

Monitor Quest -- ATC 10A-2

by Robert Learner, Nov 06 '06



The Monitor Quest continues! The British hyper-detailed studio monitors from [ATC](#) are up for review. How will the 10A-2 speakers stand against the likes of the Zu Tone and others? Keep reading to find out...

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OLD SALOON WISDOM: a shot puts a man's chin in the air and his feet on the ground. The ATC 10A-2s snap you to attention likewise -- you don't realize how veiled most speakers sound until you've heard a pair of these.

Tequila, fermented from the sap of the blue agave plant, comes in three styles: blanco, which is not aged -- it is a transparent fluid that yields the greatest insight into spicy fruitiness of the plant.

Reposado is barrel-aged less than a year, and is generally a bit mellower than blanco -- the natural sharpness of the agave is a bit softened by the wood. Anejo is aged more than a year and has scotch-like woody character and smoothness, yielding the least agave 'hit'.

All three styles have their complexities and merits. I'd put the previously reviewed [Zu Tone](#) toward the anejo end of the scale. Is it the most transparent and revealing speaker out there? No. Its presentation is smooth and forgiving, tending to sound good regardless of recording quality.

The ATC 10A-2, however, is pure blanco. It lets you know what the agave tastes like: you will hear exactly what is on the recording, likely more than you knew was there.

THE NUMBERS: the 10A-2 measures 11.4"H x 9"W x 12.2"D and weighs in at 34 pounds. The front baffle is wider than the rear of the speaker, creating a trapezoidal shape. An XLR connector for the signal and an IEC connector for power are on the back. MDF panels top and bottom are bolted to aluminum posts at the front left and right edges of the speakers, as well as the rear heat sink which serves the on-board amplifiers. These are an ATC designed 50 watt amp that feeds a Vifa-sourced 1" dome tweeter, and a 200 watt unit that drives ATCs proprietary 5" bass/mid driver. The cabinet feels exceptionally rigid and the sound is notable for its lack of coloration.

At \$4200, the 10A-2 costs over twice as much as the Zu Tone (\$1795), but as this number includes amplifiers, the price difference is somewhat mitigated. A quick, wholly not-definitive perusal of audio discussion boards indicates Tone owners commonly using amps in the 2K 'hood -- this puts the speakers in the same ballpark cost-wise.

A passive (sans amps) version of the 10A-2 lists for \$2900, but as much as I've had my heart set on a tube amp for the living room rig which is the target of my [monitor quest](#), I'd go active if I went the ATC route. The potential advantages of such a design, beyond the obvious synergy you'd expect between an amp and speaker made for each other, are fully exploited by ATC.

I used the 10A-2s on 28" stands in two locations/rigs: my relatively undamped living room, fed by a VTL 5.5 preamp, and in my acoustically treated basement, fed by a Meridian G68 processor. Placement in both rooms was 18" from the side walls and 3' from the front walls, with the speakers slightly toed in. As is my custom, I also placed the speakers in their likely real-world location: very close to the front wall. This favorably augmented the bass with little penalty to clarity elsewhere in the frequency spectrum. However, and this is true with all speakers, such placement impedes the illusion of soundstage depth. See my [bio](#) for more detail on the rigs.

PRESS PLAY: the first time is a shock of transparency and resolution. Is this too bright? No, there's body and balance -- it's just really, really clean-sounding. Awhile after your jaw's bounced back off the

floor, you begin to appreciate the soundstage; not only left to right stability, but depth, something I've come to associate with time-phased designs like the ATC. Images are palpable, shapely. Real instruments have curves; you see and hear them w/the ATC. In concert with the transparency and resolving abilities, the slightest quiver in a voice or fingertip brushing a string just hangs right in front of you. These ain't the cheap seats.

The slight vibrato, the raw edge of PJ Harvey's close-miked voice on 'Tecló' on *To Bring You My Love* also illuminates the 10A - 2s microdynamic capability. Many speakers that are otherwise detailed have what I think of as a 'lacquer effect'. Subtle texture is glossed over, not necessarily from a lack of resolution, but rather an inability to render the very brief, yet significant volume changes within a note or vocal moment. Some find this smoothness appealing, but as an immediacy fan, it ultimately bores me. The innate unpredictability within notes and vocals, essential to capturing the thrill of a performance, are preserved here.

There is, however, a slight, occasional hardness in the the otherwise sweet treble region that gains prominence as volume increases. Less than stellar recordings exacerbate the problem, moving to my acoustically treated basement mitigated it somewhat. Tubes upfront might be a good idea (wish I'd tried my VTL in the basement) and I'd love to hear them with the vinyl front end I hope to have in place by early '07. I'd be interested to hear the 20A-2, a step up the ATC food chain from the 10A-2 and featuring an upgraded tweeter.

More good news: large scale dynamics and bass response are exceptionally good for a speaker this size. The best rock album I've heard over the last couple of years, the monumental *Funeral* by The Arcade Fire, just cooks on the 10A-2s. They won't go as loud as the Zu Tones or fill up a room as large, but they do go subjectively deeper, conveying more bass power and definition. For a small speaker, the 10A-2s do a great job of tracking a bass guitar through its range and even rumbling your gut a bit. Though a sub would help, it's not a necessity if you want to rock.

Though I appreciate the smoothness and comfort of an anejo, at the moment anyway, I'm a blanco guy. I want to taste the plant at its purest, and if that's a bit rougher sometimes, so be it.

Bottom line: the resolution, transparency, dynamics, timbral accuracy and soundstaging depth these speakers are capable of is simply thrilling on good recordings. The music is palpable and alive -- prepare for transport.

Next up is a good reposado, the Amphion Ion.

Comments

Nice review. I own the active versions of these speakers and agree that they are extremely "clean-sounding". That was, in fact, the same adjective I used when I first heard them. (I run them with a Blue Circle 21.1 preamp with JAN 6922 tubes, and a Red Wine-modified Olive Symphony.)

In my room (12' x 25', opening into adjoining area), I've always found them rather bass-shy. The lack of low-end weight makes them sound lean and mid-rangey, and, in my opinion, detracts from their macro-dynamics, as much of the "slam" of a speaker comes from the bass. Still, augmented with a subwoofer and with the right music, these things can sound fantastic.

One other speaker that reminded me of the Active 10s was the Wilson Benesch ARC. These have the same cleanliness and hang-in-the-air imaging as the ATCs, but with a bit more bottem end. These should be added to your monitor list!

BTW, "Funeral" is an incredible album. My favorite recording of 2004/5.

Posted by: Anonymous at November 6, 2006 1:22 PM

Glad you liked the review. I'd definitely like to hear the ARCs, but at \$3500 or so, they're a bit out of the price range of the other monitors I've been hearing.

For their size/price, I found the bass pretty good, probably better than most. But yeah, I'd probably want a sub. I should be hearing the 20A-2s very soon -- I'll be interested to see what a 2x larger cabinet and somewhat bigger driver will produce bass-wise.

How do you like your Red Wine modded Olive? I have a RWA Squeezebox I'm pretty happy with. That Blue Circle is a nice preamp -- it's a bit different than the VTL I use.

Posted by: Robert Learner at November 6, 2006 1:49 PM

How wonder we will have a direct comparison between all the monitors. Audio scrutiny is just so difficult. Looking forward to it.

Posted by: Nuno Sousa at November 6, 2006 2:58 PM

I wrote the original comment.

I'd also be interested to hear your thoughts on the Active 20s, particularly with respect to bass. The measurements listed on the ATC website seem conservative.

I like the RWA-modded Olive a lot. It sounds good and the convenience can't be beat. I'm currently using it as a transport into a TacT 2.0S (DAC only; no room correction).

Posted by: ril at November 7, 2006 12:45 PM

So you find the Olive's digital output to yield better output via the TacT DAC now? Cool. Is the Olive jitter-prone w/o the mod?

Should have the 20s soon, and I'll let you know. And yeah, the ATC site does seem conservative -- the frequency response of the 20s is the same as that of the 10s, despite twice as much cabinet volume and a larger mid/bass driver. There's got to be more bottom end.

Posted by: Robert Learner at November 7, 2006 3:34 PM

Ril:

Just to follow up on your comments on ATC's "conservative measurements." ATC doesn't measure bass response as most manufacturers do. They take their speakers, and put them in the middle of their quite large warehouse well up from the ground and away from side wall reflections and measure the bass output. This removes bass reinforcement from the floor as well as side walls which dramatically reduces their measured out put.

In a "real listening room" their speakers measure much deeper than ATC's measurements - I owned passive 20s and obtained 6dB down at 31 Hz. That's remarkable bass from a small speaker. ATC rates the speaker as having bass down to 60 Hz, that's way off the mark from a real living room.

I find Robert's characterizations very close to my experiences, at least as regards transparency and clarity. With the wrong preamp or cabling the sound could be unrelenting. With a slightly warmish sounding preamp and cabling and th speaker would sound warmish. The 10s are pretty dyanamic, though not as dynamic as the 20s, which again aren't as dynamic as the 50s.

FWIW, my experience is that there is an optimal match between the speaker and the room size; a room that's a match for the 20s probably won't match as well for the 10s. And a room that fits the 10s might just be overloaded by bass with the 20s.

ATC make excellent speakers. Instead of the tequila metaphor, I'd say ATCs are like black coffee, when the recording is good you wouldn't want any sweetener or cream; when it's bad, maybe you'd want a bit of sugar and cream when the coffee bean (the recording) is poor.

Cheers,
Larry Cox

Posted by: Larry Cox at November 7, 2006 11:33 PM

Interesting info Larry. I'd suspected the ATCs were measured in a very large room w/o reinforcement. The 10s certainly went subjectively deeper than other speakers that are spec'd as going lower in my room.

I'll have to measure the 20s. As for unrelenting, supporting equipment aside, I'll be curious to see what impacted the upgraded tweeter brings the 20s over the 10s.

Posted by: Robert Learner at November 8, 2006 8:26 AM

As I happy owner of ATC 20A I can only fully confirm Larry's findings.

ATC actives needs (desperately) low impedance preamps with as little gain as possible, a technically perfect match would be anything under 100 ohm and between 0 and 6dB gain. It is hard to find such a valved pre. I fail to make them sing with Cary SLP98L but some of really good synergies include Pass Labs X2.5 (despite a highish imp) and especially Electrocompaniet 4.7 Mk2 (with a bias switch on the back) currently playing in my system.

Recommended cables IMHO are Van den Hul The Second or Hybrid Integration, for overall more transparency and deep bass, or Linn Silver for extraordinary sweetness and musicality and little less focus, depending on your source and how sophisticated it is.

This are some of best and most natural speakers ever produced and that needs to be fully exploited but a careful owner will be fully rewarded!

Cheers Gordan

Posted by: gordan at December 21, 2006 4:21 PM

Interesting info Gordan. I'll have to check into this. The preamp I might hook up w/the 20s is a VTL 5.5 -- a preamp I really like, but at a 195 ohm output impedance and 20db of gain doesn't fit your recs. Is your rec. experiential and/or are there technical reasons why such preamp would interface badly w/the amps and load the active 20 presents?

Best,

Bob

Posted by: Robert Learner at December 22, 2006 7:06 AM

JB also has had excellent results with an old Electrocompaniet, beating out many, many other preamps. He finally settled on YBA.

Posted by: Josh Ray [SonicFlare] at December 22, 2006 10:04 AM

Just got them back painted by a guy who does Steinway pianos. They look great, and I'll have them up in a couple of days w/my VTL. We'll see.

I'd love to be able to audition some of the other preamps.

Posted by: Robert learner at December 26, 2006 6:57 PM

Sweet review! Glad to hear the ion is next. I tried the vr1... it was fine, not too impressed and am considering the ion as an alternative for a small system.

Posted by: Chris at January 1, 2007 8:12 AM

Hey Chris,

Glad you liked the review. Ion review should be up any time now. It's a good option for a small system.

Posted by: Robert Learner at January 1, 2007 9:59 AM

Hello Robert,

I've been following ATC for years now, and I am looking for an upgrade from my Dynaudio Audience 42's, my amplification is a Cyrus Pre/Power combo of 60w potential, and the cd is a Meridian GO6. I was settled on the Dynaudio Focus 110's until I got a call out of the blue suggestion I give ATC SCM11's serious consideration, but everyone I talk to has a different opinion, some say Cyrus would be too 'lean' and not have enough 'drive' for them, others have had great results with 200 NAD amps. I don't believe in 'in-store' demos and home try-outs don't seem possible. Can you give me a 'real world' opinion on this? Thanks very much,
Kevin Thompson NW7.

Posted by: Kevin Thompson at December 15, 2007 6:10 AM

Hi Kevin,

I don't know the Cyrus combo, so I can't comment specifically on that. NADs tend to have a warmish, full-blooded sound as well as decent power reserves -- I'd think this would be a good match for the 11s. In any case, err on the side of more power rather than less, the ATCs can take it. Hope this helps.

-- Bob

Posted by: Anonymous at December 16, 2007 6:15 PM

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