introduce any noise, and that’s the Spinstigator’s claim to fame. They use a high grade precision ball bearing mercury pool slip ring assembly with less than 1 milliohm of contact resistance, and the assembly is fully shielded so as not to compromise the EMI performance of the cable. This would be an excellent stocking stuffer for the guitarist who’s also getting a trampoline.
http://www.spinstigator.com/

Headway EDB-1 Direct Box (DI)
I’ve long been a fan of the L.R.Baggs Para Acoustic DI for its flexibility in getting the tone (and the problems) out of an acoustic guitar with a pickup. The Headway
EDB-1 seems to be in the same spirit as the Baggs with five bands of equalization plus a variable-Q notch filter. In addition to a high impedance pickup, it also has a stereo input and an XLR mic input with phantom power which can be blended with the instrument input. The output is mono, so you’ll get a mix of the two channels if you’re using a stereo source, or a mono blend of pickup and mic. It feels solid as a brick and weighs about as much, which, in my book, is a good thing.


Picks

What would a NAMM show be without some interesting guitar picks? Wheatware was showing what’s probably the first biodegradable pick, made from a wheat resin. When they break or wear out, put ‘em on your compost pile and they’ll degrade into fertilizer in about 3 months. You could probably even eat one for breakfast (but don’t try this at home, kids). They know their picks, too, evidenced by the fact that they’re available in a range of thicknesses. Wheatware also has drum sticks made from the same material.


The Wrapup

This was the smallest NAMM show in recent history, but with few exhibitors outside the main room, the aisles still appeared to be fairly busy. Word around the show was that this one was aimed toward the mom-and-pop music stores who don’t travel to Anaheim for the main show in January. Many of the major exhibitors were conspicuous by their absence, and I saw only one company displaying real pianos. Still, it’s good to see some innovative products and clever applications. As long as people are creating music, there will be new ways to help them.