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**December 17, 2007**

**iPod Sound Systems**

There are dozens of iPod-compatible sound systems on the market. You can't swing a cat in a consumer electronics store without knocking over stacks of them. We've rounded up over 20 of the best, put them all on the bench and let 'em rip. What follows is our short list of the best in each category, with ties given where we couldn't pick a clear favorite. Some models sound so similar that the only way to choose is because of a unique feature or a cool design aspect. Price did not factor into the equation, since in virtually all cases the prices are so close as to be irrelevant.



I can only imagine how many times Apple designers tried to fit little speakers to the iPod, only to have their designs end up in the trash. The iPod is so perfect as it is that bulky speakers just have to be a separate item. Recalling the Great Boombox Plague of the 1980s, perhaps Steve Jobs simply doesn't care to be exposed other people's musical tastes -- unless they are buying that music from the iTunes Store so all he hears is the sweet *ka-ching!* of profit. *De gustibus* may be *non disputantur* but everybody likes to get paid.

Of course, Apple does offer one iPod sound system, the \$349 [Apple Hi-Fi](#). Requests to Apple for a loaner to review have yielded no response, so the Hi-Fi is not included in this roundup. The Hi-Fi began quietly disappearing from retail racks a couple of months ago and it is no longer available at Apple's online store, so they are either working on an updated model (likely, since the Hi-Fi product page is still up on Apple's website) or leaving the iPod sound system business for other companies to exploit.

**Best All-Purpose iPod Sound System: Harman Kardon Go+Play (\$349)**

This amazing machine really crosses categories. It's certainly portable, weighing in at under 5 pounds with batteries. Yet it sounds better than any other sound system made strictly for AC-powered desktop use. The Go+Play uses the exact components Harman Kardon made for the Mercedes S-class. Its sound is unlike anything else any other unit is capable of emitting. The



high end is airy and crystal clear, while the dual subwoofers pump out so much clean, thumping bass you'll have the neighbors

complaining. Between the extremes there lies the all-important mids, and HK made them pour out exactly right. I compared the Go+Play to my Audioengine A5 desktop monitors (\$349 street) and it was basically a wash. The A5s were flatter (meaning more accurate compared to the source material) and the stereo "soundstage" was wider since they were farther apart. But in detail, volume, and sheer spine-tingling power, the Go+Play held its own. If I was going to play my music in some music exec's office, I'd drop the Go+Play on his desk and let it blow his ponytail back.

This Go+Play is not without controversy. Other reviewers have whined about the lack of equalization controls and the horizontal dock bed. Yep, your \$350 sound system has no bass or treble controls -- nor does it need them. Harman Kardon designed in the hi-res digital logic to make all necessary adjustments for you. To my ears, they got it absolutely right. I could not find a volume level that needed any EQ to make it better. Technically, you could employ your iPod's internal equalizer presets to bend it as you please, but I see no need. The flat dock is only a problem if you want to use the remote to pick songs from you iPod screen when you are across the room. From that far away, you wouldn't be able to read it anyway. I don't think this is a deal breaker, but you might. I think having the iPod display visible from the front of the machine would detract from the ultra-minimalist aesthetic of the thing. Speaking of the remote, it uses RF (radio frequency) instead of IR (infrared) so you don't have to aim it to use it. You also get greater range. There is even a pop-out drawer for it hidden in the back of the Go+Play.

Obviously, I could rattle on and on about this remarkable machine, so I'll just leave you with this single sentence description: 120-watts cleanly powering four world-class speakers built into a portable, black and silver work of art that consistently lets your iPod's music sound absolutely wonderful at any volume, indoors or out.

[Harman Kardon](#)

#### Best Stationary iPod Sound System: Audioengine A2 Powered Speakers (\$199)

Okay, so I bent the rules a little. The Audioengine A2 doesn't not have an iPod dock unless you plopp one on top. But the left speaker does have the connections to make this work with the iPod dock you already own. The company doesn't market the A2 as an iPod-specific sound system, but it works beautifully that way. At one-third the size of the \$349 Audioengine A5, these compact speakers still sound so full you'll be looking around for a secret subwoofer under the desk. Silk tweeters, kevlar woofers, dual class A/B 30-watt amplifier, beautifully finished cabinets in black or white, and all the gold-tipped cables you'll need for connect anything to them.



If you're up for spending \$150 more, get the Audioengine A5 (\$349) instead. More lows, more power, more everything. Buying the A5s makes sense if you want to fill a living room with sound and you don't plan to move them around much. I've used a pair for almost a year now for all my everyday listening and as second monitors for my Pro Tools recording, mixing, and mastering work. They sit atop a pair of \$1000 Mackie HR824 studio monitors I use for my critical work. The A5s sound near as good unless I have to crank up the volume to paint-peeling, rafter-rattling levels. These are magnificent sounding, great-looking powered studio monitors pretending to be mere powered speakers. I don't think you will find better sound for the price and you definitely won't find anything better looking.



[Audioengine USA](#)





**Best Mobile iPod Sound System: Logitech Pure-Fi Anywhere (\$149) and Altec Lansing iM600 (\$149)**

This was a tough call. Two identically priced units from two great companies in fierce competition. There are plenty of things about the two products that will sway you one way or the other, but either way you win. They both offer brilliant sound quality from compact designs that were built to last. They are more alike than they are different. The Logitech is wide where the Altec is more squarish but both pack small and flat. The Logitech has an AC adapter that fits in the iPod well for easy travel, while the Altec has a very good FM radio. Both have internal rechargeable batteries, the Logitech rated at 10 hours and the Altec rated at 7. Both offer stereo field expander logic to trick your ears into thinking the speakers are farther apart, though at the risk of a slight increase in distortion at max volume. Both have auxiliary input jacks for non-iPod audio sources and both have excellent remote controls. Both have comparable output power and maximum volume before distortion spoils the party. The Logitech has a sweet fitted travel case, while the Altec has an alarm clock feature. If you haven't already decided which one you want more at this point, then perhaps you don't need a mobile sound system after all.

[Logitech](#)

[Altec Lansing](#)

**HONORABLE MENTIONS**

Want to spend a little less and still get good sound, useful features, and solid build quality? Consider the following products as safe choices in this increasingly crowded market niche:



**Macally TunePro (\$99)**

We were impressed with the TunePro for its pleasant combination of superior good looks, small footprint, cool embedded clock display, excellent radio, and clear sound from its flat panel speakers. If you need an iPod-compatible clock radio on your bedside table and don't plan to blast it loud enough to wake the whole house, the TunePro is a great choice.

[Macally](#)

**Griffin Technologies Journi (\$130)**

The Journi was hot on the heels of both the Pure-Fi Anywhere and the iM600 for top billing. It has a comparable feature set, stereo field expander logic, aux input, rechargeable battery, remote control, and a brilliant design including an integrated case that folds into a stand. In fact the only area that fell from "excellent" to "good" was the sound quality when cranked way up high. If you never listen really loud, then you could save yourself \$20 and go with the Journi. You've got to love that black faux-leather case/stand!

[Griffin Technology](#)



**Altec Lansing iM9 (\$199, heavily discounted online)**

If your travels take you places where your gear tends to get roughed up a bit, you should consider the Altec Lansing iM9. It offers much of what makes the Pure-Fi Anywhere and the iM600 attractive, but it's wrapped up in a semi-rugged shell. Bass output is remarkably good for its size, though the trebles are not quite as sweet as others in this range. It uses



alkaline C-size batteries instead of a built-in rechargeable pack and it is about two pounds heavier, but it comes with a really nice backpack-style case for taking your music where no one has gone before.

[Altec Lansing](#)

#### iHome iH82 Powered Speakers (\$129)

If you want a stationary bookshelf-style stereo in a bedroom, kitchen, or dorm room but can't pony up for the Audioengines, consider the iHome iH82. This is a pair of powered speakers, one of which has a built-in iPod dock. Sound quality is nothing to write home about but is certainly adequate for casual listening. These would be great for an iPod-toting teen. The list price of \$129 is too high for what you get. If this set listed for \$99 they'd be a lot easier to recommend -- look for discounts online.

[iHome Audio](#)



#### DLO iBoom Travel (\$89)

Though there isn't much of what you'd call *boom* in the iBoom Travel, there is plenty of travel potential due to its diminutive proportions. This is the smallest iPod clock radio we've seen and it does all the things you'd expect it to and does them well. Just don't expect the little guy to blow your socks off.

[DLO](#)

~David MacNeill

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Posted by dtm at December 17, 2007 02:03 AM

#### Comments