

ATC SCM19 V2 Loudspeakers

Feature Articles & Reviews



October 2016

Does the name Billy Woodman ring a bell? Although he may not have been involved in any of the audio components you use at home, it's very likely that Woodman designed some of the gear used in recording the music you listen to. All over the world, many of the finest musicians and audio engineers make their most crucial judgments of their work by listening to it through monitors made by ATC, the company Woodman founded in 1974. Beck, Kate Bush, Coldplay, Mark Knopfler, Diana Krall, Tom Petty, Pink Floyd, Lou Reed, Supertramp, Jack White -- all have depended on ATC monitors to get an accurate idea of what's really on their master recordings. If you've ever enjoyed records engineered and/or produced by T Bone Burnett, Bob Ludwig, Mark Ronson, or Doug Sax, or in the studios of Electric Lady or Telarc, or Sony's massive SACD remastering facilities, you owe some of that pleasure to Woodman's stunning speaker designs. Even at Abbey Road Studios, right next to the Bowers & Wilkins monitors you always see advertised, you also see ATCs.

Back in 1974, Billy Woodman made a bold move into the professional sound industry by producing a loudspeaker that would play louder with much less distortion than was the norm, and with extreme reliability. These qualities would become the core of his company's philosophy of sound. By 1976, he'd added the SM75-150 soft-dome midrange driver to his portfolio, and nothing did more to change ATC's fortunes. This driver checked off each of Woodman's design goals: it offered crystal-clear sound, could play very loud without breakup, and was preternaturally dependable. It kept its place at the top of the midrange-driver food chain for decades, with only minor upgrades. Soon Woodman added active amplification, and active crossovers with built-in phase correction, and the modern ATC monitor speaker was born.



For 20 years, I was the proud owner of a pair of ATC's SCM50ASL speakers (\$15,490 USD per pair, for the current version). Through them I played everything from screaming, block-rocking beats to full-range film bombast to delicate jazz vocals. In terms of clean sound at high levels, my ears always gave out before the ATCs did, and no matter how hard I pushed them, nothing ever broke or had to be replaced. Perhaps even more miraculous, regardless of price or fame, I never heard any other speakers that could dislodge the SCM50ASLs from my system. Then, a couple years ago, I moved into a downtown loft that's just too small for the ATCs' mighty *oomph*. So I sold the SCM50ASLs for 70% of what I'd paid for them 20

years before -- not bad. But I really miss those speakers. Which is why this review is partly about my hunt for speakers to replace them.

I'm very interested in two of the hottest studio monitors on the market today: Barefoot Sound's MicroMain 26 (\$12,495/pair) and Kii's Three (\$14,000/pair). But as someone who knows the magic of ATC's soft-dome midrange driver, I'd love to find another speaker with an ATC's ability to instantaneously respond to dynamics with no sense of strain. Sadly, in my experience, that has always meant a three-way speaker from ATC -- something big, heavy, and expensive. I need something that costs less and takes up less space. I have high hopes for two other ATC speakers: the SCM25A Pro (\$7990/pair), a compact three-way that is equipped with ATC's dome midrange driver, and the two-way SCM20ASL Pro (\$4990/pair). Both of these speakers are smaller than and won't play quite as loud as my dear, departed SCM50ASLs. On the other hand, my new listening room is a lot smaller than the old -- my ears will be much closer to the speakers.

For we who sneer at the fanciful names that the marketing departments of high-end speaker makers slap on new products, it's good to know that the decidedly nonpoetic names of ATC models actually mean something. In the case of my erstwhile ATC SCM50ASL speakers, *ATC* is an initialism for Acoustic Transducer Company, *SCM* stands for Studio Control Monitor, *50* indicates that this model has an internal volume of 50 liters, *A* stands for Active, and *SL* for Super Linear, referring to the magnet system, which ATC uses to reduce distortion: in short, ATC SCM50ASL.

When I spoke with ATC about reviewing the SCM25A Pros, they nudged me away from the Professional line and toward what they call their Consumer HiFi models, specifically the SCM19 V2 (\$4299/pair). If you've done your homework, you already know from its name that this speaker has a much smaller internal volume of 19 liters, and that it isn't active. That means I'll need amplification and some very good speaker cables -- and even then, I'll lose the ATC Pro models' active crossovers and built-in phase correction.



That doesn't mean I'd be riding second class. The SCM19 V2 is clearly built to ATC's normal, tank-like standard. Moving these "tiny" stand-mounted but stout desktop speakers around was a bit tougher than I thought it would be. The SCM19 V2 measures 17.25"H x 10.4"W x 12.9"D (including grille), and is biwirable. The midrange-bass driver alone weighs 20 pounds, the entire speaker 39.25 pounds. The SCM19 V2 comes in a beautiful cabinet available in Black Ash, Cherry, Satin White, or Satin Black, its innards designed to reduce standing waves. The cabinet is sealed, so the bass rolloff is slow and well controlled. That meant that the bottom octave of a bass or piano wasn't perfectly flat, but it was perfectly audible.

Despite its somewhat small size, I found that the SCM19 V2 could pump out surprisingly high sound levels -- always a nice thing to have on reserve. Far more important, it did so

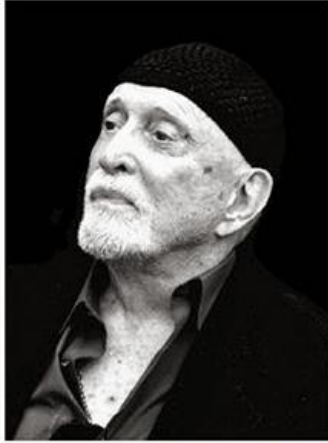
with vanishing amounts of distortion. Below are three great test tracks I used with the ATCs, all streamable from Tidal as 16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC files. Each was recorded with very wide dynamic range, which really showed off the SCM19 V2's abilities. You could spend a whole day listening to Tidal's different versions of Cole Porter's "Get Out of Town," which was a stalwart for Shirley Horn and Mel Tormé, and still is for Patricia Barber. But the versions by the three singers described below were recorded with exceptional clarity and infinite headroom.



Holly Cole's version is from a live album, *Don't Smoke in Bed* (Blue Note). Its lovely, funky bass intro showed the ATC's ability to rattle my room at 41Hz. Cole's singing is the coolest of these three, but she offers some drama about four minutes in that can disrupt an audio system. The SCM19 V2 sounded just the slightest bit opaque in the very highest frequencies, as if ATC's designers had decided that consumers might not like the precisely accurate sound reproduction required by audio professionals. If they did, I think it was a mistake. In any case, most people wouldn't notice the difference at all -- and after a day or two, I forgot all about it.



Sammy Davis Jr. is something of an acquired taste these days, when enlightened listeners have seized on such true musical greats as DJ Snake or Young Thug. All Davis did was: start a vaudeville career at three; become one of the top nightclub draws in the US; star on Broadway in a hit play that ran for more than 400 performances; have his first album, *Starring Sammy Davis Jr.* (1955, Geffen), hit the Top Ten; star in his own primetime variety hour on NBC (1966); and appear in nearly 30 films and more than 30 TV shows. His career hit the skids because of two things: to the black community, he looked too much like an Uncle Tom for buddying-up to Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and the rest of the Rat Pack; and to bigots, in 1960 he committed the unpardonable sin of marrying May Britt, a white woman. Stuck in the middle, Davis kept doing what he did best: sing, dance, and entertain. His version of "Get Out of Town" is a bongo-popping, finger-snapping groover from his second album, *Sings Just for Lovers* (1955, Geffen). Though the music is heavily compressed (I think by Collector's Choice, a previous licensee), Davis's voice is still a preternatural thing. I'd love to know what types of mikes and preamps were used, and how far Davis was from his mike, just to get an idea of how the engineer dealt with this singer's vocal power.



A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP
BUT BEAUTIFUL
GET OUT OF TOWN
HERE'S TO LIFE

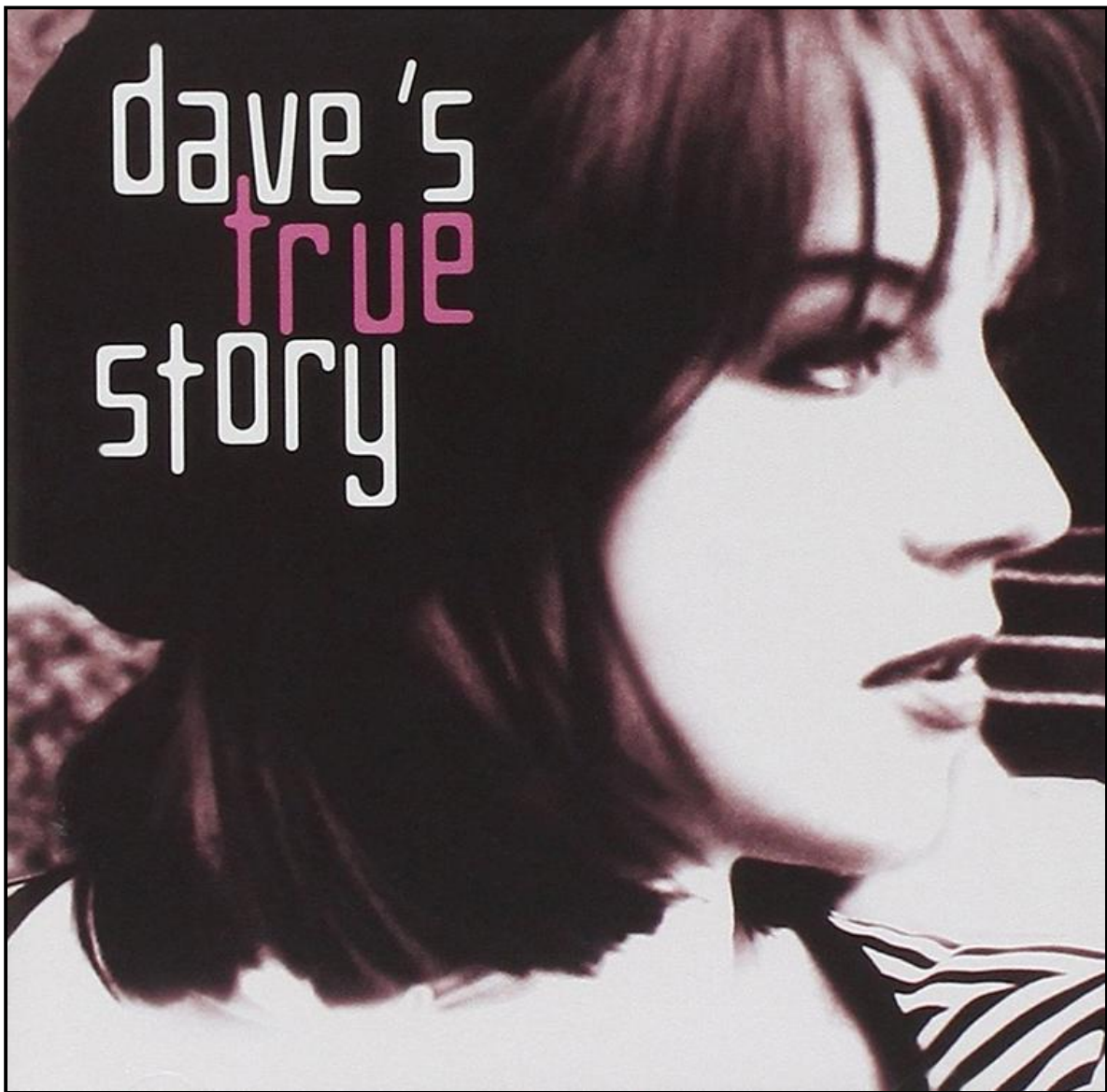
A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

MARK

REMEMBERING SHIRLEY HORN

MURPHY

Finally, Mark Murphy (1932-2015), one of the top five male jazz singers ever,* toward the end of his life recorded a wonderful version of "Get Out of Town" released on his four-song EP *A Beautiful Friendship: Remembering Shirley Horn* (Gearbox/Light in the Attic), released in January 2016. Listen to drummer Steve Williams as he lets the sound of his snare slowly decay. The ATCs did a better job of catching the naturally decaying sounds of instruments in a room than any other speakers I know of. As he did during most of his final decade, Murphy takes it easy, never pushing his voice, going for meaning over cutting-contest pyrotechnics. Still, listen for every creak, push, and turn. He was an amazing artist. Seeing him in concert was always a riveting experience -- he would stretch out in wild ways that, by the end of the song, would always make complete sense. If this sounds appealing, dig around on the Web, watch a concert or two, and see if you don't get hooked.



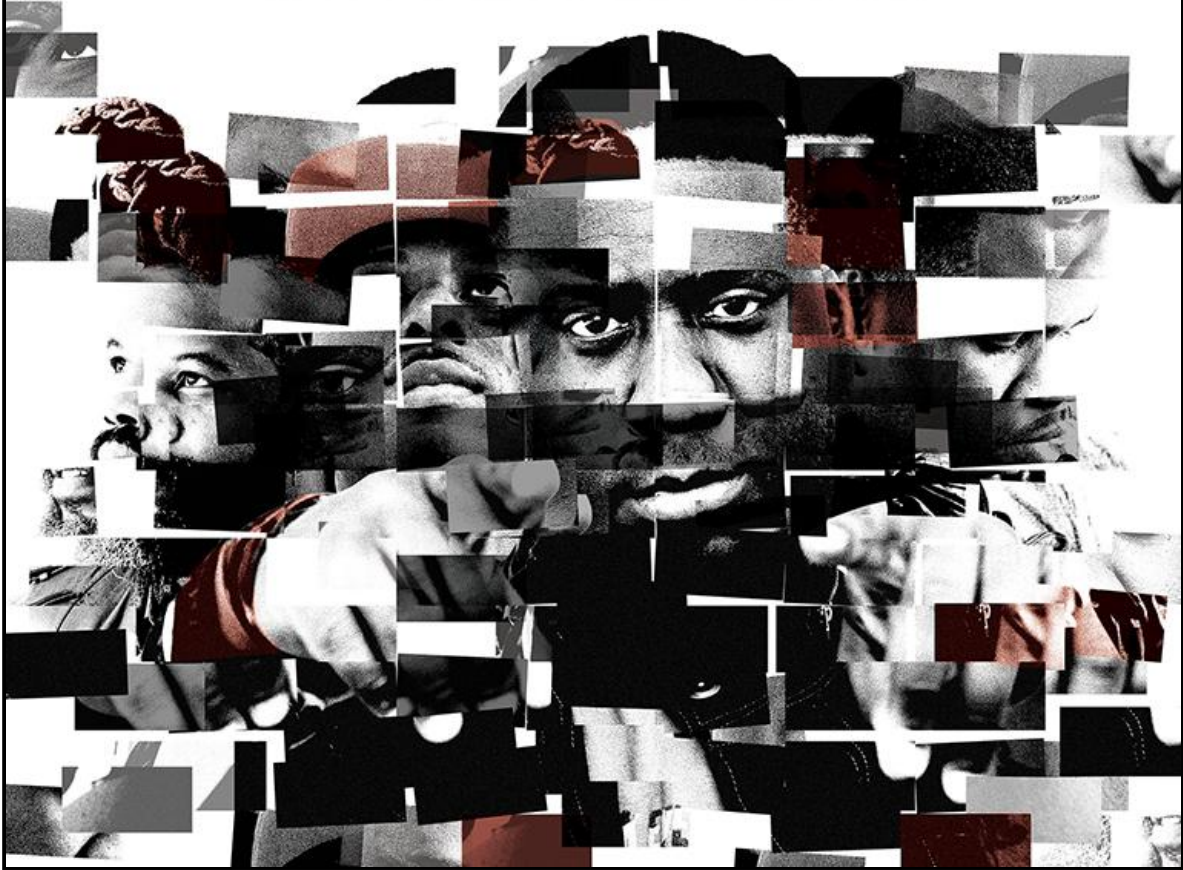
An even better example of how those trailing tails of reverb spread across the room to naturally decay comes from a recording by a band that deserved far more fame than they ever got, and whoever came up with the name Dave's True Story deserves some of the blame. Imagine a band with a lead singer, Kelly Flint, who sounds like Tracey Thorne of Everything But the Girl; a guitarist, David Cantor, who plays like Barney Kessell; and Cantor's semantically euphoric songwriting, reminiscent of Cole Porter's. Does that sound like a band that should be named Dave's True Story? Anyway, their self-titled first album (1994, 16/44.1 FLAC, BePop) is packed with witty songs, especially "Another Hit." Would that Sammy Davis Jr. had still been alive to sing it -- rarely has a song been so clearly destined to be sung by a specific singer. Imagine a disheveled, slightly drunk Davis, sitting in a dark bar early one afternoon, complaining to the bartender about life's vicissitudes:

*A long parade of goddesses
Passed through my bedroom door
I unhooked gowns and bodices
Till it became a chore
I dined with Julie London once
Charmed her with my wit
Joe, I could use another hit*

ATC's trademark effortless sound was still there in the SCM19 V2 -- but *sound* is the wrong word. What I heard was so effortless that I never heard a trace of the existence of a crossover and separate drivers. It was as if the term *headroom* had never been coined. The small details of Flint's sad yet inviting voice shone right through, all adding up to her beautiful timbre. Nor did her faultless diction ever sound forced, and there was no exaggeration of the upper midrange. This sort of sound will entirely disarm those who still maintain that studio monitors are "too revealing."



ROBERT GLASPER EXPERIMENT
BLACK RADIO 2



"Calls," an enchanting song from jazz keyboardist Robert Glasper's *Black Radio 2* (CD, Blue Note 3 74338 3), is well worth using as a test. In this uncanny album, music and sounds are blended in an aural realism so stark you'll swear someone has just walked into your room, and with quirky soundstaging that's both flawlessly specific and altogether abstract. I'll definitely be watching out for more work by engineer Keith Lewis, mixer Qmillion, and mastering engineer Chris Athens -- and the extraordinary voice of Jill Scott.

In fact, I can't get enough of "Do You Remember?," from Scott's own *Experience: Jill Scott 826+* (16/44.1 FLAC, Hidden Beach), her second album of 2001. Andy Hamill's slick bass, the soulful backing singers, and the ecstatic crowd noises (half of this album was recorded in concert), all sound nice and real. Then, 4:15 into the song, listen as Scott hits a perfect high note. Any breakup in your system? That note leads into the sing-along part of this track, which should open up the front wall of your listening room. Through the ATCs, it did.



Do you ever find yourself gazing longingly at one of the world's great stereo systems and wishing you could own it? Maybe a pair of Magico Ultimates, or the latest Focal Grand Utopias? For amplifiers, would you prefer a behemoth with Dan D'Agostino's signature on it? Or perhaps a sexy single-ended-triode from Lamm Industries? And don't forget those TARA Labs cables!

Such a system would cost close to a million bucks. And while I have absolutely no doubt that, if it were mine, I'd have the best-sounding system on the block, I don't have the space or the money. But what if I could get a speaker that had the amplifiers, wires, crossovers, and all sorts of potential phase and EQ correction built in, all in the digital domain? I'd love all that -- and that's why I'd buy a professional studio monitor. As you've perhaps noticed, all three of the speakers on my wish list are manufactured by makers of professional monitors. They tend to be more reliable, can take more abuse, and they almost always sound better than consumer models of the same price.



Still, a lot of our readers want to keep all that stuff separate, and I understand that. But if you want the sound quality and sturdiness of a pro speaker, and the knowledge that your music was likely monitored in the studio through speakers made by the same company in the first place, then look at ATC's Consumer HiFi models. A pair of ATC SCM19 V2s (\$4299), along with their clean- and open-sounding P1 dual-mono power amplifier (\$4200), total \$8499 and would be hard to match.

Ever since I bought my first pair of ATC speakers 20 years ago, it's been my opinion that you can never go wrong with ATC. I nominate Billy Woodman for the Audio Hall of Fame.

. . . *Wes Marshall*

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* Obviously, each of us has his or her own opinion about such things -- and when I say *jazz singers*, I don't include such glorious saloon singers as Davis, Sinatra, and Tony Bennett. My five favorite male jazz artists are Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, Mel Tormé, Johnny Hartman, and Murphy.