

Unity Audio, The Rock Review

November 30, 2011 in [Hardware](#), [Reviews](#)



For many years Unity Audio have distributed some of the finest bespoke audio gear; this includes many of the most lauded and popular nearfield monitors. So when in 2009 they announced that they would be doing their own nearfield monitor, it quickly started triggering audiophiles curiosities and "The Rock" quickly became a bit of a buzz word. So I thought it was about time that Audio Production Tips got in on the act and got a pair for review. It is typical for a nearfield monitor review to descend into a lot of technical jargon about what the unit is made from that quite frankly most engineers won't care too much about. All I will say on the matter as there is nothing cosmetically ugly or anything with a mass produced feel about The Rock.

First Impressions

So after plugging them in and a thirty minute warm up I was ready to analyse. My first thoughts were somewhat mixed. It was immediately clear how crystal clear and flat that they were, I just felt that I wanted more bass response and potentially a sub-woofer. I plugged in a pair of Fostex PM1's, Yamaha HS80's and Mackie HR824's to quickly A to B. At this point I want to apologise profusely to Kevin and all his team at Unity Audio for my initial skepticism. Not only was the bass end rolling off around the same frequencies (although the rocks roll of seemed less steep) it was also much, much, much flatter (did I mention it was flatter?).

There is a growing movement of late between top mixers to avoid ported speaker designs, this A to B comparison was the first real test I have performed personally on this issue and boy was was I shocked. It revealed to me that I was myself falling for an illusion of sub bass response from the increased power from the ports in the top end of the bass and low-mid.

I played a plethora of my favourite productions and I could hear nuances that my other monitors had failed to uncover. Things like hearing intimate details of a vocalists breathing and 'spittiness' that added some 'realness' to them. In some cases I could even hear some things that I'd never noticed before that could be perceived as mistakes or bad editing. For instance what I believe to be some squeaking of a chair and some spluttering just before the main acoustic guitar comes in on Pink Floyd's -Wish You Were Here. Also some uneven reverb trails on the main vocal probably caused from bad tape splicing on The Polices – Roxanne. With this in mind I skeptically decided to listen to some of my mixes that I thought were of commercial quality (some of which are commercially released too).

Mix Comparisons

So I closed my eyes before reluctantly playing the first mix I'd closed to analyse. I was pleasantly surprised the mixes still held up PHEW!

There were more than a few noticeable changes compared to how I perceived the mixes compared to the Fostex PM1's (that I had done the majority of these mixes on). Firstly and most importantly I could hear much more precisely the low mids in the mixes. It felt like there was 'space' and 'air' and definition between instruments where things had previously been muddy and blurred. This I believe is a direct result of the shorter decay of the bass frequencies over time of enclosed designs.

I also realised that I had a problem in the 3-4KHz area of previous mixes done on the PM1's. Guitars and Vocals at times were over-sharpened and brittle sounding. This could have become obvious because of superior crossover to the tweeters or again the adverse affect of a muddy low-mid meaning you can't hear presence as efficiently.

One of the more advantageous elements of The Rock is that they are really unsympathetic with bad edits, I could hear the odd occasion where there were some Elastic Audio artifacting and also one or two sloppy crossfades.

Mixing with The Rock

With this sort of flat response, clarity and precision is initially not the easiest or most immediately rewarding to mix on because you always feel that you have work hard to make the music really 'speak'.

However once you get used to this it becomes a real pleasure and in fact vastly improves the speed and accuracy at which you complete mixes. It also improves the mixes portability and you get the added bonus that when you transfer the music to a hi-fi or car stereo to test the benefits are immediately obvious and refreshing. In Unity Audio's specs for The Rock they describe it as 'Brutally Honest' this is an explanation I cannot compete with as it just describes this monitor so well.

I also found that when mixing I was able to EQ much faster, set HPF's at ease and sweeping through frequencies with an EQ felt much smoother across the whole mid/highs. I could also hear more accurately compressors releasing.

Although I still feel though that i'd like a sub woofer unit to turn on sporadically throughout the mixing process. However my perception is now that using a sub at all with cheaper ported speaker designs would cause some real disastrous problems in the perception of the high-mids and treble frequencies.

Conclusion

It is clear that The Rock has been designed with care and precision not with the purpose to sound "nice" but to be flat, smooth and transparent. For this reason my mixes have already become more portable and cleaner with only a week of using them. The Rock quite frankly has the smoothest and most versatile tweeter i've ever heard in a nearfield. Also believe me when I say after getting used to them they sound nicer than those nearfields tinged with a touch of the hi-fi market in mind.

To conclude not only has The Rock become a set monitors that I have fallen in love with and a tool I wouldn't want to be without on future mixes; it has also made me become painfully aware of the danger of some of the low-mid heavy ported nearfield designs and the effect that it has even into the high mids because of this smearing of low end frequencies over time.

I am also sure that for your money there is not even a competitor close to matching the performance of the rock especially as it is an active monitor. Quite frankly if you are setting up a studio or post-production suite then don't spend that extra money on fancy plug-ins reach straight for The Rocks and some decent room treatment and build from there up.

Pros

- Terrifically flat
- Enclosed unit so it has a great time domain response
- smooth, transparant and non-fatiguing tweeter
- As Unity Audio say themselves "Brutally Honest"
- Competitive price for similar standard monitors
- Active and simple to set up

Cons

- Even though a bargain compared to similar monitors, the price puts them into the range of the professional mixer and out of the reach of all but the most staunch hobbyists
- Because of the low range roll off you would still need the big brother "The Boulder" to be mastering grade

MONITOR RATING [9.5/10]