

Apple TV – Let it change your life

By Loyd Van Horn, W4LVH

I am a self-admitted tech-junkie, but I wasn't always like this. There was a time, before I purchased my first iPod, that this type of stuff didn't really hold much appeal to me.

Sure, I have been an active Web surfer since 1993, have had WiFi in my laptop since 2003 and made the change from CDs to Mp3s without hesitation in 1999. However, it wasn't until I purchased my first iPod that the little light went off in my head and the entire future of my daily life flashed before my eyes in monochromatic LCD-screen glory.

The iPod changed my life in ways that I never anticipated possible from a music device. This had me on the lookout for other gadgets that could simplify or enhance my daily activities. I didn't anticipate that the next product to turn my world on its ear would be another product from Apple.

The first Apple TV release seemed interesting in concept, but the feature list wasn't quite on par with what I wanted to do, plus the price was way too high. Then came Apple TV 2.0 and I was ready to take the plunge. For those still on the fence, hopefully this review will entice you to come aboard.



It might not seem like much – a small 3.9" W x 3.9" D x 0.9" H black box with a few connection ports. But trust me, there is plenty of "punch" under the hood. My focus for this review will be mainly on using Apple TV as a streaming radio device, but I will also touch on some of the other features that you might find useful.

Word of note: Apple TV is not a TV; it is a streaming interface to a TV. You will need a TV or receiver that handles HDMI connections, or something with an adapter, because Apple TV only works in HDMI (audio and video) or fiber optic (audio only). You will also need an internet connection – either wireless or Ethernet.

❖ Out of the Box

Apple TV, like so many of the products coming from Apple, comes in a minimally packaged box containing the Apple TV device, the AC power cord, the aluminum remote and a 33-page setup guide.

After taking out the Apple TV device, the next thing you will see is the 3-button aluminum remote. The remote is extremely intuitive with a menu button, a play/pause button, and a select button that is surrounded by navigation arrows for going through the various menus. The remote is made of the same aluminum material as iMac and MacBook Pro laptops.

The set-up guide is extremely easy to read and has the same user-friendly feel that has



made Apple a leader in the computing industry. It breaks down how to navigate the menus and connect to your network to the wireless a/b/g/n connection or through the 10/100 Base-T Ethernet port in the rear of the device.

The device itself is very basic. The top and sides are made from smooth plastic, with the top frosted except for the Apple TV logo. The bottom is rubberized to help prevent skidding on surfaces. The front side of the device houses a small, blue light to indicate when the device is in use, but it is recessed, so unless it is actually operational you won't see it. The back panel has the various connection ports: the port for the AC power adapter, an HDMI port (this is the only way to connect for video streaming), an optical audio port, an Ethernet port, and a micro-USB port for "service and support."

As media devices go, this one should be hardly noticeable at all in your home theater setup. It is sleek and stylish enough, but it is designed to operate in the background. It runs quiet and cool; I don't think I have heard a single sound from my device in the six months I have been using it.

Mine sits on top of my AT&T U-Verse set-top box very easily. I note that when plugged in with my HDMI cable, the cable sometimes pulls the Apple TV box at an angle, which makes remote control use a little more spotty. It just took moving the cable around to get my Apple TV device to sit squarely where I wanted it.

The AC adapter is a sleek, thin, 2-prong plug. In the days when so many devices are turning to large wall-warts, the Apple TV plug is easy to incorporate into even the most packed power strip or outlet.

The rest of the operation of Apple TV happens on-screen. Getting the unit up and running takes very little time at all. The speed at which your device operates will largely depend on the speed of your network (including signal strength of your wireless router).

❖ The Set-up

I have set up many devices to connect to my home-theater system and to my wireless network, but as yet, I hadn't combined a device with both of them. I was a bit apprehensive that this might be a complicated process, but Apple once again has made it relatively painless.

I started with my HDMI cable plugged into the back of the Apple TV device. From here, you decide where you want to send the Apple TV signal. If you are running all of your devices through just your HDTV, you can just plug it into

RATINGS

Audio Quality – 4.5 out of 5

Audio/video sync issues are rare; otherwise audio quality is excellent

Video Quality – 4.5 out of 5

Occasional buffering/digital noise, but this too is rare. The 720p picture quality is stunning.

Performance – 5 out of 5

Never had any issues, it just does what it is supposed to do when you want it to do it.

Features – 4.5 out of 5

AirPlay is genius; other features are fantastic, too. There are a few I would still like to see added, but I am too busy playing with Netflix and AirPlay to care right now.

Design/Appearance – 5 out of 5

They got it right: no big bulky device with a wall-wart, this is sleek, simple, hidden and sufficient.



Overall rating – 4.75 out of 5

This is pretty close to perfect. A few features still need to be added to round it out, but please, go out and buy one now. You will thank me later.

one of the HDMI inputs on your television. If you are using a surround sound receiver, use one of the HDMI inputs there.

I had to improvise a little. My surround sound receiver's inputs were all full, but I wanted to still route audio from Apple TV through my surround sound (there is some Dolby Digital 5.1 audio to be found on Apple TV). So I plugged the HDMI cable from Apple TV into one of the inputs on my television, then used the fiber optic output from the TV into one of the fiber optic inputs on my receiver. I include this information, knowing that many receivers have only three HDMI inputs. If this is the case with your system, the above workaround works splendidly.

Once everything was plugged in, all I had to do was tell Apple TV how to connect to my wireless network. Doing so is relatively easy if you have any experience in entering text through a remote control or other non-keyboard interface. Once you have set up your wireless network and you are connected, you can begin to enjoy all that Apple TV has to offer. Once you get everything set up, you can also use the Apple Remote App on your iOS device, which allows you to type text in on the touchscreen keyboard.

❖ The Performance Test

There are so many features within Apple TV, that you could literally write an entire book to discuss them at length, so I won't even try. I will begin with Internet Radio, since that is the aspect of Apple TV that will most likely interest our readers.

If you have any experience at all with the streaming radio content on iTunes, then the Apple TV Internet Radio experience is going to be a breeze for you. You simply go to the main menu, select 'Radio' under the 'Internet' option and then select the genre for which you would like to find a station. If you have set up your favorites in iTunes using your iTunes account, you should be able to access them on Apple TV as well.



While there are a large number of Internet-only and a good number of terrestrial broadcasters on iTunes, it is by no means comprehensive. Wouldn't it be great if you could use your favorite iOS internet radio app to stream radio stations from your device through Apple TV? Well, you can, and this is because of one of my favorite features of Apple TV – AirPlay.

AirPlay allows you to stream content from your iOS-enabled device (iOS 4.2 or higher) through Apple TV, as well as music and videos from iTunes. Many media apps available on

iOS devices now have the ability to stream their content through AirPlay; just look for the AirPlay logo (it looks like a box with a pyramid in the middle). Many of the popular media apps have AirPlay capability now, including Pandora, TuneIn, YouTube, iHeartRadio, and more.

So, if you find the iTunes Internet Radio station list to be inadequate, have no fear, your iOS device with your favorite Internet Radio app is ready to save the day.

Other than AirPlay, you will also find Apple TV packed with a ton of other worthy features. I had avoided Netflix for years until I tried the free one-month trial. I now gladly pay the \$7.99 per month fee for unlimited streaming through my iPhone, my PC and Apple TV. There are also movies and TV shows through iTunes, podcasts, NBA/MLB games, Flickr photo sharing, and a lot more.



A few minor things came up in performance testing. Every once in a while, the audio and video will lose sync. The fix for this was simply pausing the content, rewind slightly, and resume the program. Also, there would occasionally be a hiccup of digital noise or buffer issues when streaming video, but this, too, was rare. Other than this, my experience with Apple TV over the past six months has been virtually bulletproof.

As an Internet Radio streaming source, the combination of streaming my apps through AirPlay makes this invaluable and definitely the easiest way to stream Internet Radio through my surround system.

❖ The Final Word

Apple TV hasn't quite reached the end-all-be-all convergence of my media and entertainment world status just yet, but it is getting there.

Once Apple opens up the ability for me to stream any audio or video content from my computer or mobile device – and once there is somehow a combination of a gaming system, satellite/cable television package and App-based content – then Apple TV will take its place as the most necessary device in your home next to your TV, phone and computer.

As it stands, Apple TV is pretty much a necessity in my home. I watch YouTube videos and Netflix on it constantly, using my iPhone 4 as my remote control. I stream music directly from my iPhone or even my iMac (where I have access to 10,000+ songs I



have stored) so I can listen through my surround sound to my favorite tunes. I stream audio from my scanner apps and my LiveATC app; even my amateur radio EchoLink conversations take place with AirPlay and my Apple TV.

I recently even took it with me on a trip so I could connect it to the hotel WiFi network and watch movies in my hotel room through Netflix without paying the hotel extra for them.

If it seems like I didn't have to explain a lot about the interface, it is because I really didn't. Using it is simple and intuitive. Any questions you might have are easily answered by the setup guide. Plus, the real bonus of Apple TV is interfacing your iOS device with your home theater system using AirPlay.

So, if you are wanting to combine streaming audio or video from your iOS device or computer with your home entertainment system, I cannot stress how much easier Apple TV makes everything. For \$99 USD, I cannot think of a more practical and useful device to add to your home entertainment system.

Apple TV can be purchased through online retailers like Amazon.com, or directly from any Apple Store or the Apple Web site.

WEBSITES

Apple TV - www.apple.com/appletv/
 Apple TV in the Apple Store - http://store.apple.com/us/browse/home/shop_ipod/family/apple_tv?mco=MTM3NTM1Nzk

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