"... GREAT SOUND ...

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by Kevin Hunt

Faux stone speakers for your back yard? Rock on!

It's too soon to put Paradigm's 60-SM in the rock hall of fame, but I've never heard a Northeastern Dark Granite formation sing like this.

Of course, the Rock Monitor 60-SM might look like a stone but it's really an outdoor speaker trapped in a molded, faux-rock polymer. Outdoor speakers shaped like rocks used to be a novelty act, but manufacturers of serious in-home loudspeakers, like Paradigm, are now bringing great sound to the great outdoors.

Most outdoor speakers look like indoor speakers, coated and plasticized to withstand foul weather but frequently installed under partial cover, well above ground. The Rock Monitor gets down and dirty in the garden, poolside or next to fellow rocks of the natural kind. Its appearance is uncannily rock-like, though upon closer inspection, the rippled metal grille coated in weathered mud-brown reveals its true speaker identity.

Paradigm adapted the Rock Monitor from its indoor Monitor Series, using the same 1-inch pure-titanium dome tweeter and a 6.5-inch polypropylene cone driver for the bass and midrange. But its design is highly unconventional: Paradigm installed two tweeters, firing high-frequency sound at opposite angles, and wired the Rock Monitor as if it were two speakers.

The extra tweeters produce a much wider sound field. The wiring makes it easy to use one Rock Monitor, if that's all you need.

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Two pairs of speaker wires, a couple of feet long, emerge from the base of each Rock Monitor. Installation requires these wires to be connected to additional speaker wire, suitable for underground burial and joined with wire nets, then sealed in silicone. The wire is then routed into the house and connected to your receiver.

One Rock Monitor — also available in Fieldstone and Western Sandstone —puts out a lot of sound with wide dispersion, but it's not stereo. Two speakers will produce great music or a public nuisance, depending on the volume.

Wiring a stereo pair is simple: Twist together each pair of those speaker leads and connect them to a single speaker wire. That's how I set up two Rock Monitors, leaving a trail of speaker wire into a nearby sunroom, where an NAD 320BEE integrated amplifier and Toshiba SD-3950 DVD player awaited.

"With four tweeters blaring and two 6-1/2″ bass drivers thumping, the Rock Monitors pushed their coherent soundstage way beyond the yard's boundaries and deep into the woods."

With four tweeters blaring and two 6.5-inch bass drivers thumping, the Rock Monitors pushed their coherent soundstage way beyond the yard's boundaries and deep into the woods. At one point, my wife leaned out a second-floor window and said, "It sounds like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir out there," when, in fact, it was only me and a disc of medieval music by Trio Mediaeval ("Stella Maris," ECM New Series). The Rock Monitors also lived up to their name by handling a heavy-duty bass intro from the opening track of "The Hope Seed" by Connecticut favorites, Rane.

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There's no telling how long the Rock Monitor will last, but these 1-foot-tall, 12-pound speakers look ready to spend many years with the modern stone-age family.