

JBL

LS Series



\$1,699 - \$5,999

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PERFORMANCE



DESIGN



FEATURES



▲ FOR

Astonishingly crisp high-end sound, lush design

▼ AGAINST

Needs a strong amp to drive them due to low frequency, will reveal all flaws in your system.

► CONCLUSION

Overall, JBL's LS 5.1 system is a hoot to hear. The good news is that this system is a joy to behold and great to pass off as hi-fi to the unsuspecting. That is until you decide to really let them rip, when their serious nature will be revealed.

JBL Brings Back High-End

THE LUXURIOUS-LOOKING 5.1 PACKAGE SOUNDS BETTER THE MORE POWER YOU PUT THROUGH IT. THAT'S NOT A BAD THING, SAYS ADAM RAYNER.

Fondly known as 'Gerbil' in the oh-so-witty world of pro-audio, American loudspeaker specialist JBL has a long history of some of the most important developments in the physical side of speaker design. The LS series, which are a development of an old idea, has been refined much like the humble cassette deck was by Nakamichi. The LS series don't just use horns, they feature full-on professional-style compression drivers.

This is a sexy set of speakers with all the luscious beauty of tropical hardwood – although it might hurt your environmental soul as this stuff is not a renewable resource and could well have been ripped out of the rainforest. One look at that ebony wood veneer, though and I was in love. They are luscious – opulent even. Funny thing is, a professional acoustic woodsmith I know came to visit and pronounced them hideous.

The grilles are a bit plasticky but when you remove them (there are badges on both the grilles' and enclosures' fronts) you see why these speakers are so serious. If you don't have kids or a cat you'll want to leave the grilles in a cupboard; the horn-toting front baffles are simply evilly sexy in their form-breeds-function shapeliness.

The 2-inch high-frequency Bi-radial horns are cunningly formed. They sit like a wide-open frog's mouth beneath the state-of-the-art 0.75in UHF ring radiator tweeter. This deadly duo makes for a high-frequency performance that can be superbly directional and a massive efficiency in the top notes that enables little details, tings, pings, creaks and clunks to come fabulously to the fore. However, this also means that any hiss at all, any lack in that oh-so-important signal-to-

noise ratio specification in any part of your system, and you will hear it like a bag of snakes. A nothing noise becomes an irritating 'Pishhh!' Especially as you need to drive the living daylight out of these speakers to get them to sing. At low levels they have an acceptable detail retrieval and can give you all the background fiddle-faddling you'll want from your soundtracks, but when cranked, something wonderful happens. They come to life.

The LS system is a bit like a huge Mercedes SL500 I once took for a test drive, which was always polite until it 'woke up' at 135mph and seemed ready to really rock. These speakers took on another character at near-to-full levels of gain. As soon as I got to a certain point, the

WHEN CRANKED, SOMETHING WONDERFUL HAPPENS

midband became fuller, the top mids crisper and all the soundstage melded into one hellacious mayhem of action, but with all the components of it discernible individually.

Now let's play a little game I call 'testing speakers together.' *Cars* by digital animation kings Pixar opens with shiny hero Lightning McQueen giving himself a pep talk in his trailer, which is revealed to be parked at a heaving racetrack just before the off. If you turn the volume up loud enough, there's a whole layer of surround sound background hubbub, in every channel, in what you thought were the quiet reverie moments. It's 20dB or more down in the mix but it's there. I love the movie but had never played it through speakers with the resolution of this system,

and had not heard this layer before – when I found it I was astonished and delighted. Beware, though. If you're hearing this level of detail, volume levels could be dangerous! McQueen's voice was quite loud but when the brief bursts of race action cut into his own blitherings, it took my face off, metaphorically speaking.

To my ears, this LS system is genuinely brilliant. Huge in scale and limitless in potency and attack. It may not be refined as, say, a Bowers & Wilkins or KEF 'mad-tweeter' technology soundstage, but it can work better under pressure.

And, of course, that's the point. These things have the appearance of really expensive furniture and if you compared them to Bowers & Wilkins' 800 series at literally twice the price, you might wonder why the B&Ws are so much more costly. Also, whilst ultimate refinement might not be what these models are all about, the sheer brio of this system made me grin like a nutter.

You get two sets of speaker connections on the back of each enclosure. All bar the centre speaker have wide-mouthed port tubes set into their behinds for deep breathing. The subwoofer is quite straightforward in operation – you get gain, crossover, a switchable phase flipper and an override switch to use your own crossover. I was able to overload the woofer, but in time found a setting that was able to cope with the levels offered it, even during the *Cars* sequence. If anything, the enormous, professional playback-room grade output of these barely disguised control monitors is so big as to make the job of bass a tough one. Yes, the woofer is big (it employs a 12in driver) but I reckon this array really needs two of them.