

Polk Audio's I-Sonic AM/FM/HD/XM/CD/DVD and MP3 Player

By Ken Reitz

Whew! That's a mouthful! There's no point waiting to the end of this review to get to the heart of the matter: The Polk Audio I-Sonic is the most ambitious, most accomplished, best sounding and most expensive of the HD Radio table-top sets.

❖ Unparalleled Audio

If you're happy with the Bose Wave sound, you're getting about half of what the I-Sonic delivers. It's an amazing four speaker system featuring left and right front, left and right rear, full range, hi-fi speakers and a patented, bottom fired, bass port, all of which combine to provide a sphere of sound emanating from the I-Sonic. This radio has a well balanced amplifier with plenty of power, which sounds as good at low volume two feet away on a desk as it does at high volume from across the room.

Polk Audio has designed the I-Sonic as a premium audio center capable of playing CDs, listening to HD Radio, hooking up your MP3 player, or flipping through the channels from XM satellite radio. You'll get the same great audio out of all of these music sources – but wait, there's more! Just hook up your TV set to the "S" video output and you can watch your favorite DVDs through this system as well.

❖ Features upon Features

As indicated in the title of this review, the list of product features on the I-Sonic is impressive. No other radio even comes close. It tunes AM/FM and HD Radio channels with an amazing 30 station presets done in three pages of 10 each. You can mix AM/FM, HD Radio and XM channels, so that, if you're going through the presets, the radio switches automatically from analog AM, FM, HD Radio and any XM channel you program in. No other radio lets you do this.

XM satellite radio functions are built-in to the I-Sonic software and remote control, but you'll have to buy the XM mini-tuner package which includes and XM antenna with CNP-1000 plug for



XM Mini-Tuner Docking Station with XM antenna and XM Passport add a new dimension to this multi-faceted radio. A Sirius satellite radio docking station is also available. Your choice for either one: \$59.98. Subscription fees extra. (Courtesy: Polk Audio)



the jack on the back of the I-Sonic and an XM subscription cartridge, known as an XM Passport. However, if you prefer, you can add a Sirius satellite radio home docking station as you would to any stereo receiver, and I-Sonic sells such a unit on their web site. Of course, whichever you choose you'll have to subscribe to either service.

The CD player functions as any other CD player. Though it plays only one CD at a time, it can be configured to wake you as an alarm. The alarm (you can set two) – if not turning on your favorite CD, XM or an HD channel – is a pleasant yet persistent chime, something that other radios should have done years ago. Audio from CDs played on the I-Sonic is outstanding.

The DVD player uses the same slide out tray as the CD player and plays only standard definition DVDs, not high definition DVDs, but does play the wide screen (16:9 ratio) format if you're plugging the I-Sonic into a wide-screen set. The audio from the DVD player is not surround sound, but is the same quality as the radio, CD player or satellite receiver.

All functions, including reverse, fast forward, and stop are controlled by the remote. Video displayed through the I-Sonic via the RCA video output jack or the "S" video output is excellent. You may also connect the audio output from the DVD player directly into your TV set or larger stereo.

I think you'll find that the audio from the I-Sonic is better by far than the stereo speakers built into most TV sets. In fact, most new wide screen TV sets have audio outputs which let you listen to the TV audio through better stereos. Over-the-air TV broadcasts were greatly enhanced by taking the audio from the TV and playing it through the I-Sonic. Cable-TV and satellite TV audio is also enhanced in this way.

Listening to an iPod or any other MP3



Ultra-modern design, luxurious audio, full function, credit card sized remote and capability for HD Radio, XM satellite radio option and iPod or other MP3, CD and DVD player. Polk Audio's I-Sonic does it all. (Courtesy: Polk Audio)

player is done by plugging an actual iPod docking station (not included) or the output of any other MP3 player into the AUX2 jack on the I-Sonic. You'll use your I-Sonic remote to control the other audio functions. I also found this was a great way to stream audio via the Internet. Use the included mini-to-mini stereo patch cord for this purpose.

The I-Sonic is the perfect desktop radio; you just have to have access to an outdoor antenna to take advantage of FM reception.

The blue LCD display is the same standard as used on all the other HD Radios, but Polk Audio has made the graphics much easier to read and the screen can be adjusted to be less obtrusive and yet maintain a readable contrast. The display includes a signal strength indicator, external antenna indicator, HD Radio text (when transmitted), the station frequency and the time. The clock is manually set. Alarm settings are stored in a non-volatile memory.

All functions done on the credit-card-sized remote control are duplicated on set-top buttons. And, while it's a little difficult to navigate via those buttons, remember that Bose has stripped the buttons off their new Wave Radio completely.

Analog and HD Radio reception was among the best I've tested. My location requires the use of an outside amplified antenna, which I have on a rotator to help zero in on those elusive HD Radio signals. As expected, HD Radio reception was not as good as analog. Nearby FM HD Radio signals came in well and the audio was great. But, trying for those distant (100+ miles) stations was disappointing. That's not the fault of this radio, though, as no other HD Radio I've tested could do any better.

Analog AM at night was very good. I especially appreciated the higher audio quality when listening to AMers still bothering to broadcast music. Listening, for example, to the Grand Ol' Opry on WSM using a tunable AM loop antenna was a joy. I was unable to tune any AM HD Radio signals night or day, which is not too surprising since the nearest AMer transmitting in HD Radio format is 60 miles away.

MANUFACTURER SPECIFICATIONS

Tuning: AM 530-1710 kHz
FM 87.7-107.9 MHz

Antennas:

AM built-in ferrite core
AM screw terminals (AM antenna switch to go from internal to external AM antenna)

FM 75 Ohm "F" connector

XM antenna input (requires XM Passport or CNP-1000 antenna)

2 Auxiliary Inputs:

1 3.5 mm stereo input (for MP3 player)

2 RCA inputs

Video output:

"S" Video cable port

RCA Video jack

Audio Output via left and right RCA jacks

3.5 mm headphone jack

Dimensions: 14.5" W x 9.75" D x 4.75" H

Weight: 9 lbs. 4 oz.

❖ Is There a Downside?

Yes, there is a downside to the I-Sonic. Without antennas, this radio is deaf as a post. As with all HD Radio sets, you'll need all the antenna you can get to receive HD Radio signals on either AM or FM bands. As with all the other manufacturers, Polk Audio includes an AM external non-tunable loop and a folded dipole "T" antenna for FM reception. Unless you're in a suburban location you won't get much on those, either.

Listeners in rural areas will need a roof mounted, amplified FM antenna for HD Radio reception. There is an "F" connector for an FM coax antenna lead. While there is a built-in ferrite loop antenna, you'll need a good, tunable AM loop antenna to receive AM analog stations during the daytime, and it's a real plus even at night. There are screw terminals on the back of the radio for a direct AM antenna hook-up.

As with all other HD Radios made today, there are two peculiarities in radio reception involving the digital processing. The first is that the audio is slightly behind that of an analog radio. You'll never notice, though, unless you have an analog radio in the same room tuned to the same station. The resulting echo effect will force you to turn one or the other off.

The second is that the processing can be clearly heard as a sort of whirring sound in the background when the volume is turned up and the radio is tuned in between stations on either the AM or FM band. This effect is less noticeable on some sets, but on the I-Sonic it is more in evidence. Of course, when tuned to a solid analog or HD Radio channel, there's no such effect. You will not hear this effect when tuning XM channels, the CD or DVD player.

And, finally, navigating the LCD on-screen menu is not intuitive. This is mostly due to having so many functions on this radio that it requires going through pages of menus to get to the screen you want. You might consider it a problem if you consider of a wealth of features a problem!

❖ Final Word

At the beginning of this review I mentioned that the I-Sonic was the most expen-



sive of the table-top HD Radio sets and it is: \$599.95. If you're looking for best counter-top/desk-top/dresser-top HD Radio on the market, the I-Sonic is for you. If you've got limited space, don't have room for a full sized stereo system but care about audio quality, the I-Sonic is for you. It's perfect for small apartments, RVs or dorm rooms.

The I-Sonic comes loaded for most of your audio needs. But, there are some options you may also want, including an iPod docking

station (\$79.99), Sirius Satellite Radio Tuner bundle (\$59.98), or XM mini-tuner and docking station (\$59.98).

When ordered through the Polk Audio web site (<http://I-Sonic.polkaudio.com>) shipping on the I-Sonic is free and you get a 30 day, 100% guarantee: your money back including return shipping. As this is written there is also a \$50 mail-in rebate offer from HD Radio but it is due to expire the first week of July. However, there may be other rebate offers in the future, and it pays to check their web site for details.

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