

# The Rock nearfield monitor

Unity Audio has developed a line of studio speakers with the take-no-prisoners title of 'The Rock'. Phil Harding finds out if it takes a sledgehammer to the age-old problem of the 'perfect' nearfield monitor for the project studio and beyond... Or is it a bit of a brick?

## Price and Availability

£1,580 + VAT (€1,790) per pair  
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It seems hard to believe but, not so long ago, the concept of nearfield monitor speakers in professional recording studios did not exist. Back in the 1970s at London's Marquee Studios, I will never forget the day when Gus Dudgeon turned up with these tiny speakers from the US called Auratones. He said that we all had to hear them as they were going to revolutionise the way we work. Pretty quickly those speakers got the nickname 'horror-tones' as they were rather poor in terms of a true reference speaker. Next came the Yamaha NS10s in the 1980s, and finally the definition of a useable nearfield speaker that would sound the same, or similar, in most studios was born. I'm happy to say that I threw out my NS10s years ago and I'm regularly rather shocked to see people still using them in professional studios today.

It's a never-ending debate – what's the best nearfield speaker? And, which monitors do producers and engineers prefer? You rarely get the same choice twice because the reasons we choose what we do is very personal, especially if it's for our own project or home studio. This relationship between engineer and speaker; well, it's very personal.

I've been using JBL Control 1s with a passive SB 1 sub for over 20 years now and I've mixed many, many hits on them. However, most of those were also mixed with a wonderful set of Dynaudio M2s in the room to give me that full-frequency spectrum that engineers have taken for granted for years. For the past five years I've needed to upgrade from the JBLs and get some 'real-world' pro-studio quality reference speakers into my home set-up – and my search continues today.

So, enter The Rock, the first of a new range of monitors from Unity Audio. Better known as a distributor than a manufacturer (particularly of Thermionic Culture outboard), MD Kevin

Walker says "the time has now come to produce our own brand of professional active monitors".

The Rock's tech specs are impressive but even more so is the approach to the design. Studio designer/acoustician Kevin Van Green was commissioned to develop the birch plywood cabinet and corian front baffle. Then Tim Di Paravicini (of the acclaimed Esoteric Audio Research, or EAR) was brought in to design the discrete bi-polar 100W amplifier. German speaker manufacturer ELAC was chosen for the 6.5" woofer and 50kHz ribbon HF tweeter. So the pedigree, on paper, is pretty special to begin with.

The Rock's cabinet is sealed with no port. Sealed-cabinet speakers are quite an old idea but as we've seen from the survival and longevity of the NS10s, it can be popular and effective in achieving consistent results. There is a balanced XLR input and an unbalanced RCA gold-plated phono input, a volume control and no EQ controls – that's it!



see where it took me in terms of results and listening fatigue across extended working hours.

This is where the true speaker test begins. The process of listening to, setting up and adjusting individual instruments in a mix situation is entirely different to listening to material already mixed. I can only say that the experience after two days was both painless and enjoyable; and the result of testing that pop mix elsewhere on other systems passed with flying colours. The low-end material was easy to deal with and the tight, extended lows of the design made it easy to define what was going on down there. Mix decisions were easy for me right through the frequency range and the individual elements of the tracks.

Vocals seem to stand out and come forward on The Rocks without having to push them while panning and stereo placement of overdubs and their associated reverb effects was a joy and not a chore. Heed my advice, your ears will give out way before the speakers do and, for the size and cost of these units – that's quite a revelation. Some may consider the price expensive but for what you're getting at £1,580 per pair, I think this is good value.

Future Unity Audio manufacturing plans include The Boulder (big brother to The Rock): a three-way active monitor with a coaxial mid-range tweeter and four EAR amplifiers per unit. Unity assembles in the UK so that the turnaround from orders to manufacturing to delivery is lean and controllable.

Ultimately all pro engineers and producers will make their own selection of studio monitor, both at home and in their commercial studio work. Those selections are based on years of experience/success they've had with projects mixed on certain speakers and how speakers fit into their environment. Now, all that remains for me to do is find the ice for a pair of Rocks... ❄️

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- ▶ Active two-way nearfield monitor
- ▶ Freq Response: +/-3dB 50Hz-35kHz
- ▶ Speakers; ELAC Woofer 7"/180mm, ELAC 50kHz folded ribbon tweeter
- ▶ Bespoke true class A/B 100W EAR discrete bi-polar low-feedback amplifier
- ▶ SPL max @ 1m: 105dB
- ▶ Size: 290mm deep x 22mm wide x 325mm high
- ▶ Weight: 11.2kg per cabinet

## PROS AND CONS

### Pros

- ▶ Easy set-up straight out of the box
- ▶ Tight full-range sound
- ▶ Very good bass response that hits you straight away
- ▶ No need for a sub unit
- ▶ Big sound for relatively small units
- ▶ British design and manufactured
- ▶ Affordable price range
- ▶ Your ears will give up before The Rocks do

### Cons

- ▶ Too expensive for some users, maybe
- ▶ Very competitive market in which to gain a foothold
- ▶ First manufactured product by this company

