

## B&W Zeppelin

Price: \$999

It was the arrival of B&W's Zeppelin that prompted this whole round-up of superior iPod speaker docks. At \$999, it's the priciest dedicated dock yet, matched only by certain valve-laden creations such as the glowing Bernstein on p63.

Before we kick off, it's worth noting that, almost without exception, iPod docks carry an auxiliary input, usually a stereo minijack socket, through which you can play a second source, be it a non-Apple MP3 player (or a Shuffle, which rarely adheres to a standard dock) or CD player. Hence these 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 that will fit your particular 4G Red Label photo edition iPod, or whatever. No trays at all come with the Zeppelin, because any iPod (except Shuffles) will connect direct to the chrome branded curving dock socket, supported by the slight tension maintained between the angled iPod and the backplate. Very neat, rather superior.

Indeed, the construction here is clearly top of the league throughout. 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 your docked iPod is a handy threefold: the remote egg; the shiny steel power/volume controls above the dock; and your 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 — the bass emphasis here sounds more rounded and processed, the highs are less airy than a pair of good bookshelf designs can achieve.

But the combination is perfectly pitched 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

Price: \$999

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

**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

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