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Zeppelin Air Review

Posted 05/06/2011 at 11:30am | by Ray Aguilera

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This ain't no lead balloon

iPod docks are a dime a dozen—or in the case of the new Zeppelin Air, 5,999 dimes and a nickel. But while most run-of-the-mill docks will elicit something in the range of “meh” to “that sounds OK” from your friends, the first thing we said when we fired up the Zeppelin Air was “holy *&#@#!” Yep, it's that good.

With the Air, Bowers & Wilkins built on the success of their original Zeppelin (Apr/08, 4 stars), but rather than rest on their laurels, those clever Brits have improved one of our all-time favorite iPod accessories. This time around, the Zep is rocking more power, better electronics, and Apple's AirPlay technology for wireless streaming from your Apple devices. For 2011, B&W upgraded to five separate amps: individual 25-watt amps for each of the two tweeters and midrange drivers, and a 50-watt powerhouse for the 5-inch subwoofer. To give the amps more to play with, the revamped Zeppelin features a new 24-bit, 96kHz digital audio converter (DAC) to grab the best possible signal from your late-model iPod or iPhone.



Zeppelin Air sports beefier sound and Apple's new AirPlay wireless streaming.

But the dock portion of this speaker dock gets overshadowed by Apple's new hotness. The Zeppelin Air is one of the first third-party devices to incorporate Apple's AirPlay technology. For the uninitiated, AirPlay is a wireless streaming protocol for Macs and iOS devices. It's kind of like AirTunes in the Airport Express, but a lot cooler. AirPlay streams from your iOS device or desktop iTunes over your existing network. If you're lucky enough to be able to spring for multiple AirPlay devices, you can stream to multiple speakers at once from a Mac. On an iPhone, iPod touch, or iPad, however, you're limited to streaming to a single device at a time, although switching devices as you move from room to room is seamless. Whenever our iPhone reconnected to our Wi-Fi network, the Zeppelin automatically became

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available as external speakers in the iPod app.

Of course, streaming will take a toll on your network, but we had no problems with web surfing and “normal” downloading while streaming, although your luck might be different if you’re trying to watch streaming video in one room and stream to an AirPlay device in another. But those are limitations of your network, not the Zeppelin.

If you follow the included instructions and temporarily tether your new Zeppelin Air to a Mac, setup is a breeze. B&W also recently rolled out a completely wireless setup process, and when we reset our unit, we were able to get it running on our network the first time out.

When it comes to the heart of the device—the sound—the Air doesn’t disappoint. Even at apartment-filling top-end volumes, the Air remained rock solid with deep bass that belied the Air’s (relatively) small size. And at over 25 inches wide, the Air offers a wide soundstage, making it great for double duty as a soundbar speaker under an HDTV plugged into the AUX input on the back.

So it sounds great and looks great, but there’s got to be a downside, right? The included remote (similar to the ones offered with other B&W devices) is adequate, but its roly-poly bean shape and indistinguishable buttons make it hard to use without looking. And the single multicolor LED indicator is tiny and understated (which we like), but it’s also difficult to see from across the room (which we don’t like). Finally, B&W once again includes a luxe catalog of other B&W gear in the box...but you’ll still have to download a PDF if you want a proper owner’s manual. For six Benjis, that just feels cheap.

The bottom line. It’s pricey, but for music fans, the updated Zeppelin offers excellent sound and great new features for the same price as its predecessor.

Product	Zeppelin Air
Company	Bowers & Wilkins
Contact	bowers-wilkins.com
Price	\$599.95
Requirements	iPod, iPhone, or other audio device; iOS 4.2 or iTunes 10.2 or later to use AirPlay
Positives +	Improved sound quality. AirPlay for wireless playback. AUX input and composite video pass-through. Can connect via USB for iTunes syncing.
Negatives +	Remote is so-so. Includes printed catalogue of other B&W gear, but no hard-copy owner’s manual. Price puts it out of reach of lots of music fans. Cloth speaker covers are a dust magnet.


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