



Ready player two

Components need to be flexible to survive in today's audio market. **James Parker** tries ATC's updated multi-purpose player for size

While it is probably best known for its loudspeakers, which are more commonly found in recording studios, ATC has been producing amps and preamps since the introduction of its standalone 'hi-fi' electronics line in 1996. This CD player/DAC/preamp combo is actually an updated version of the company's innovative CDA, which has been specially designed to accompany its £3,375 P2 power amplifier and active speakers.

The CDA2 Mk2's mixture of facilities is something of a masterstroke in simplifying what could be a multi-component system. Then again, there

will be those that sound a note of caution, as they would with any multifunction device of this kind: in what is still a rapidly evolving digital audio market, buying such a product might be putting too many eggs into one basket. After all, while the CDA2 Mk2 might be convenient, it is prey to the appearance of future formats requiring decoding or processing beyond its capabilities, and appears to have no clear upgrade route through modular design or firmware updates.

That's not forgetting the formats and services that are already available that the CDA2 Mk2 won't play ball with. So, while it will comfortably

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC CDA2 Mk2

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
CD player/USB DAC/
preamp

WEIGHT
7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
445 x 90 x 330mm

FEATURES
● 32-bit/768kHz
PCM and DSD-
capable DAC
● Digital inputs: 1x
optical; 1x coaxial;
1x USB-B
● Analogue outputs:
balanced XLRs;
RCAs; 6.35mm
headphone jack

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Loudspeaker
Technology Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 760561

WEBSITE
atcloudspeakers.
co.uk

handle files up to DSD256, it won't play SACDs, and onboard streaming is notable only by its absence. Meanwhile, if you want to play music from network or internet sources, you'll have to do so via a computer connected to the USB-B input or add a dedicated network music player. And with line analogue inputs only, turntable users will have to add an offboard phono stage, too – making this a comprehensive but not quite complete solution.

The CDA2 Mk2 uses a Chinese-made TEAC drive to spin discs, partnered with an AK4490 DAC from Asahi Kasei. Part of AKM's Verita Series, and using what the company calls its 'Velvet Sound' architecture, the AK4490 supports up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM (the CDA2 Mk2 uses this capability up to 384kHz) and DSD256. The DAC also receives data from the digital inputs, which include USB-B, coaxial and optical. Interestingly, the USB port will support DSD256 when used with Windows computers, but only DSD128 with OS X machines.

The output of the DAC stage, and the three analogue inputs (one of which is of higher sensitivity, and provided on a 3.5mm stereo socket



The distinctive go faster stripes ensure the CDA2 Mk2 stands out from the pack

extrusion with a brushed and anodised silver finish.

So what's changed from the previous model? Both the USB and 3.5mm stereo socket are new additions, but the CDA2 Mk2 is also the result of extensive reworking under the lid. The AKM DAC is new, as is the TEAC-supplied transport, chosen for faster seek times, lower mechanical noise and improved error correction, while the power supply has gained nine extra voltage regulators and better decoupling. The input/output gain stages have been upgraded with discrete op-amps in six blocks – two for input buffering and

touch being a 'CD standby' button to turn off the disc section when listening to other inputs – reducing the potential for noise and vibration.

Sound quality

ATC recommends J River Media Centre 22 for playback on both Windows and Mac OS X, and provides illustrations in the user manual for the optimum setup for the best possible sound. One thing that's immediately clear from the start is that no matter what you feed it, the CDA2 Mk2 sounds very special indeed. Whether it is spinning discs, receiving audio via its S/PDIF inputs, connected via its analogue ins or handling hi-res audio from a computer, there is a rightness and directness about the sound, with tight, powerful bass, a clean, informative midband and a treble that's as explicit as it is sweet, all suggesting that it is just letting the music flow through it and not messing with it in the process. It's this neutrality that makes it such a joy to use – it is amazing just how addictive its 'nothingness' really is. You can pay a lot more for a CD player, DAC and preamp and still find the components imposing something of themselves on the sound. That this (relatively) affordable player offers so much and yet adds or removes so little is a major achievement by ATC's engineers.

For an indication of this in action, I turn to the eponymous debut album ▶

The CDA2 has a wide open sound with masses of detail and unrestrained slam

four to deliver the balanced output.

The output section is also designed to drive long cable runs, as might be the case when, for example, the CDA2 Mk2 is connected directly to a pair of active speakers. ATC says it's good for balanced cables of up to 50m, which should be adequate for even the largest room. The headphone amp has also been upgraded, to give it better drive for tricky loads. The package is completed by a comprehensive IR remote control, handling all the functions, a neat

instead of a pair of RCA phonos) feed into a fully balanced preamp stage. Even the 6.35mm headphone socket, which is driven by its own amplifier, is on the rear panel to keep signal paths as short as possible.

Outputs are provided on both balanced XLRs and conventional RCA line-level phonos, and the CDA2 Mk2 is built on a chassis that combines steel and aluminium and uses constrained mass damping to control resonances, with the front panel machined from a 13mm aluminium

CONNECTIONS

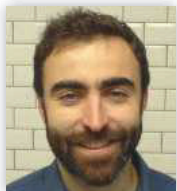


- 1 Coaxial and optical digital inputs
- 2 RCA line-level analogue outputs
- 3 Balanced XLR output (right)
- 4 6.35mm headphone output

Q&A

Ben Lilly

Technical sales manager,
Loudspeaker Technology Ltd. ATC



JP: What are the key differences between the original CDA2 and the Mk2 version of the player?

BL: For the Mk2 we're using a new TEAC CD transport and an upgraded AKM 32-bit DAC. We've introduced a USB digital audio input, a high-sensitivity 3.5mm analogue input for connection to portable audio devices, re-engineered the headphone amplifier for a wide 30-600ohm range and refined both the power supply design and the analogue audio circuits.

As there doesn't appear to be a clear modular or firmware upgrade path, what futureproof support is offered to owners?

The DAC we have selected is capable of converting up to quad rate DSD and 384kHz PCM data. It would be great if there was a wider choice of high-resolution material on offer, but the reality is the majority of sessions are produced in 24-bit/96kHz. While the DAC is not upgradeable, its specification surpasses what is required to listen to the vast majority of digital releases currently on offer and we do not see this changing in the future. On top of this, all ATC products are designed, engineered and manufactured for an extremely long life and are supplied with a six-year warranty.

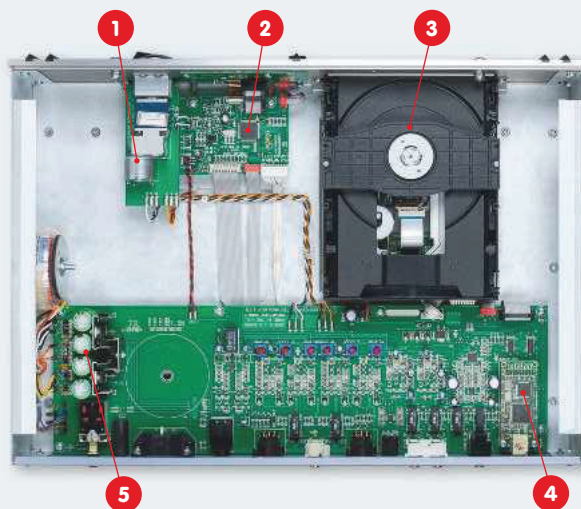
How does ATC see the future of CD?

Given the limited choice of quality CD mechanisms on the market, it's hard to say what the future holds. At the moment CD is still the most popular physical format, it's just that the buzz in the market surrounds the resurgence of vinyl. In Asia, an international market where ATC is strong, CD is still very popular.

Why is DSD file support limited when using OS X platforms?

OS X supports driverless DSD playback, but only up to DSD128. For DSD256 playback on OS X a dedicated driver is required. Based on availability of DSD256 releases, it wasn't viable to develop a dedicated driver.

IN SIGHT



- 1 ALPS 'Blue Beauty' motorised potentiometer
- 2 Control board and system control processor
- 3 TEAC 5020A transport
- 4 USB interface
- 5 Highly regulated linear power supply

by The B52's from 1987. While some saw the 'High Fidelity' logo on the cover as a joke – given the snappy, jerky rhythms, dense mixes and camped-up vocals – the album lives up to the description right from the opening riff of *Planet Claire*. The CDA2 Mk2 delivers it with real drive and a wide open view of the layers of the recording, charging through the album with such verve that it seems to be over almost before it's started.

This front end may come out of a studio heritage, but it knows how to have a good time, and there's nothing anonymous or 'technical' about the way that it plays music.

The same can be said about Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*, in DSD64, played via the USB input. The crisp resolution of the CDA2 Mk2's digital section allows the lumbering rhythms of *Have A Cigar* to power out into the room, while making every detail of the lyrics and recording plain to hear. Meanwhile its unfettered dynamics are perfectly suited to the slow burn of *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, before it lets the guitar riffs scream out with fine attack.

Entering somewhat spikier territory with Elvis Costello And The Attractions' *Armed Forces* album, and the gutsy Nick Lowe production combined with the still punky charge of the band on tracks such as *Oliver's Army* and *Goon Squad* is meat and drink for the wide-open ATC sound.

It's an album on which you can hear Costello's sound continually changing, his voice opening up, the song's still hard hitting lyrically, but now becoming more layered with keyboards, more guitars and harmonies. Here it comes up fresh as a daisy, reminding you what all the

fuss was about back when it was first released back in 1979.

Coming bang up to date with Beth Hart and Joe Bonamassa's *Black Coffee* – an album that looks dynamic range in the face and throws its head back with laughter – and the CDA2 Mk2 lets the full-on, 'bouncing off the limiters' effect thunder through with all its melodrama intact. It ain't pretty, but boy, it sure is effective!

Conclusion

Though it may have the air of a component that's been designed by committee and is perhaps lacking in some areas when it comes to features, this is all forgiven once you hear just what the CDA2 Mk2 is capable of. With a wide-open sound, masses of detail and unrestrained slam, it makes a fine partner for power amps and active speakers alike, getting on with the all-important business of delivering the music without adding or subtracting anything. Assuming you can live without SACD playback and onboard streaming, it's well worth an audition ●



In the UK, ATC's CD2 Mk2 finds itself entering a dwindling product category, but this is good news for the longevity of the model as rivals are limited and plenty of audiophiles still enjoy playing CDs. There are a couple of lower-cost models, including Audiolab's 8300CD (HFC 404) at £1,000 with a slot-loading CD transport mechanism, preamp functionality and DSD playback via USB. Cambridge Audio's Azur 851C (HFC 349) is also a CD player with upsampling USB DAC and preamp built-in. It's a popular choice, although its price has increased to £1,400.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY



★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY



★★★★★

FEATURES



★★★★☆

OVERALL



★★★★★

LIKE: Neutral, detailed and wide-open sound

DISLIKE: No over-the-air upgrades; price

WE SAY: Functional styling and an impressively neutral performance make this a great multi-purpose CD player