

When Are Monitors So Bad They're Good? Check Out Page 72

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New Old Sound McONE Active



A new name in monitor control debuts an impressive active design

Based in Tel Aviv, Israel, New Old Sound Ltd. is billed as a "Pro Audio gear design workshop." The company's founder and principal designer, Evgeny Klukin, was born in Siberia, and got his start at Waves developing hardware boxes like the legendary L2 Ultramaximizer and MaxxBCL.

NOS currently offers a small but growing lineup, with one microphone preamp and a selection of monitor controllers. There are two simple passive models: the McONE Standard, with an Alps volume pot, and the McONE Stepped, with a 23-position stepped rotary volume switch. The focus of this review is the McONE Active, an active desktop-style monitor controller created in conjunction with the company's US distributor, Warren Dent's ZenPro Audio.

Meet the McONE Active

The McONE Active is a 10.25" x 6" x 3.25" slanted desktop device that weighs just shy of 4 lbs. It is finished in a white/cream color with black lettering and is capped on each end by thick wood side panels. My studio furniture is finished in a similar wood grain look; sitting on my desk, the McONE Active looked like it was custom-made for my room... which didn't exactly break my heart!

The unit is a great balance of simplicity and features. It starts with a pair of 3-position rotary switches marked A / B / C. The top switch is labeled Input and the bottom control is the Cue Select. You can send one of three input sources—like your DAW output, a console's monitor mix, or a portable music player—to a pair of selected studio monitors, as well as to the Cue output, which in turn can feed a headphone distributor or a set of tracking room speakers. A similar 3-position Output switch selects one of three speaker outputs.

Four black latching pushbuttons are next, marked: Mono, Dim (-17 dB), Mute, and Sub (a stereo subwoofer out). Volume control is handled by a large black knob which uses a high quality Alps pot. It is super smooth yet nicely resistant and feels fantastic.

Next there is Headphone volume control for the headphone output (on the rear), a top mounted power button and lastly a red momentary push button for talkback, with a small built-in microphone located just above the button. When talkback is engaged, the unit automatically dims and the talkback signal is routed to the Cue outputs.

All inputs and outputs are located on the back in the form of balanced 1/4" TRS sockets. As per the controls above, there are 3 input pairs, 3 speaker output pairs, and a stereo Cue out. There are also a pair for the stereo Subwoofer output, and a single TRS headphone out. See the sidebar for a short list of relevant specs.

In use

The unit is simple to hook up, and operation is as straightforward as it gets. More importantly, the McONE Active sounds fantastic... which, for a monitor controller, means that it does not exhibit a noticeable sound at all!

Despite its simple "what you see is what you get" aesthetic, there are a few things to note. Each input and output is a one-at-a-time either/or choice. You cannot choose simultaneous inputs, nor can you have multiple sets of monitors active at the same time (with the notable exception being one set of speakers plus a subwoofer). The Sub out is a simple stereo out. There is no built-in bass management; all crossover and level setting needs to take place on your sub itself.

Headphones and talkback

The headphone output is clear and offers plenty of solid gain. However, the headphone signal is a mirror of the selected input, and you can't hear the talkback mic in it. That makes it suitable for the engineer in the control room but not for the talent in the tracking room.

From a workflow standpoint, The McONE Active is designed so the stereo Cue output feeds a headphone distribution amp or in-ear monitor setup, and the talkback mic does route to the Cue sends. This makes sense and I completely understand why it was designed this way. However, the headphone outs on every other monitor controller I have owned or reviewed usually include the talkback mic in the headphone out mix. I only mention this because it's not uncommon to track artists in the control room, and it can also be a bit disorienting to not hear one's own voice in the headphones when giving direction to the talent.

Speaking of (or better yet, into) the talkback mic, its gain is settable via a control on the bottom of the unit, and mine came preset at a level that I found both adequate and appropriate. More importantly, you have probably read reviews of monitor controllers and computer interfaces with built-in talkback mics where the reviewer usually uses kind words like "usable". In other words, most of them are functional, but often tinny-sounding, slightly distorted, and/or distant. The talkback mic on the McONE Active goes well beyond "usable"—it's the nicest, fullest, clearest, and warmest talkback mic I have ever heard!

Other considerations

I really enjoyed this unit and it did almost everything that I need a monitor controller to do. It also offered two features I wish more monitor controllers would offer. The extra switchable stereo sub output is a great addition, not found on many competing

units. I also love the fact that it has 3 sets of speaker outputs. When comparing monitor controllers at last year's AES Convention, I was surprised by how many typically only offer 2 sets of monitor outs... even high-dollar units. That's an odd choice when many studios have two sets of nearfields, or near and midfields, as well as a third set of real-world check speakers.

Having said that, there are three features that I missed on the McONE Active. The first is admittedly pretty esoteric and not often seen—the ability to mute the left and right speakers individually, to do mono mix checks on a single speaker. Second, a phase reverse feature would be handy for checking phase issues.

Finally, the unit offers no individual speaker attenuation; set-and-forget adjustment of relative levels has to be done on the speakers themselves. Usually this is not a problem with powered monitors, as they often have their own onboard volume controls, but for this issue I was reviewing a set of passive Amphion Two18 monitors (see page 18) whose power amp didn't include any volume attenuation. Fortunately it wasn't quite as much of an issue as I'd originally feared; I was able to match my active monitors to the Amphions to within a couple of dB.



Speaking of level, the McONE Active gives you a wide, accurate throw between quiet and loud, and even cranked all the way up, it is neither painful nor speaker-damaging. This box impresses with accuracy and smoothness rather than "Hey, look how loud I can be."

Conclusions

Those small concerns aside, this is a beautiful-looking and beautiful-sounding box that is well featured, well built, and fills in the midlevel price range well. If you don't have a need for a cue mix, talkback, or a parallel subwoofer output, the basic 3-in/3-out McONE passive models will give you the same sort of audio quality with fewer frills at considerably lower price points, but the McONE Active does the job nicely for studios that need an all-in-one monitor/talkback solution. ➤

Price: \$599

More from: New Old Sound Ltd., new-old-sound.com;
dist. in USA by ZenPro Audio, www.zenproaudio.com

McONE Active Specs

Maximum Input Level: +26 dBu
Maximum Output Level (before clipping): +29 dBu
Signal-To-Noise Ratio: 120 dB @ 0 dBu unity gain
L/R Crosstalk: -105 dBu @ 1kHz
THD + Noise: 0.005% for +24 dBu input @ unity gain
Frequency Response: 20Hz–20kHz (±0.3 dB)