

# Souping up your player

Bits and bobs to help you make the most of your digital music player

The growing popularity of digital music players means they have become a phenomenon, which in turn has spawned an explosion of gadgets you can use with them. Here, we look at speaker docks, alarm clocks, FM transmitters and a few other accessories, and pick our favourites.

If what we have on test whets your appetite, a brief search of the internet will bring you to many more digital music player gadgets including DJ decks, a speaker in the shape of a dog, and boxer shorts with a discreet pocket for your digital music player. Have fun!

## Best Buy transmitters

**Forgo the radio in favour of your own music with the help of an FM transmitter**

A change in the law in December 2006 has meant that low-power FM transmitters – which enable you to broadcast the music on your digital player to a radio – are now legal in the UK. As a result, we are starting to see more and more of these devices being sold in the shops, with most being marketed as the ideal solution for letting you listen to music in the car.

All of them work in the same basic way. You plug the device into the headphone socket of your MP3 player and it converts your music into an FM radio signal. You tune the device into a free FM frequency and the signal can then be picked up by a nearby portable or car radio. We tested five transmitters from different manufacturers, and two made it as Best Buys.



### ■ GEAR4 POWER TRIP FM £30

The Power Trip is a doddle to set up and use. Sound quality is good when you can find a free frequency but, like all FM transmitters, this isn't always easy – even in rural areas. Like the iTrip Auto, below, the Power Trip can be used with iPods and other digital players. Available from Argos.



### ■ GRIFFIN ITRIP AUTO £40

Similar to the Gear4 Power Trip, above, the iTrip Auto is easy to set up and use, has good sound quality and is powered by the car's cigarette lighter – which helpfully enables it to double as an in-car charger for your digital music player. Although one of our trialists described it as 'simple and compact', another thought that it was a bit cheap looking. Available from John Lewis.

## 📶 Gimmicky gadgets



### ION iTT USB turntable, £120

This turntable lets you convert your vinyl collection to a digital MP3 format, so you can listen to your old records on your computer or digital music player. We found the instructions were a bit of a letdown – they cover the assembly of the parts but not the turntable's connection to a stereo or computer, or installation of the supplied software. Sound quality is OK, but our trialists were not impressed with being able to hear every pop and crack from the vinyl. Available online.

**VERDICT** A good idea but a poor-quality device.

### H2O Audio waterproof case & headphones, from £55

Ever found yourself wishing you could listen to music while swimming? This combination of a waterproof case and headphones (sold separately and designed for the iPod, iPod Nano and iPod Mini) should be the answer. Our trialists found them easy to use and totally leakproof, but thought the devices were more hassle than they were worth. The waterproof headphones offer poor sound quality and didn't fit well, despite repeated adjustments. Available online.

**VERDICT** Our trialists struggled with comfort and the combination of an iPod and case was too heavy to swim with.



### GRIFFIN iKaraoke, £30

This little gadget plugs into an iPod and fades out the lead vocal on any track you play, letting you take the place of your favourite singer. If you want to give your singing talent a bit of a boost, you can even plug the iKaraoke into your stereo to turn up your voice a decibel or two. Unfortunately, the iKaraoke failed to impress even our keenest karaoke enthusiast. It is difficult to set up, you'll need to buy extra cables (costing £29 from Apple) if you want to connect it to your stereo and our trialists found that vocals were still audible on some tracks. Available online.

**VERDICT** A nice idea – shame it didn't work very well.



## Speaker docks and alarm clocks

Instead of keeping your music to yourself, unplug your headphones and slot your digital music player into a speaker dock to hear your favourite tracks out loud

A speaker dock lets you listen to music without headphones – useful if you want to share music with friends – and some even come with built-in alarm clocks. Slotting your player into some speaker docks also charges it up while you listen to your music. Be

aware that sound quality isn't outstanding

– it won't match the quality you get from a mini hi fi system, for example. However, speaker docks will fill a room with decent sound, which is good enough for listening to while away on holiday or in the garden. Read on

**Gear4 House Party 24/7, £60**

to find out more about our Best Buys.

Two of the docks we tried come with alarm clocks. The **Gear4 House Party 24/7** (£60 from Argos, pictured above) is the better of the two by a small margin. It has an AM/FM radio with five station presets, and you can wake up to your digital music player or the radio. It's compatible with many players but charges only iPods.

The **iHome2go iH26BE** (£100 from Currys, above) is also compatible with a variety of players. It lacks a radio, you can't wake up to



**JBL Radial, £180**

music, only an alarm, but it uses less power than the Gear4 and is more portable.

If you don't want a speaker dock that comes with an alarm, then you'll be pleased to know that our tests revealed several other good models to choose from.

First up are those that don't come with a radio. The **Altec Lansing M602** (£133 online, bottom left) sounds good when playing music from your digital player. Another set without a radio is the **JBL Radial** (£180 from John Lewis, above left). It has a good sound but isn't the easiest set to use.



**Logitech AudioStation, £200**

If a radio is a must-have, consider the **Logitech AudioStation** (£200 from Argos, John Lewis and Tesco, above). It has an AM/FM radio with eight station presets per band and is easy to use. However, we found that it is the most power-hungry speaker dock on test by some margin – although this won't stack up to much extra cash on your electricity bill, it is a minus when we are all supposed to be thinking about how much energy we're using.

The **Monitor Audio i-deck plus** (£200 from Currys, below) also has a radio and is the best-sounding speaker dock on test. Unlike the other models on test, it comes with two separate speakers that you can arrange to get the best possible stereo sound.



**Monitor Audio i-deck plus, £200**



**Altec Lansing M602, £133**

## How we test



The gadgets were tested by our lab and consumers

We tested the accessories at our laboratory and also gave the alarm clocks, transmitters and gadgets to a panel of consumers; they got to use them over a fortnight to see how well they worked in normal use. We considered both the lab's testing results and users' verdicts in our overall assessment.

## Rest on test

Other accessories we tested

### FM TRANSMITTERS

AudiAx DGT-202, Belkin TuneCast II, Kensington Universal

### SPEAKER DOCKS

Cyruslink LinkDock, Gear4 StreetParty N2, Intempo Digital iDS-01BR Series, Intempo Digital iDS-02, Jamo i200, Logic3 IP106

## Contacts

**Altec Lansing** 0870 458 0011  
www.alteclansing.com

**AudiAx** 020 8676 4850; www.digiana.com

**Belkin** 0845 607 7787; www.belkin.com

**Cyruslink** 01480 410 900  
www.cyrusaudio.com

**Gear4** 01494 436 221; www.gear4.com

**Griffin** www.griffintechnology.com

**H2O Audio** www.h2oaudio.com

**iHome** www.ihomeintl.com

**Intempo** 0161 828 5219; www.intempo-digital.co.uk

**Ion** 01252 341 400; www.ion-audio.com

**Jamo** 01923 205 600; www.jamo.com

**JBL** www.jbl.com

**Kensington** 0845 603 1730

http://uk.kensington.com

**Logic3** 01923 471 000; www.spectravideo.com

**Logitech** 020 7309 0127; www.logitech.com

**Monitor Audio** 01268 740 580  
www.monitoraudio.co.uk