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Focal-JMLab Focal XS Multimedia Sound System

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Never content to leave well enough alone, we've spent a lot of time looking for an audio system that could topple B&W's mighty [Zeppelin](#) off its perch as our favorite iPod sound system. And now we've finally found it -- in Focal-JMLab's Focal XS Multimedia Sound System.

The Focal XS is the logical follow-up to Focal's awesome [iCub](#) powered subwoofer, which had a 2.1-channel amplifier but didn't come with satellite speakers. The new system includes not only a pair of excellent near-field satellites, but also an integrated iPod dock and a USB interface so you can sync your iPod to iTunes, and convert digital audio from your PC's USB port.

To be entirely fair to the Zeppelin, these two devices are really designed for different applications: Where the Zeppelin system is designed to fill a room with sound, the Focal XS is more of a near-field system that's best enjoyed when you're sitting in close proximity to it. And that probably explains why, unlike the Zeppelin, the Focal XS does not have an analog video output that would allow you to watch movies stored on your iPod on your big-screen TV.

An amp in the Focal XS's subwoofer cabinet puts out 30 watts to each of the satellite speakers and 70 watts to the sub. The Focal iCub's amp, by comparison, produces 75 and 150 watts, respectively. The Zeppelin's amp, meanwhile, sends 25 watts to its full-range speakers and 50 watts to its sub.

The satellites in the Focal XS are two-way speakers with 3-inch mid-range paper cone drivers and 0.75-inch mylar dome tweeters; the sub features a 6.5-inch paper cone. The satellites are permanently mounted to anodized aluminum stands that put the drivers just about at ear level when placed on a desktop. Hard-wired cables, each about five feet long, connect the satellites to the subwoofer cabinet.

A dock in the base of the right satellite can host and recharge an iPod, or you can plug the analog output of any other audio device into the dock's 1/8-inch aux input. You can also pipe digital audio from your PC to the speakers via a USB cable, using the Focal XS's integrated Burr-Brown DAC. Connect the dock to your PC, push a button on the back of the base, and you can sync the iPod to your iTunes library.

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When not in synch mode, you can use either the iPod's control wheel or the wireless remote control to play your tunes. The remote has buttons for power, volume, play/pause, and skip forward/back, as well as a magnetic back that can "stick" to the speaker stand. An on/off switch and a set of volume control buttons are also located in the right-hand channel's base.

The subwoofer is a down-firing design with a large vent in front and an independent volume control. It doesn't put out the gut-punching bass of the iCub, but it's easily the Zeppelin's equal. The Focal XS's \$600 price tag matches the Zeppelin's sticker, but is \$150 lower than the iCub's.

Listening to good self-powered speakers isn't about loudness, it's about definition. The Focal XS system proved to be adept at sussing out all the complex layers of acoustic and electronic instrumentation present in the tracks that make up the spectacular 2001 recording "Global A Go-Go," from Joe Strummer and the Mescaleros (we ripped the CD and encoded to Apple Lossless for the iPod and FLAC for the PC).

We were particularly impressed with the system's performance with "Bhindee Bhagee." This high-energy track has so much going on (vocals, flute, violin, guitars, Wurlitzer, and numerous effects processors) that it can devolve into a distorted mish-mash on lesser systems. It sounded positively glorious on the Focal XS.

Focal-JMLab Focal XS Multimedia Sound System



MESCALERO

Superb definition and tight, well-integrated bass response; attractive industrial design; great feature set.



MESCALINE

Pricy; no video output for a docked iPod.

VERDICT

9 **KICK ASS!**

Focal-JMLab