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Polk's I-Sonic ES2 Takes the Stage Table-Top Entertainment System

Christopher Jones

While the first wave of iPod speaker systems had decent if uninspiring audio performance, we're now starting to see a new wave of products that really ups the ante. Polk Audio's I-Sonic Entertainment System 2 (ES2) is a table-top iPod speaker system that excels in sound quality and also adds HD Radio, iTunes Tagging, and other unique features to the mix. If you're looking for a versatile, high-quality music system to play both an iPod and radio, the ES2 is in a league of its own.

VERSATILE DESIGN AND PERFORMANCE

Polk's first-gen I-Sonic Entertainment System includes a CD/DVD drive, but the ES2 does away with it and knocks \$100 off the price (now at \$500). Even without the drive, the ES2 is still one of the most feature-packed iPod speaker systems available. It has an AM/FM radio, HD Radio, an alarm clock, and iTunes Tagging, which lets you "tag" songs (by pressing a button on the ES2) you hear on HD Radio. The ES2 transfers this tag information to



your iPod, and when you sync it to a computer, iTunes automatically displays the songs in a new playlist so you can preview, buy, and download them. Pretty nifty feature for those who like to discover new music on the radio.

Given the ES2's small size (14.5" x 9" x 4.75"), it's well suited for a variety of rooms in a house or office and would even serve as a solid (simulated) surround sound system for your TV. The design is sharp but subtle, and the backlit display can be easily read from within 10 feet or so. The remote fits

comfortably in your hand and the buttons are easy to read and manipulate. It works well within about 30 feet, but an unfortunate problem that I encountered was that my (older) 30GB iPod photo isn't supported, so I couldn't use the remote to switch tracks. But it will support every other iPod since the iPod photo, including the iPhone.

YES, HD RADIO REALLY IS COOL

I was anxious to test the HD Radio, because all I've heard in this realm is XM satellite radio, which is very impressive. But HD Radio sounds

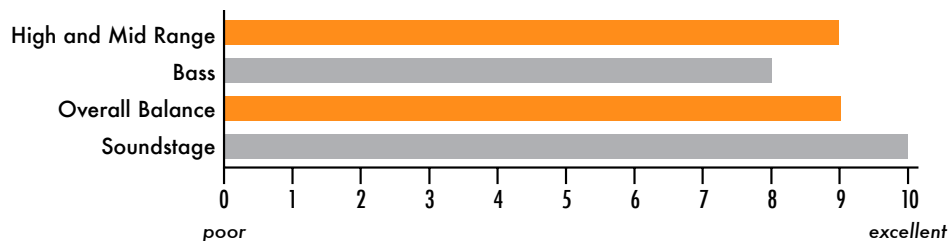
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just as good, and is even easier to dial in, since the broadcasts come from traditional FM radio stations. The only thing you need to do is hang the (supplied) antenna. Our local NPR affiliate here in Austin also has some great music shows, so when KUT came in loud and (crystal) clear I was off and running.

The first song that popped up was a doozy: Van Morrison playing "I Cover the Waterfront," featuring John Lee Hooker. Of course, Morrison and Hooker both have big, soulful voices and over the HD stream they both sounded great, with all the depth and dynamic range they demand. It was a far cry from the somewhat dull and muffled sound that I normally associate with radio listening. One of the coolest HD Radio features is that each FM station can broadcast multiple programs simultaneously. So when I hit the SEEK button, I was greeted with KUT-2, and then KUT-3. Three for the price of one, and the first one was free! And to help you keep tabs on the action, whenever an HD-broadcast station tunes in, an HD symbol lights up on the screen, which also streams the name of the song and station (although not every single station supports this feature yet).



POLK I-SONIC ES2



A BONA FIDE SOUNDSTAGE

With its four 2-inch, long-throw drivers, the ES2 isn't the most powerful system I've heard, in terms of how high you can crank it up. But it's very efficient and puts out a big-bodied, remarkably detailed sound that definitely lives up to its "room-filling sound" boast.

Creating a convincing soundstage is a problem for most iPod music systems because single-case speakers (for example, boomboxes) have a hard time dispersing audio equally well to different areas of a room. Polk came up with a creative solution to this problem by using an array of four speakers in



LAST WORD



- Sound quality is superb, and surprisingly big.
- Cool design and style.
- HD Radio sounds great.
- iTunes Tagging is an innovative feature.



- Remote won't support older iPods.
- Radio recording would be nice.

the ES2—spaced evenly around the unit—to create a 360-degree soundstage. This design was tailor-made for the layout of my house, where the living room and kitchen are divided by a bar, which is the most convenient place to put a sound system. With other iPod speakers, I face them toward the living room, and end up with indirect, so-so sound when I'm cooking in the kitchen. But the ES2 came as a revelation: when I walked between rooms, I heard nearly the exact same sound quality wherever I stood. If I owned it, I'd be tempted to cook twice as often.

I played a variety of jazz, rock, and hip hop on the ES2, and first up was Outkast's *The Love Below* [La Face]. "Roses" is a song that opens up with a lively jazz piano solo, but quickly jumps into thumping R&B-laced bass and synth

lines. As Andre 3000's voice rises above the mix, backed by big vocal choruses, the ES2 produced a nice balance between all these disparate pieces of the mix—and I was pleasantly surprised by the tight, full-bodied bass. Polk's patented "PowerPort" technology uses a vent in the bottom of the unit to let the bass breathe and even out the air flow from the driver. The result is a more efficient and bigger bass sound than you would ever expect from a system this size and weight (7 pounds).

With more subtle arrangements, such as those on *Duke Ellington and John Coltrane* [Grp Records], the mid- and high-range performance of the I-Sonic ES2 shined through. "In A Sentimental Mood" features a delicate interplay between the two artists, where Trane's sax is breathy and

restrained, while Ellington's piano lines float by with a graceful, lively edge. The ES2's imaging was also impressive here, giving you a vivid impression of all the instruments in this intimate collaboration.

BOTTOM LINE: *The ES2's sound quality—most notably its soundstage, detail, and overall balance—would be impressive for any small surround-sound style speaker system, but among iPod speakers, it's definitely a top contender. Its HD Radio and iTunes tagging features are a big bonus and might just change the way you listen to, discover, and purchase music. PB*

Specs & Pricing

Polk I-Sonic ES2

Outputs: RCA stereo; headphones; S-video and composite (to send videos to a TV)

Inputs: RCA stereo

Dimensions: (HxWxD) 4 ¾" x 14 ½" x 9"

Weight: 7 lb.

Price: \$500

POLK AUDIO

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