USB
Blue Yeti Pro
$249.99 MSRP, $249 street
bluemic.com

They're not just for podcasting: USB mics are also excellent mobile-recording tools—you don't have to haul a mic, mic preamp, and audio interface just to record your band rehearsal. They can also serve as desktop mics and headphone interfaces for VOIP applications.

But are they "pro"? Some look and feel cheap, offer only 44.1/48kHz sample rates, and top out at 16-bit resolution. That's fine for low-res podcasts, but you can do better: Blue's Yeti Pro USB mic offers sample rates up to 192kHz with 24-bit resolution. System requirements are reasonable (USB 2.0 port, 256MB RAM, Windows 7/Vista/XP Home Edition or Professional, or Mac OSX 10.6.4 or later), and both installation and operation are a snap.

The Yeti Pro's build quality and heft inspires confidence. It weighs 1.2 lbs, not counting the 2.2-lb. removable yoke-style desktop stand (included). A standard mic stand mount is built into the mic's base. The Yeti Pro retains the original Yeti's three-14mm-capsule design; capsules can be combined to provide four polar patterns—omni, cardioid, figure-8, and X/Y stereo. Multiple patterns are rare in USB mics, but this feature really contributes to Yeti Pro's versatility. In particular, stereo recording helps separate Yeti Pro from the pack.

In addition to its USB 2.0 out, Yeti has a 5-pin XLR output. A short XLR "Y" cable breaks this into color-coded left and right 3-pin XLR outputs; selecting a mono pattern mults the signal to both outs. (Note that the analog configuration requires phantom power.) There's no pad switch, but the 120dB SPL rating (0.5% THD @ 1kHz) means you can use Yeti as a room mic for your guitar amp or drum kit with little risk of overload. However, it's probably not suitable for close-miking a kick drum.

The overall sound quality is very pleasing—there's a slight peak near 4kHz in most modes, a few dB of rolloff in the highs above 10kHz, and a somewhat steeper rolloff below 200Hz that minimizes boominess with close-miked vocals.

Few USB mics include regular XLR outs, but this option significantly increases the mic's versatility and interfacing possibilities. Instead of being a specialist mic for podcasting duties (note that the digital headphone volume control and mute button on the mic's front, usable only in USB mode, are ideal for podcasting), the Blue Yeti Pro is a real workhorse that you'll find useful in the studio and on your mobile recording adventures. Most importantly, the sound quality is so good that it sets new standards for this type of microphone.

Alternatives: Studio Projects LSM, MXL Trio, sE Electronics USB2200a