

Appletell reviews Focal XS 2.1 Satellite Speakers

by Jake Gaecke on Mar 19, 2009 at 12:15 PM

 2 Comments

Product: 2.1 speaker system

Developer: Focal JMLab

Minimum Requirements: USB, a 1/8 in. audio connection or a dockable iPod

Price: \$599

Availability: Now

Have you ever purchased something that changed your life? I wouldn't be surprised to hear a large portion of you answering that question with the following products: an iPod, an iPhone and of course, your first Mac. I've found another product that you can add the list of products that improved your life: the Focal XS 2.1 speaker set.



First, I want to get the obvious out of the way. Focal JMLabs is a company that specializes in high end audio. Let's just say they aren't known for making anything cheap. But we're Apple users, and we are accustomed to paying the "Apple tax" (whether we admit to its existence or not). All that said, these are among the most economical speakers that Focal makes, even at the steep price of \$599. These are hard economic times, and I'm not going to sit here any tell you that you need to spend this kind of money on a set of speakers for your Mac that is already perfectly capable of producing sound on its own. But if you (or your wallet) aren't turned away yet, I would like to tell you that you get what you pay for.

The Focal XS is a 2.1 set of speakers, meaning you get a right and left channel along with a subwoofer. The right channel speaker has a dock for an iPod, an IR sensor for a remote, and the volume controls. You can connect your audio source via 1/8th in. cable or to your computer via USB. They are plug and play, so there is no software to be installed (thank you, Focal). Both speakers connect to the subwoofer via some pretty heavy cables, and the USB is a standard mini to regular USB plug that goes from your right channel to your computer.

You can't beat the style of these speakers. They accent a Mac better than any set of speakers on the market with their brushed aluminum and black plastic. The speakers themselves are elevated by a stylish piece of aluminum not unlike the stand on an iMac or Cinema display. On the back, they have curved, black, shiny plastic. The subwoofer is encased in matte black plastic, which is a superb choice. Everything about this set screams quality. They not only look great, they feel super sturdy too.



You really can judge a book by its cover, especially when its beauty runs deeper than the surface. For the Focal XS, this is true. From the moment I plugged these speakers into my MacBook Pro I was absolutely floored by the quality of sound. I've never been an audiophile, which is a bit odd, actually, considering I spend a lot of time with audio related hobbies. I now realize why I never became an audiophile; I couldn't tell the difference between a 128kbps MP3 and anything higher. Why? Because all of the speakers I've used in the past have sucked.



This set of speakers will change the way you hear music forever. I started out not caring too much about what bit rate I imported my music into iTunes with. Now, I'm in the process of reencoding my entire library as 256kbps stereo AAC files. If I had the disk space, I'd do everything in Apple lossless. You could say I've seen the light, or rather, I've heard it, and it is good. I've even developed a love for turning up the bass, which is something new for me. Cymbals sounds so much better, muddy audio turns to gold, the world sounds like I've just taken ear plugs out of my ears.



Besides the price (which I'm going to overlook in the rating), there is only one thing on which to desire improvement. The iPod dock does not currently come with an iPhone insert. This is mostly because Focal needs to jump through a few hoops, thanks to Apple, to be able to provide that. This is hardly a reason to grumble, but I'd like to be able to put my iPhone in this dock to sync and play music. Chances are, by the time these start shipping with an iPhone dock insert, Apple will have already released a new iPhone. But the iPhone and iPod support is really just an extra feature anyway. It's not the main reason why you should buy these, sound quality is.

I wish there was a way for me to fully explain just how amazing these speakers sound, but I can't. What you can do is make a trip to your local Apple Store. Focal made a deal with Apple, and these guys are currently being showcased with the Apple TV at Apple Stores. So, go check them out. A word of warning, they sound great in the less than optimal acoustic environment that is the Apple Store, but they are breathtaking when you get them home. Take my word for it.

Appletell Rating:

