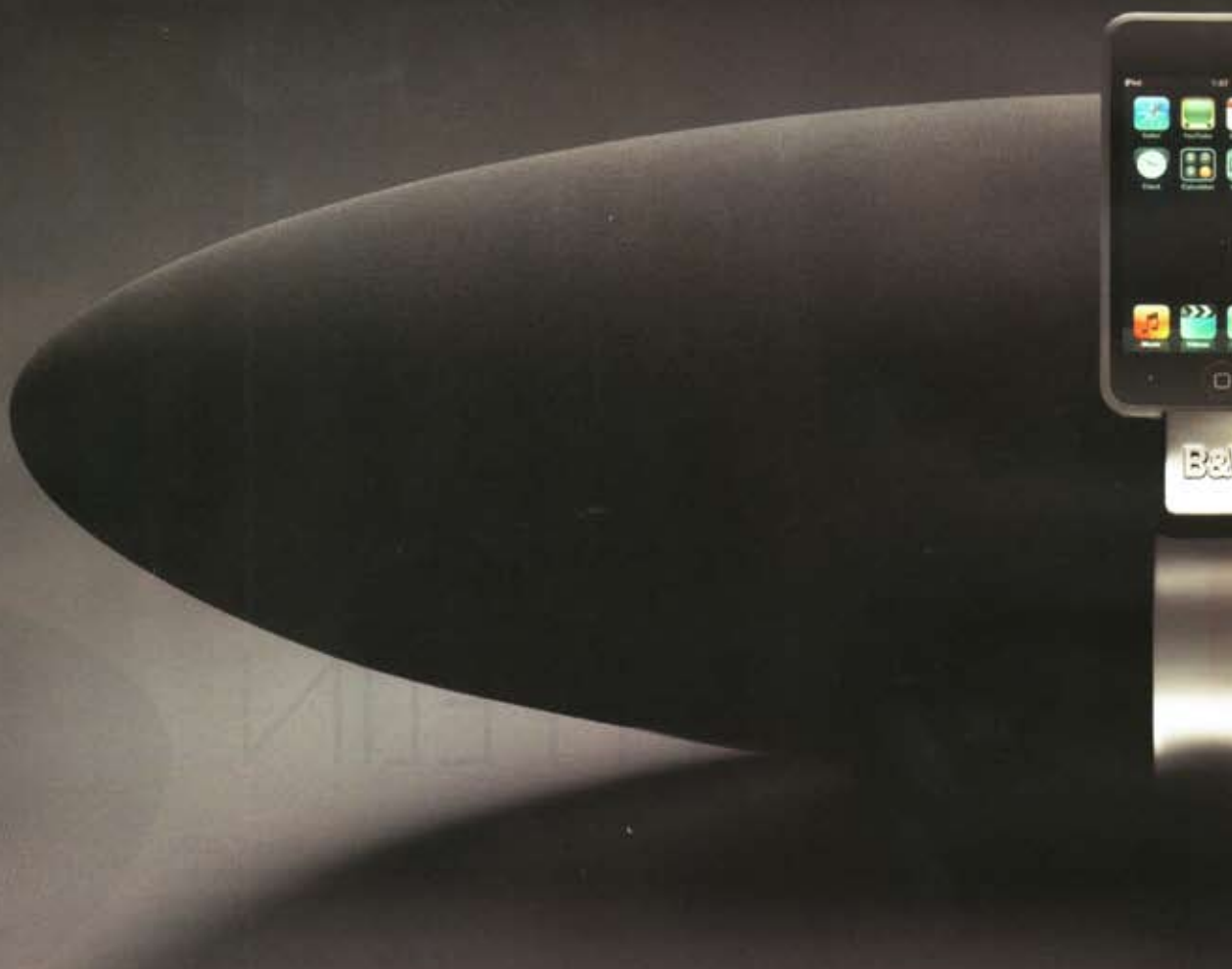


LADIES & GENTS, IT'S THE SUPERCOOL \$999 IPOD DOCKS



Here at *Geare* we run through iPod (now also iPhone) docks like they're going out of fashion. But you couldn't get more fashionable than the two speaker docks here, both of them returning mere cents from a thousand dollars, both of them eliciting an involuntary spurt of drool from our side cheeks as we unwrapped them. With the B&W Zeppelin and the Bernstein ITR10, the iPod speaker dock has come of age.

Yet they couldn't be more different. The Zeppelin is more bonkers than a silver cage of frogs on a caffeine diet, yet comes with

all the hi-fi heritage of B&W. Indeed the company is keen to emphasise this — listen to this quote, for example, from the richly-produced booklet delivered amongst the Zeppelin's fine packaging:

"The reference speaker Zeppelin is a direct descendant of B&W's legendary reference speaker range. The 800 Series is sought after by world-leading recording studios... what an artist plays is what gets played back to them. With Zeppelin, the technologies that allow that to happen can be experienced in your own home."

Spinning the once-humble iPod dock as a reference speaker to be compared with its 800 Series, as used in Abbey Road studios — pretty bold stuff, we reckon.

Then there's the valve-laden Bernstein ITR10, from a German company keen to recreate the warm and friendly tones of ye olde radiograms of the past. But with an iPod dock; a bit of a crossbreed, then, but a beautiful product.

So what do you get for splashing those 999 golden kangaroo coins on either of these 'grand' docks? Let's find out... ➤



THE HIGH FLYER: B&W ZEPPELIN

B&W's Zeppelin is an undoubted king among speaker docks. The radical airship styling is not mere bluster, it aims to please in audio terms also. The rounded and tapering ends minimise the baffle area around the drive units, which are themselves of high quality, and everywhere there is technological trickle-down from the company's high-end hi-fi designs.

If you're still choking on the price-tag, remember that the Zeppelin is not solely for iPod amplification. Nearly all iPod docks carry an auxiliary input, usually a stereo minijack socket, into which you can plug a second source, be it a non-Apple MP3 player (or a Shuffle, which rarely adheres to a standard dock), computer output or CD player. Hence iPod speaker docks cater for more than just iPods — they represent the micro hi-fi systems of the moment.

As expected, around the back of the Zeppelin's extraordinary curves is a minijack for this purpose, though this socket can also receive a minijack optical digital input. It's the first bonus to justify the price tag here.

The Zeppelin is full of such upmarket features, the most prominent being its unique springloaded front dock support. Nearly all speaker docks arrive with an infuriating selection of iPod adaptor trays, often unlabelled and hard to identify, from which you must sift for the one tray to fit your particular 4G Red Label photo edition iPod, or whatever. No trays at all come with the Zeppelin, because any iPod (except Shuffles) connect direct to the branded steel curving dock, supported by the slight tension between the angled iPod and the backplate. Very neat, rather superior.

Indeed, all the construction here is absolutely top-notch. Spin the pleasingly-weighty Zeppelin around and admire its shining stainless steel rear panel, funnelling in to a pair of bass ports. Lower the Zeppelin neatly into its rubber tilt-pad designed to fire sound horizontally from the speakers (you can omit the base if you'd prefer the speakers to fire slightly upward). Fondle the remote control, a ravishingly tactile egg, black on top, chrome below.

The grilles are designed to be "difficult to remove", but B&W supplies a handy X-ray image in its glossy included booklets so you can appreciate the Nautilus tube-loaded aluminium-dome tweeters that



push frequency response to 50kHz (at -6dB), the twin 90mm midrange glass-fibre cones marked with "strategically-placed resin-filled slots" to reduce standing waves, and the single 125mm bass unit. Total power is quoted at 150W (50W bass, 25W to each of the other drivers), though no distortion levels for these figures are given and the actual rated total power consumption is 20W. Standby power is a tolerable 3.7W.

Control over a docked iPod is a handy threefold: via the egg-shaped remote control; via the shiny power/volume controls above the dock; or with the iPod's own controls, which remain (unusually) fully functional. Particularly useful is the integration of Zeppelin volume and iPod volume — both work in concert as one control, so that you don't get a low iPod output raising the noise floor to be amplified by the Zeppelin.

So how have B&W's Abbey Road credentials translated into sound quality? The first sonic impression is of solidity and weight. No thin trannie tones or ghetto-blasters bravado here: the Zeppelin sounds rich and full whether running background music at low level or pumping out party-

popping presence. That 125mm driver provides genuine bass (quoted to 45Hz at -6dB) as well as lower midrange, and B&W has included signal processing that aims to maintain an integrated bass/treble balance at any volume. Your iPod also gains a bass adjustment menu (called 'Speakers') when docked in the Zeppelin, useful for different positioning and room characteristics (adjustments made will be retained even after your iPod is removed); the same new menu adds the useful backlight option of "only on when playing", plus a special 'large album art' setting to make your iPod even more beautiful than usual.

We needed no EQ adjustments, loving the weight and solidity of thump behind the bass-drum pedal on Morcheeba's *Riverbed*, for example, and the snap of snare transients on Joan Armatrading's *Into The Blues* assisted by those metal-dome tweeters. And we particularly enjoyed the Zeppelin at close range — around a metre — where the airship shape allows clear stereo separation between left and right and a precision of image edges that makes vocals especially clear and crisp.

Could you pick it from a small hi-fi system? We think so, yes — bass emphasis here sounds more rounded and processed, the highs are less airy than a pair of good bookshelf designs can achieve.

But the equation is perfectly balanced for its purpose, and B&W's Zeppelin justifies the not insignificant asking price by its combination of aesthetic, build quality and audio pleasures. It's an equation that will be well-known to aficionados of the B&W University of Sound.



VERDICT

B&W ZEPPELIN

\$999

www.ehifi.com.au
www.conexus.com.au

THE TECH

Inputs: iPod dock; minijack auxiliary/optical digital; USB 2.0 slave (for software updates)

Outputs: composite video; S-Video

Dimensions: 640 x 173 x 208mm (whd)

Weight: 7.3kg



- Stunning design
- Solid and enjoyable sound
- Great build quality
- Optical digital input



- Only price

