



Audio-Technica ATH-R70XA

An astonishingly wide and deep sound stage and all-day comfort define the R70XA

By Shaun Prescott

▶ WHETHER YOU'RE HOME recording or practicing discretely, a decent set of monitoring headphones is worth the outlay. Audio-Technica has ticked both boxes for years with the ATH-M50x, which launched in 2007 and still sits at the top of our list of the best headphones for guitar amps. The company's M series has proven reliable, somewhat overshadowing the R series, which takes an open-back approach to the company's line of reference headphones.

Open-back reference headphones make a lot of sense: this design principle is the best option for a clear, uncolored reproduction of the sound source, which is the whole point of monitoring headphones. It works because the drivers aren't enclosed in a shell that can cause unwanted vibrations to affect the sound. Similarly, the drivers aren't affected by the stymied air flow of an enclosed case, which means they can "breathe" more easily and thus deliver more accurate sound on the level of detail.

But it has drawbacks too: open-back design tends to let exterior sound in and speaker sound out. You may not be too picky, but if you're using open-backs in loud environments, that can be a dealbreaker. Similarly, if you're practicing fingerstyle next to, say, a sleeping partner, open-backs bleed a lot of sound and probably aren't ideal. The R70xa is a new iteration of the R70x, which competed directly with Sennheiser's open-back perennial, the HD600.

Build quality

Removing the R70XA from the box, the first thing I noticed was how light and inconspicuous it is. The headband cover is pocked with oval holes, the honeycomb speaker housing has no protrusion, and the headband base is so thin as to seem flat. The aluminium speaker housing feels almost fragile in the hand, almost malleable, but I can confirm that no amount of clamping with my hands could break it.

These headphones are clearly meant to disappear once you've placed them on your head, and that goal is mostly achieved: I used this for playing guitar through an amp, yes, but I also used them all day at my desk, and they never became painful. Weight comes in at a slight 199 grams, while the cups are perfect circles rather than ovals, which suits the dimensions of my ears, but your mileage may vary.

The headband did have a weird habit of flapping out from under the headband cover, which meant that I fell into the habit of placing the unit onto my head while holding the

“Brilliantly precise monitoring headphones with wide open-back sound”

headband in place. The headband is locked into the cover arch with a simple flap through one of the aforementioned oval holes, which makes it customizable, yes, but also inclined to pop out occasionally. This is obviously in the interests of making the unit as light as possible, but it remains a small annoyance.

The headset comes with a removable (and thus replaceable) dual-sided three metre cable with locking jacks and a 6.3mm adapter which can be screwed off to reveal the 3.5mm jack. The earpads are velour and can be replaced. A drawstring pouch is included.

Performance

The frequency range is 5 to 40,000Hz which results in some astonishing detail, particularly at the higher, treble-centric ranges that are commonly clouded by the bass in most conventional headphones. Flicking between the R70xa and a couple of other non-monitor headphones I have at hand – the Audio-Technica ATH-S300BT and the Sennheiser Momentum wired – the differences are stark when listening to a whole range of material.

Some examples: In Bell Witch's Mirror Reaper, the ride and crash cymbals sound full irrespective of the dread-inducing bass growl, while listening to Bert Jansch's brilliant collab with Loren Auerbach, it felt like the former's bright fingerstyle was being performed in the room. This sense of presence and spaciousness can be attributed to the open back design, and especially AT's treatment here: aside from the honeycomb plating, the rear of the speakers are entirely unobstructed by branding or the headband base. It's a real boon for the mid-range, which maintains its weight and vibrancy without shearing layers off either low or high frequencies.

These headphones are great for listening because they bring to life aspects of recorded music otherwise obscured by speakers tuned to foreground bass – which most consumer-level headphones do nowadays. As a player, the effect is less pleasant, albeit welcome. Tracks that I thought sounded fine through inferior units sounded not so great thanks to the harsh truth afforded by these reference headphones. This is, to be clear, exactly what you want from reference headphones, and is the strongest argument for why they're worth

GUITAR WORLD VERDICT



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PROS

- + Incredibly wide and detailed sound stage
- + Featherlight build that nevertheless feels robust
- + Comfortable for very long stretches
- + Benefits of open-back design

CONS

- Sound bleeding out is inherent to the open-back design
- Headband sometimes has a mind of its own

SPECS

TYPE: Open-back, reference
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 5Hz - 40,000Hz
IMPEDANCE: 470 ohms
DRIVER: 45mm
CONNECTION: 3.5mm with 6.3mm stereo mini-plug included

having around.
Are reference headphones worth having for home practice, even if you're not a home recorder? It's possibly overkill, though if you have to practice quietly, it's smarter to invest in a more neutral set of headphones that won't make you sound much better (or worse) than you are. The ATH-R70xa is great for practice but really – and this is the rub – designed for recording. It's brilliant for listening, though its loooong dual-sided cable makes it fairly impractical for commuting, if you had versatility in mind.

Verdict

With the R70xa, Audio-Technica has built a superlative set of open-back reference headphones that ticks every important box. It has a gorgeously detailed and neutral sound stage and feels virtually weightless on the head. It does have some quirks, such as the sometimes argumentative headband, but overall, this is a brilliant mid-range professional headset.

