

Digital audio speaker docks

With speaker docks, we've found that you get what you pay for. Here, we reveal the best – and some you should avoid

M P3 players have revolutionised the way we listen to music on the go. Speaker docks aim to take the revolution a stage further – allowing you to put your MP3 player at the heart of your home music system and clear away that pile of dusty old CDs for good.

We've tested a range of speaker docks to see which are worthy of cradling your MP3 player.

Unfortunately, audio quality from speaker docks tends to be a mixed bag. There are lots of cheap portable speaker docks on the market, starting from less than £40, but they're unlikely to do justice to your music collection (see Don't Buys, opposite).

For truly excellent sound, you should expect to pay more. Our latest tests revealed only one Best Buy – the Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin, which costs £399. At www.which.co.uk/speakerdocks you'll find full reviews of all the speaker docks we've tested.

As Apple dominates the MP3 player market, most speaker docks are designed for use with iPods and usually charge them while they're docked.

However, we have found that newer generations of the iPod and iPhone can't be charged with some older models of speaker dock – see 'Power struggles', below, for more information.

Most docks can be hooked up to other types of MP3 player using a standard 3.5mm 'audio line-in' (a cable that would fit a standard headphone socket), though you won't be able to charge your player if it's connected this way.

Some speaker docks can be powered by batteries – ideal if you want to listen to music in the park or the garden. All of the docks we've tested come with a remote control, allowing you to change tracks and adjust the volume from across the room. Some remotes even allow you to navigate your iPod's menu.

If you don't want to splash out on a speaker dock, you can connect your MP3 player to most hi-fi systems using a 3.5mm to twin stereo phono cable – and you'll often get better sound quality with this type of setup. This type of cable typically costs around £5 – that's £394 less than our Best Buy speaker, the B&W Zeppelin.

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71% Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin £399

This speaker dock certainly has the wow factor, but it comes with a hefty price tag. Fortunately, the sound quality is impressive. The Zeppelin produces a natural sound, and does great justice to a range of music. Bass notes are rich and warm, though they're occasionally a little overenthusiastic.

The speaker dock itself is huge – it's the heaviest we've tested by far – so be sure you have enough space to accommodate it. You can set the angle of the unit with a rubber 'tilt pad' that comes with it, although this isn't particularly straightforward as the Zeppelin itself is so bulky.

The Zeppelin is fully compatible with the latest range of Apple products – it will charge as well as play music through the iPhone 3G, fourth generation iPod Nano and second generation iPod Touch – as well as older models.

WORTH KNOWING The Zeppelin's pebble-shaped remote can't be used to navigate an iPod menu.

Weight 7.5kg Power consumption (at normal listening level) 12.2 watts Power consumption on standby 5.2 watts



POWER STRUGGLES

Why charging a new iPod or iPhone could be problematic

In the past, it didn't matter whether your speaker dock used USB or FireWire-based technology to charge your iPod or iPhone. However, new Apple products don't use FireWire as a means of receiving power. That means the new iPhone 3G, fourth generation iPod Nano and second generation iPod Touch

– and any Apple products released in the future – will only charge using USB technology.

As a result, some docks won't be able to charge new Apple devices. We've checked for this in our tests, and the table opposite shows which speaker docks can charge all newer versions of iPods and iPhones.

■ Another issue you may experience with the new iPhone 3G is interference when it is docked. This is due to mobile phone reception, and can be stopped only by switching the iPhone into airplane mode.

For more on compatibility issues, visit www.which.co.uk/speakerdocks.

Contacts

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www.bowers-wilkins.com; 01903 221 500
Gear 4 www.gear4.com
Hitachi www.hitachi.co.uk
Intempo Digital www.intempodigital.com
0161 828 5243
JBL www.jbl.com
Klipsch www.klipsch.com
Logic 3 www.logic3.com; 01923 471000
Logitech www.logitech.com
Philips www.philips.co.uk; 0845 601 0354
Xtrememac www.xtrememac.com

Worth considering

The Bose Sound Dock is a great Best Buy from a previous test

BOSE SOUND DOCK £150

We first tested the Sound Dock in November 2005, and it's still a smart choice for a high-quality speaker dock. Music is vibrant and clean, with plenty of detail, and there's little distortion even at higher volumes. It's an easy model to use, although the small remote is rather limited in functionality. As the Sound Dock was subject to a much earlier test programme, we cannot directly compare its test score with the



scores of the speaker docks in this test.

WORTH KNOWING: Bose has just updated the original Sound Dock with the Sound Dock II (£220), which is capable of charging the latest iPod models and the iPhone 3G.

Don't Buys

For sound quality, this trio was disappointing

■ GEAR4 STREET

PARTY III £50 29% Music sounded scratchy on this portable device. Complex jazz numbers revealed some distortion, and our panel also detected some interference.

On the plus side, as the Street Party III is so basic, it's easy to use.

■ HITACHI KC90 £70

29% The KC90 doubles as an FM clock radio, and allows you to set 20 radio

stations. Our experts were far from impressed by the audio quality, though, which they described as 'thin and raspy'.

■ XTREMEMAC TANGO

X2 £85 27% It scored well on power

consumption, but the Tango X2 has one of the worst sound quality scores we have given to a speaker dock. Our panel said music sounded shrill and distortion was audible.



MODEL	SPECIFICATION						WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE				SCORE %
	PRICE (£)	SIZE (cm) (hwxwd)	CHARGES NEWER IPODS AND IPHONES	RADIO	AUX INPUT	BATTERY LIFE (hours)	SOUND QUALITY	FEATURES	POWER CONSUMPTION	EASE OF USE	
1 BOWERS & WILKINS Zeppelin	399	22x64x26	✓		✓	n/a	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	71
2 ALTEC LANSING T612	150	21x35x13	✓		✓	n/a	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	58
3 KLIPSCH iGroove	148	14x40x30			✓	n/a	★★★★★	★★	★★	★★	56
4 KLIPSCH Room Groove	248	17x39x16			✓	n/a	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★	55
5 LOGITECH Pure-Fi Elite	165	19x41x15	✓	FM/AM	✓	n/a	★★★★★	★	★★	★★	55
6 GEAR4 House Party IV	70	17x28x15	✓	FM	✓	n/a	★★★★	★	★★★★★	★★★★	49
7 GEAR4 Bass Station	75	18x44x20			✓	n/a	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	48
8 JBL Micro Radial	100	19x22x11			✓	n/a	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	48
9 PHILIPS AJ300DB	70	19x16x17	✓		✓	n/a	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	46
10 LOGITECH MM50	50	90x33x97 ^a	✓		✓	10	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★	42
11 JBL On Stage III	100	5x19x19	✓		✓	14	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	37
12 LOGIC 3 i-Station 8	70	20x22x11			✓	5	★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	37
13 INTEMPO IDS-03	40	21x24x15			✓	n/a	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	34
14 GEAR4 Street Party III	50	12x22x7	✓		✓	9	★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	29
15 HITACHI KC-90	70	16x20x13	✓	FM	✓	n/a	★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	29
16 XTREMEMAC Tango Digital X2	85	11x30x19	✓	FM/AM	✓	n/a	★	★	★★★★★	★★★★	27

^a With legs extended

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Specification

Price See p47. **Charges newer iPods and iPhones** A ✓ means the speaker dock will charge the newest generations of the iPod and iPhone. **Aux input** A ✓ means

the dock has a 3.5mm mini jack for connecting to any MP3 player.

Battery life (hours) If the dock takes batteries, we measure the battery running time at a moderate listening level. All docks can be powered from the mains.

Which? test performance

Sound quality Based on technical measurements and assessment by an expert listening panel.

Features Based on connectivity, versatility, controls and portability.

Power consumption Based on power consumption during playback at normal volume levels,

in standby and, where applicable, running time of batteries.

Score

Ignores price and is based on:

Sound quality	70%
Ease of use	20%
Features	5%
Power consumption	5%