

## B&W ZEPPELIN AIR

This is B&W's new and improved Zeppelin Air iPhone dock. The original was obviously a design statement, although its curves served a sound-centric purpose, for example angling the speakers outward for a wider response. But when that original model

launched, we found we weren't too fussed about the sound, particularly at \$1000 a unit. Nice, but not as thrilling as we imagined from its significant heraldry and lineage.

Given all the changes on this Air version, perhaps B&W also thought it could improve things. Let's see how high the Air can fly.

### Equipment

The Zeppelin Air looks superficially similar to the original, bar the disappearance of the shiny chrome rear. But inside this is a comprehensive redesign. There are new drive units — a pair of the same 25mm Nautilus tube aluminium tweeters used in the company's MM1 desktop speakers (which we did like), a pair of 75mm midrange speakers and one 125mm bass driver. These are now individually driven by dedicated 'audiophile' Class-D amplifiers (4 x 25W, 1 x 50W for the bass driver), and all sources are now upconverted through a 24-bit/96kHz DAC. B&W says the addition of advanced DSP plus the company's Flowport technology has dramatically improved the bass performance.

The new Air suffix, of course, comes from its compatibility with Apple's AirPlay. This means you don't even need to dock your iPhone (or iPod touch or iPad, not that you could dock an iPad anyway). Instead you can hold your iDevice of choice and use it to get songs streaming direct via your Wi-Fi network from either the device itself, or even more neatly from your home PC/Mac iTunes collection.

### Performance

Those last couple of paragraphs all got rather technical. The beauty of using the Zeppelin is that things aren't at all technical. Just launch the 'iPod' App on your iPhone/Pad, play a song, and use the new AirPlay drop-





down menu to select the B&W Zeppelin Air. Et voilà, out come your tunes — no physical contact required. Plus the convenience of holding on to your device as, effectively, the remote control.

So that's what we did. And as soon as Björk's *Aeroplane* (accidentally appropriate) was streaming its way invisibly from iPad to Zeppelin, the quality of the tweeters was immediately obvious in the depth and detail of the background atmosphere and the *réalité-acoustic* around the brass. And just before the vocal, in came the bass. It was positively alarming, and we feared that B&W had gone the same path as B&O, overengineering a massive bass component that would dominate to the detriment of the whole. But here there was no lack of cut-through to the vocal, which sounded lovely, all her emotional Icelandic minutiae, every wince and chuckle reaching through, while cymbals shone, wood blocks knocked. It was all there, big and loud, and sounding more like a small hi-fi system than any contender in this group. It's big bass that doesn't interfere.

The Björk/David Arnold collaboration *Play Dead* followed, and we began to feel like the guy in the old Maxell tape ads as the sound blasted past us. The playlist continued — Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole, rich, dynamic, well supported. The size and fidelity from a single-piece unit has only been matched, in our memory, by VAF

Acoustics' shockingly-discontinued Octavio dock. And all this while selecting tunes by touchscreen from the iPad on our lap. Looking for the future? Come and play.

**Conclusion**

Especially interesting here is that the original Zeppelin definitely didn't do this for us. It was the first superdock, priced at \$999, a spectacular bit of design, a gamble that proved worth taking. It was full of bits of hi-fi, but the result lacked a bit of hi-fi finesse.

The new Zeppelin Air most definitely hits the spot, over and over, and, of course, you don't even need to dock your iPhone or iPod; indeed you don't even need to own an iPhone or iPod, since you can stream and control everything from your main Mac or

PC. Or an iPad. There's tasty. And this time it's \$799, all praise to parity of the dollar.

B&W's only worry now will be maintaining its desire to appear 'exclusive' once everyone's bought one.

**B&W ZEPPELIN AIR**

Price: \$799

Dimensions (whd): 640 x 173 x 208mm

Weight: 6.2kg

- ⊕ Great music
- ⊕ Bass strong but doesn't dominate
- ⊕ The joys of AirPlay

⊖ Early networking issues

Contact: Convoy International

Tel: 02 9700 0111

Web: www.ehifi.com.au

for example, when you're setting an alarm, everything disappears except a Select key and the ones intended for up and down. It saves a lot of time, and is further assisted by the use of words rather than icons, except a few widely-recognised symbols for eject, play, etc.

There is also an auxiliary minijack input at the rear, and a 10-key remote control, which we suspect Mr Jensen delegated to a junior design team, it being less impressive, although an aesthetic match for the main unit.

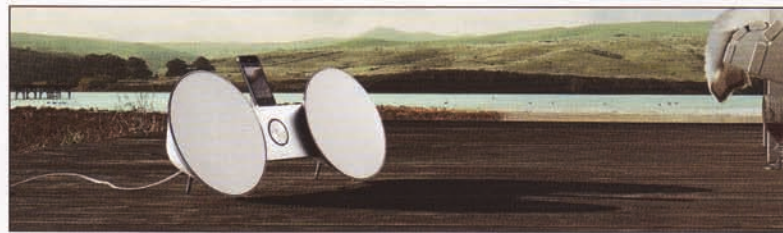
**Performance**

Slide a CD smoothly into the Tangent and it instantly impresses with a spacious sound that belies its dimensions. As with the Arcam rCube, stereo imaging is assisted by the speakers firing from the sides of the cube — bass as well as treble in this case, since it uses just a pair of three-inch full-range drivers. This does limit the bass emerging (you won't be shaking up any neighbours), but you can still feel the thud of a bass drum, and from 100Hz upwards this is a high-quality system suitable for any small or medium-sized rooms — home office, bedroom (twin alarms), small lounges. The sonic balance can be adjusted by rather too many EQ options — there's loudness on/off, bass/treble controls, and a set of EQ options, all of which can be piled on top of each other if you're not careful. This was one occasion where we did opt for the 'Pop' EQ option, which seemed best at nudging up the bass without causing deleterious side-effects.

The radio section worked great — a telescopic rod antenna extends from the top, though it can't be rotated to improve reception, nor replaced by an external aerial.

**Conclusion**

We enjoyed the Fjord greatly. It is perhaps not inexpensive given its conventionality of sources, but it's certainly a high-quality piece of equipment, beautifully designed.



**FINAL VERDICT**

With such SuperDock joys, which hero would we choose to save us?

The good news is that sonically, there's not a duffer in the contest. We reckon you could take home any of the docks here and you'd get sound either as good as you were expecting, or substantially better.

So how to choose? We can run through the horses-for-courses arguments first.

Want portability coupled with quality? Arcam's rCube stands proud. It's not the lightest portable in the world at 5kg, but it's surely one of the most hi-fi ways on earth to carry your tunes around — though we suspect Arcam intends the rCube's portability to be less 'on-the-shoulder ghetto-blasters-style street use' and more a bonus of easy relocation — out to the patio or off to the holiday home. It's not cheap, and we didn't enjoy the sound quite as much as some others, but as portable hi-fi goes, it cuts a unique path.

The B&O — well, it's crazy, innit. Looks like a bicycle, sounds like rather a bass beast for our tastes. And costs a fair bit, though perhaps less than you'd expect from the company. Still it docks an iPad, which is pretty darned cool, and has undeniable cachet. We reckon you'll already have decided if this is the dock for you.

The Tangent Fjord's relatively simple speaker configuration prevents it entirely reaching the sonic highs of some rivals here. But the sound is still highly enjoyable, the touch-sensitive controls are magnificent, and the design top-notch. Plus it's alone here in having a CD player.

The Conran Audio might seem an oddity to some — we'd encourage you to get up close with it in a showroom somewhere, because it's one of those products that feels better than it photographs. You'll then also be able to hear its ever-enjoyable sonic balance, along with a very useful Bluetooth streaming mode. It's simply well designed.

But we did have a clear favourite here — and not simply because it looks amazing and reeks of build quality. The B&W Zeppelin Air sounds gorgeous, with hi-fi-level qualities that had us playing track after track. You get AirPlay included, with no need to pay an extra fee. We even love its purple LED, and hope it heralds a move away from the 'Tron' electric blue that has been dominating home hi-fi in recent years.

And at the current price of \$799, we reckon it's a winner. Pick the others on their individual merits, by all means, and audition them with your own favourite music if you can. But make sure you include the Zeppelin Air in your deliberations. It's a high flyer. Jez Ford

**TANGENT FJORD**

Price: \$999 (DAB+ \$1199)  
Dimensions (whd): 170 x 170 x 185mm  
Weight: 3.5kg

- ⊕ Scandinavian design
- ⊕ CD player as well as dock
- ⊕ DAB+ version available

⊖ Overkill on EQ. options

Contact: Syntec International  
Tel: 1800 648 628  
Web: www.syntec.com.au