

# Send chills up your microphone with an Icicle

April 9 2009, By Craig Crossman

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One of the really great computer applications is the ability to record audio and save it to a digital file. One of the more interesting recording applications these days are podcasts. Making a podcast is fairly straightforward. Besides the computer, all you basically need is the recording software and a microphone. As far as the recording software is concerned, deciding what program to use can be somewhat daunting in that there are so many titles available from which to choose.

Usually the choice gets narrowed down to a few titles and that's based upon the number of features you want and the price. There are free ones all the way up to versions costing hundreds of dollars. And pretty much like their counterparts, you get what you pay for it. Please understand that I'm not saying the free or low cost recording products aren't worthwhile because many of them are. You're just going to have to make the effort and try them out to see if the program will do what you want.

What I'd like to focus on here is the microphone you'll be using to make the podcast. The microphone you choose can literally make or break the podcast. No one really wants to listen to what you have to say if it sounds like you're talking from a bathroom. That's the sound of the reverberating echo we all love to hear when we're singing in the shower. Technically it's called "reverb" and singers love to use it. But when it comes to the spoken word, it's something to be avoided unless your intention is to sound like something dark and spooky on a Halloween night.

When it comes to computer microphones that are designed to plug

directly into an available [USB port](#), typically these are general all-purpose omni-directional mics that will pick up anything that's close by. So when you use one of these microphones to record an interview for example, you're pretty much guaranteed you will get your voice, the interviewee, the sounds of you talking that are bouncing off the walls and floor (if there's no carpeting), any white noise generated by air movement and sundry other background sounds you may not have noticed before you made the recording. What you need is a unidirectional or cardioid mic. These professional-grade microphones are designed to only capture the sounds that are made within inches of the mic's pickup area. They typically use an industry-standard balanced, XLR connection. Balanced mics make excellent recordings because they have no line "hum." Unfortunately these mics typically aren't made to directly interface with a computer's USB port. Fortunately I've discovered a relatively new device that will let you connect any XLR mic to a USB port.

The Icicle from Blue Microphones is a small 4-inch tube with connections on each end. It's both a USB converter and mic preamp that renders the proper physical and electronic connection and makes the connection pretty much hassle-free. I tested out an Icicle with my AKG cardioid studio microphone that I have been using on my Computer America radio show. I tried using it on both a Windows PC and a Macintosh. It couldn't have been more easy. Without any additional software, I literally plugged one end of the Icicle into an available USB port using the included cable and plugged the mic into the Icicle's other end. On the Mac, I simply selected the Blue Icicle selection that appeared in the Sound Preference panel's input tab. I launched the recording software and spoke into the mic. The audio quality was simply glorious. The vocal recording had a presence unlike anything I've ever made using a computer microphone. Given the excellence of the cardioid mic I was using, it all made perfect sense. Using a common mic made for a computer doesn't stand a chance next to a professional-quality

model.

The Icicle has a few other nice little touches such as a 48V phantom power source that supports condenser mics that require power to operate. The Icicle also includes a gain control knob that lets you further refine the volume level and a power active light that makes the Icicle product lettering glow blue. It's a nice touch. If you want to make one of the best possible recording qualities on your PC, then this may be a really good way to go. The Icicle sells for \$59.99 and is available at the Blue Microphones website.

More information: [www.bluemic.com](http://www.bluemic.com)

(Craig Crossman is a national newspaper columnist writing about computers and technology. He also hosts the No. 1 daily national computer radio talk show, Computer America, heard on the Business TalkRadio Network and the Lifestyle TalkRadio Network -- Monday through Friday, 10 p.m.-midnight ET. For more information, visit his web site at [www.computeramerica.com](http://www.computeramerica.com) .)

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