



Tangent

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Ampster AMP-30 Integrated Amplifier

\$399

Speakers systems made for iPods are as common as intoxicated teenagers at the Big Day Out. And just like BDO bands, the sound quality varies from horrible (most of the acts I heard this year) to excellent (Mr Neil Young).

Even the best of these iPod systems could be improved sonically if only the speakers were further apart with bigger, sturdier cabinets and quality drivers powered by more rugged amplification. But then they wouldn't be the compact and practical iPod speaker systems the populace loves so much.

So if you insist on getting sound from your iPod that has more scale, a wider soundstage and proper imaging, then old-school separate audio components are still king. Which is where Tangent's Ampster comes in.

A mini integrated amplifier, this is a good looking, simple and inexpensive little creature that's perfect in the role of small system amp with built-in portable audio player connectivity. After all, you don't have to use full-size amplifiers to get results that can easily embarrass most iPod speakers or mini/midi/micro systems.

It's hard not to be impressed with the Ampster from the word go, as Tangent has really concentrated on the packaging and presentation. It comes in a neat foam-lined box, with the bits wrapped in orange cloth bags that match the beanbag MP3 player 'dock'. There's even a set of high-quality banana plugs to make up speaker cables. It might have been nice to see complete cables included but at the price that's probably being silly, and in any event, this is your chance to get some decent cables. It does make a difference, so lean on your dealer.

It's a deceptively heavy piece of kit, with the bulk of the weight coming from a chunky toroidal transformer packed into the solidly built black case. The RCA input allows the owner to connect a source (a CD player, for example) but, more importantly, any portable audio player, mobile phone or computer with a 3.5mm minijack connector can be hooked up as well, so you're not limited to a specific brand of player. There's even a five-volt USB charging jack to keep your player's juice topped up, so just add the speakers of your choice, hook up the leads and it's go baby go – music time.

The user experience started off in first class with the presentation and it stayed there once I got my 80GB iPod Classic nestled comfortably on the beanbag and a set of B&W stand-mount speakers plugged in the back. The Ampster provided a real hi-fi experience, making music with the dynamics, finesse and impact that distinguishes musical pleasure from background listening. The Ampster isn't going to replicate the Big Day Out at home, but matched to reasonably easy-to-drive speakers, it will sound bigger, louder, clearer and far more dynamic than the bulk of iPod speaker systems, which are handicapped sonically by the very form factor that makes them so appealing.

The Ampster's sound gets a bit congested when the volume knob is well and truly cranked up, but at anything short of 'too loud' listening levels, it does a great job with any music it's fed. Plugged into a hi-fi system where even the power cables carry a bigger price tag than the Ampster, it managed to put a smile on my face with a big-hearted, smooth performance.

If you've got a hankering for a better audio experience from your portable player or PC and you can live with having separate speakers, then the Ampster is an excellent option. Ideal for a small room or a desktop system, and with the ability to include a second source or even a turntable with an outboard phono stage, it's an easy recommendation. ■ BRETT GIDEON

SPEAKING OF SPEAKERS

There are plenty of fabulous inexpensive speakers out there. We've tested a bunch of them over the years from companies like Wharfedale, Klipsch, Paradigm, Monitor Audio, KEF and Roth.

The beauty of the Ampster is that it's compact enough to take down to your local audio dealer to audition a range of speakers and pick the set you prefer. Chuck an MP3 player in your pocket and you get to listen to your own tunes as well.

What you're looking for are speakers that are sensitive enough (efficient and easy to drive, not emotional and prone to writing poetry) to sound good at the volume you need without having to run the Ampster ragged on its treadmill. You'll be surprised at how much volume a typical set of stand-mount speakers can generate with something as flea-powered as an Ampster, and there's generally even more to be had from floorstanders. But if you really want, need and have to have pants-flapping dynamics and levels, try horn-loaded speakers from the likes of Klipsch and other horn specialists.

TECH SPECS

AUDIO OUTPUTS: Subwoofer line-out
AUDIO INPUTS: RCA, 3.5mm minijack
OTHER CONNECTIONS: 5-volt DC USB charge
POWER OUTPUT: 20 Watts into 4 Ohms
DIMENSIONS: 50 x 205 x 130mm (H/W/D)
WEIGHT: 2.05kg

CONTACT

www.international-dynamics.co.nz

PROS

- ✦ Good presentation and finish
- ✦ Impressive sound quality
- ✦ Nice price

CONS

- ✘ Nothing at the price

VERDICT

A very worthy alternative to an iPod speaker system if the practicalities of separate speakers work for you

