

A CHANGE OF TUNE

Up until this point, we've had guitars loaded with digitally created sounds and altered tunings, but when it comes to self-tuning, it's strangely something that's only been achieved in the analogue world. Now, thanks to Auto-Tune, the rules have changed... *by Dave Burrluck*

PEAVEY AT-200 £499
ELECTRICS





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What we want to know

1 An auto-tuning guitar? Haven't we had that before with Gibson's Robots and Fret-King's Super-Matic?

Yes, those guitars self-tune and offer preset alternate tunings, but work mechanically and use small motorised gears to tune each string manually. The AT-200 is a partnership between Peavey and Antares (the inventor of Auto-Tune technology) and it does the tuning work solely in the digital realm. The strings don't move, but the outputted pitch does.

2 What's the difference between this and Line 6's Variax and Roland's G-5 VG Stratocaster?

Neither of those self-tune, and while both offer preset alternate tunings in the digital realm, they relate to the physical pitch of the strings. So, if you select an altered open G tuning and your strings are out of tune, so is your open G tuning. The AT-200 perfectly tunes your guitar in the digital realm in a second, even if the strings themselves are actually out of tune.

3 Who is it for?

For players obsessed by tuning accuracy, and recording guitarists.

Since it was launched earlier this year, there's been massive interest in this instrument: the first digital guitar to tune itself at the push of a knob. The technology used to achieve this has been developed by Antares. You may recognise this name as the inventor of Auto-Tune, the 'professional pitch corrector' that has changed the way modern music is recorded and even performed. Antares has also partnered with Parker Guitars in the USA, but Peavey is the first company to approach us with a real, live guitar!

The guitar side of the AT-200 (our sample is a final prototype) is pretty bland: a generic modern rock guitar. Its basswood body has a small edge radius, ribcage and forearm contours and a very credible gloss finish. The satin-finished neck is equally efficient, with a mainstream width, slim depth (a little too slim for anyone who likes more retro styles), a far-from-vintage flat radius and medium jumbo, nicely fitted frets. Truss rod access is behind the friction-reducing nut, while the modern six-a-side head houses adequate tuners and a couple of string trees for the top four strings. All the hardware is black-plated, including the six-saddle through-string bridge, which also has small tracks for the saddle intonation screws to prevent sideways movement under tension. The Peavey pickups are embedded in black plastic covers and look like active EMGs, but they're actually passive units controlled by a three-way toggle that's placed rather

closely between the knurled metal volume and tone knobs.

The only aspects betraying its Auto-Tune superpowers are a green LED on the bass side of the neck pickup's surround, a large recessed rear cavity cover plate (the production version will be smaller), a small non-recessed battery compartment with flip-up lid, and a MIDI-in socket next to the output jack on the guitar's side.

Sounds

Plug in, and with the tone control pulled up (passive mode) it's a standard modern dual-humbucker rock guitar with a perfectly usable thick, high-output tonality. Push that tone control down, however, and you enter the virtual world. The green LED on the pickup ring lights up and the thick rock tonality of the pickups changes to a digitally created sound that, on our prototype, is a lot lower

in output and much more single coil-like in its voicing.

If, like us, you tune up as a matter of course before you plug in, when you strum all six strings and push down on the tone control, not a lot seems to happen apart from the green LED flashing momentarily, followed by a very quick whirring while the Auto-Tune does its stuff. Regardless of whether the strings are anywhere near in tune, the sound we hear is – perfectly.

To that end, we tried this process plugged into our Peterson Virtual Strobe tuner. We tuned up in passive mode and, on checking the 12th fret harmonic with the fretted note, noticed it produced some minor discrepancies and the Virtual Strobe's 'wheels' moved up and down. In the active Auto-Tune mode it's unbelievably accurate: the tuning wheels come to just about a perfect halt, meaning the note is very in tune. Any 12th-fret intonation issues are gone; even at the 24th fret, all strings gave a perfect reading (with the exception of the sixth string past the 17th fret –

Tuning Tricks

If you want to create alternate tuning on the AT-200, you'll have to fool the technology...

The lack of alternate tuning modes needn't stop you from experimenting. Fret an F# on the 2nd fret of the sixth (low E) string, strum all six strings and push on the volume control and you're in drop D. Fret the low E at the 12th fret, strum across and hit the volume control again and your low E is now an octave lower. As with any pitch shifting, the more you move away from standard pitch the more unnatural it

sounds, but that bass octave E is pretty convincing when you hit it firmly.

If you want a string to drop a tone when you do the auto-tuning process, you simply fret it a tone (two frets) higher, and so on. For standard baritone tuning, barre across all six strings at the 5th fret. So, while it's not a standard feature, getting hold of alternate tunings on the AT-200 isn't really that difficult.

