

IT'S A KNOCKOUT!

The JBL 'Balboa' home theatre speaker package packs a powerful punch. Rocky would be proud...

JBL Balboa 5.1 home theatre speaker system

Price: \$1499

The name JBL is, of course, derived from the initials of one James B Lansing, who is justly famed for installing the very first cinema sound loudspeakers, way back in the late 1920s! Over the years the company has scaled the very heights of home loudspeaker heaven (among JBL's current high-end models are the \$70,000 K2 S 9800 stereo speakers), but it has rarely ignored the mainstream market.

And so it with the new JBL Balboa home theatre system. This is a full 5.1-channel system, complete with active subwoofer, that sells for just \$1499 for the lot.

EQUIPMENT

The system comes with two Balboa 30 floorstanding loudspeakers for the front stereo pair, the Balboa Centre for... well you guessed it, a pair of Balboa 10s for surround work, and the Balboa SUB10 for bass.

The Balboa 30 main loudspeakers conform to something that JBL has been reintroducing, against much of the industry trend over the last 20 years: a three-way design. This used to be the norm 30 years ago, but two-way systems have been dominant of late. I suppose one's preference is determined by whether you think that midrange crossover problems are best solved by avoiding a crossover completely in the midrange area, and so having a dedicated midrange driver, or by keeping the crossover as simple as possible by having a two-way system.

Each of the main speakers stands 889mm tall with their plastic feet, 229mm wide and 321mm deep. A single set of gold-plated binding posts is provided for wiring. At the top (above 3500Hz), a 19mm titanium-laminate dome tweeter looks after treble,



while a 100mm cellulose fibre cone covers all the midrange (from 600 to 3500Hz), and a 170mm cellulose fibre cone covers the bass below 600Hz.

The drivers are bass reflex loaded, with a large front-mounted port with a slight front flare positioned below the bass driver.

JBL says that these loudspeakers have a nominal impedance of eight ohms and continuous power handling of up to 80W, with the capability of absorbing brief 320W peaks. Their claimed sensitivity is 90 decibels for an input of 2.83V measured at one metre, and for frequency response JBL says 47Hz to 20,000Hz at the -3dB point. JBL says that the 30s weigh 14.5kg, but my scales suggested 13kg. Whichever, they are rather weighty speakers for the price.

A similar design theme is followed for the other speakers, barring the omission of a midrange driver. The Balboa Centre uses three drivers, with a pair of 130mm bass/midrange units handling all the way up to 3500Hz, above which the same 19mm

tweeter kicks in. The bass reflex port on this unit is located on the back, so some care in placement is required.

JBL rates the frequency response of this unit at 80 to 20,000Hz (-3dB), its impedance at eight ohms, its sensitivity at 90dB and its continuous power handling at 75W (300W peaks). It measures 170mm tall, 479mm wide and 260mm deep and weighs 6.9kg.

The Balboa 10 speakers are two-way, two-driver units. Again the 19mm titanium laminate dome makes an appearance, stretching slightly to a lower crossover frequency of 3000Hz. Below this a 130mm cellulose-fibre cone bass/midrange does the work. The continuous and peak power handling specifications fall to 60 and 240W respectively, impedance remains eight ohms. Sensitivity is given as 86dB and the frequency response as 68Hz to 20,000Hz (-3dB).

Each of these weighs 3.9kg and stands 259mm tall, 165mm wide and 210mm deep. The bass reflex ports are rear mounted, so close wall mounting should be avoided.

Finally there's the subbie: the Balboa SUB10. This is a rather large unit for such an inexpensive speaker system, standing an imposing 514mm tall on its pre-attached feet, 347mm wide and 402mm deep. The driver itself is a 250mm unit, mounted in the base of the unit and firing downwards. It is bass reflex loaded, and the large flared port resides on the front of the unit. The inbuilt amplifier is rated at an alleged 100W RMS (I assume JBL means 'continuous', since 'RMS' is meaningless in this context). JBL also gives a peak dynamic power rating of 225W which, according to the stated measurement criteria, would be equivalent to a claimed top speed for a Volkswagen Beetle measured when descending a 40-degree slope with a tail wind. But the numbers game in this business seems to demand weighty figures, and JBL has at least stated its methodology, unlike most.

Anyway, the unit weighs a solid 16kg, and JBL rates its frequency response to the -6dB points as 30-150Hz. There are a pair of stereo line-level inputs plus an LFE one. The LFE skips the adjustable low-pass filter, and is the input that should be used in the great majority of cases. There is a phase reversal switch, and level and low-pass filter knobs. The unit switches itself on and off according to the presence or absence of a signal.

All the units are finished in black ash, with metallic grey highlights around the ports and drivers (if you have the grilles removed).

PERFORMANCE

I started as I always do: listening to the main loudspeakers as a stereo pair. It soon became obvious that the limited low frequency extension implied by JBL's specification was a reality, so I readjusted the AV receiver, setting these speakers to small and the crossover for the front speakers at 50Hz (100Hz for the others).

This filled in the bass nicely and gave them a body they needed. Without the subwoofer, the front speakers tended to be a bit hollow on the kick drum. The bass was nicely controlled, but lacking, the overall sound smooth and, well, strangely gentle.

That's not necessarily a criticism, but compared with my (hugely) more expensive reference system, it was as though the edges were rounded off things, reducing their impact. Perhaps this was a virtue, because they were definitely easy listening, unchallenging loudspeakers, and I expect many people will find them attractive for that reason alone.

The stereo imaging was adequate, with sufficient sharpness but not much depth. Winding forward the volume knob



(carefully, in the knowledge that I had over 200W on tap for each of them) allowed satisfyingly full volume levels, at the cost of a little stress in the overall sound.

Turning to movies the whole system became very satisfying. The extremes I really like with movies such as *Heat* (the massively involving street gunfight and the shattering airport scene near the end) weren't quite fully achievable, but for the most part an exciting surround sound was readily on tap. Certainly all five of the surround speakers integrated well, with good imaging both sideways and across the rear.

Most impressive was the performance of the subwoofer. JBL appears to have designed this unit for powerful levels of quite deep bass, rather than pipe organ pedal-deep extension. That's a wise choice because the great majority of work upon which any subwoofer is called to do fits nicely within those design priorities. It won't shake your internal organs with infrasonics, but for the more common explosions, rumbles and thumps, it performed to the requisite neighbour-bothering levels.

CONCLUSION

It is also worth mentioned that despite the near entry-level pricing of this speaker pack, it comes with a confidence-inspiring five-year warranty.

Does it offer the ultimate in high-end home theatre performance? Of course not! No system does, regardless of the price, and certainly not one costing just \$1499. But it does deliver decent sound — in fact, among the best overall sounds for subwoofer and speaker systems priced around this point. And thanks to the strong subwoofer, it sounds like it costs rather more than it does.

Stephen Dawson +

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VERDICT

JBL Balboa 5.1 home theatre speaker system

Price: \$1499



- Excellent value for money
- Clean, easy listening sound
- Excellent subwoofer
- Limited output levels
- Limited finishes (black ash only)

DIMENSIONS:

Balboa 30: 889 x 230 x 321mm (hwd)
Balboa 10: 259 x 165 x 210mm (hwd)
Balboa Centre: 170 x 479 x 260mm (hwd)
Balboa Subwoofer: 514 x 357 x 402mm (hwd)

WEIGHT:

Balboa 30: 14.5kg
Balboa 10: 3.9kg
Balboa Centre: 6.9kg
Balboa Subwoofer: 16kg

SENSITIVITY:

Balboa 30: 90dB/W/m
Balboa 10: 86dB/W/m
Balboa Centre: 90dB/W/m
Balboa Subwoofer: active 100W

IMPEDANCE: 8 ohms all speakers
WARRANTY: Five years

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