

Stereo Systems Isn't it time you had some new gear? By Genevieve Robertson

All the buzz about the latest developments in handheld devices, laptops and digital imaging has overshadowed tremendous advances in an old-school consumer product: stereo systems. Stereos are becoming works of art that add class to a room as well as great sound. New features that let you play digital files as well as CDs, cassettes and even LPs will quickly turn you into an audiophile.

The first thing to decide is what features are most important to you. Do you need a cassette deck? Will a single CD player be enough? Is radio reception an issue? Do you really need surround sound? Also consider the space you have. Then pick a price range and stick to it.

Most people can find something for between \$200 and \$600. Keep in mind that you do get what you pay for; if sound quality and power are your biggest issues, you may need to lean toward higher-end systems.

Space Savers

The JVC MX-J500 (\$280; jvc.com) is a great mini system with all the basics and enough power to drown out any roommate. It features a dual cassette deck, three-CD

changer and 120-watt three-way speakers. And with a programmable timer and an optical digital output that

allows you to dub to an external minidisc or CD burner, you really can't go wrong.

If you have less-than-adequate space for a bookshelf system, Nakamichi has a solution. The SoundSpace 5 (\$800; <http://nakamichi.com/soundspace>) is a three-part system that mounts on the wall

and resembles framed pictures. It definitely grabs your attention, with its sleek silver exterior and blue or orange LCD that allows you to see the CDs inside. The sound is just as impressive, and at just three inches thick, clears your space for better things.

Burner Included

Now that most of us have been weaned off of cassettes and are able to create our own CD compilations on the computer, Philips has brought mix-making back to your home stereo. Philips FWR8 (\$599;

philips.com) is a compact system with a CD burner. As a stereo it holds its own with a three-CD changer, 200 watts of power, surround sound and three-way speakers, not to mention great radio reception. Plus it has the added bonus of a quality double-speed burner with text editing. It's also CD-R (write-once CDs) and CD-RW (rewriteable) compatible so you can listen to all those CDs burned on the computer. And did we mention the karaoke mike input, so you can sing along?

MP3-Friendly

Electronic music files are here to stay, and consumer electronics manufacturers are creating add-on devices to play MP3 files on your home stereo without having to boot up. DigMedia has made a combination CD/MP3 (\$499.95;

mp3shopping.com) player that will connect to any home stereo for listening without a computer. Digisette's Duo-Aria (\$199; digisette.com) is a new portable MP3 player that plugs into any cassette drive.

The MusicStore has a 5GB hard drive capable of storing 84 hours of music ripped at 128Kbps. It can be connected to

your computer to download already stored files or you can transfer to and from with a portable player that has a non-expandable 48Mb memory. Samsung makes a similar product, the Wingo (\$399; samsung.com), with a bit less memory.



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Hard Core

The next step in home audio is the digital audio server (DAS). AudioRequest (\$799; request.com) by Request Multimedia seems to be the best of this emerging category. DAS is a CD player, MP3 Player and cassette player all in one. It's designed to play back and organize digital music files through your home audio system. AudioRequest has a 17.3Gb hard drive, single-disc CD player and a Celeron

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processor along with software to convert CDs into MP3s.

It can also connect the Internet through your home computer, allowing you access to online music files. However, since these are digital files they aren't the same quality as the original CDs, but you do have the option to rip at 320Kbps, which is almost CD quality (you just can't store as many hours). The best thing about it is the ease with which you can sort through all your digital music files. The player reads artists, song titles and album titles to help you create and store your own playlists. •

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