

Monitor Audio AirStream 10 radio

As easy on the eyes as it is on the ears



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MANUFACTURER	Monitor Audio
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10 August 2009 - You might not associate Monitor Audio with radios, as they are best known for their speakers. The tagline of "design for sound" sets high expectations for the audio device. Calling it a radio is perhaps unfair, as in truth it is so much more, fulfilling the roles of radio and network music player.

The design is instantly distinctive as a complete departure from your traditional radio format. The contemporary offset shape will fit into just about any setting, with staggeringly good looks from all angles.

The quality of construction is also unquestionable: make no mistake, this is a premium audio device. The wraparound wooden detailing on the left-hand side is sumptuous, giving it that touch of retro luxury, where so many settle for cheap plastics. You can't help but look at it longingly, while it blesses your ears with equally good audio.

The controls range across the top. On the left you have a panel housing the retractable aerial and the power, with six touch buttons. The centre features a large clickable volume control and selector button, surrounded by four playback controls. A final right-hand panel gives you an LCD screen with four preset station buttons around it.

It sounds like a large number of controls and it is, but there are a large number of functions on offer here too. Not only does it offer FM and DAB tuners, but also internet radio, a network music player, an auxiliary input as well as more basic functions like alarms. A comprehensive offering and one that's likely to appeal to those who want one device that can do pretty much everything.

Down the right-hand end of the AirStream 10 you'll find an Ethernet connection, as well as 3.5mm jacks which give you the aux in, audio out and headphone socket. The power also connects here, unfortunately there is no option for a battery, meaning this is not designed to be portable.

The audio out means you could opt to connect this up to an existing music system or straight into your home cinema amp where you'd benefit from all the connectivity on offer here, although the lack of remote control hints that this isn't really the intended purpose.

Control is actually easy enough, with the screen presenting options that you can scroll through, duplicating (in some cases) options you can click through with the buttons. It is all pretty intuitive however and things are only a few clicks away. Entering letters for network passwords or searches can be a little fiddly, but you shouldn't have to do so too often - it remembered the passwords for both of our Wi-Fi [networks](#), so could be easily moved without entering passwords again.

The DAB tuner seemed solid enough, although did seem to suffer from interference from our other [computer hardware](#) more than some radios do, so careful placement might be needed in an office, but we had no problems in the kitchen or conservatory. The in-built Wi-Fi means you don't need that Ethernet connection to hook into your network if you want to stay wireless.

The internet radio options are pretty good, giving you access to heaps of stations online. It also gives you regionalisation, so presented us with a menu option for UK stations and "BBC", which makes it much easier to find what you are looking for. We also like the fact that podcasts are presented, broken into Genres, so it's really easy to find a technology podcast for example.

Within the internet radio section, you can assign stations to the four presets too, as well as adding content through the Frontier Silicon Radio Portal, but you'll have to register on their website and provide the code supplied with your AirStream 10.

As a network music player, the AirStream 10 offers to playback content being shared on your network. We found it quickly detected our Linksys Cisco Media Hub through UPnP, Windows 7 PC sharing music and Mac running TwonkyMedia. The menu then lets you browse by artist, album, genre, folder, playlist and so on, as well as straight keyword searching.

Music playback supports MP3, WMA, RA and AAC, so it won't cater for everyone, but it will cover the vast majority. We like the Info options that you can scroll through, indicating album and artist, track buffering status and track details, including bit rate, codec and sampling rate for the geeks out there.

The biggest surprise might be that the AirStream 10 features only a single 3.5-inch woofer. The sound though is exceptional. We've seen high quality audio from radios such as the Pure Evoke-2S, but the AirStream 10 holds its own, with rich deep bass giving substance to a device that is still relatively compact. It might not offer the same wide sound stage that some network music players do, but stick this in your kitchen, crank up the volume and you'll be grinning from ear to ear.

We found the AirStream worked best upright, i.e., with the controls on the top and the speaker facing forwards. Lie the thing down and it can sound a little more muffled, but not devastatingly so.

The AirStream 10 comes with a 3.5mm cable in the box so you can connect almost any MP3 player, such as your iPod, direction to the aux in. An Ethernet cable is also supplied, so you get everything you need in the box.

Verdict

There is so much to like here, but it comes down to the simple things that make the AirStream 10 a real winner for us: good quality construction, attention to design and detailing and audio that wows.

The feature set might not match all those offered by a range of other radios, such as Pure's ReVu option, or access to a wider range of online music services like the Squeezebox Boom, but in terms of design, the AirStream 10 beats them all.

Expensive, but worth every penny.