



TECHTALK

By: Vish Viswanathan

Soundbars: Surrounded by Sound

Do They Really Deliver Surround Sound?

The other day I was walking through the Electronics aisle in Costco and a **Soundbar** caught my eye. By the way, I like the electronics in Costco more than at Circuit City or Best Buy, not for the variety, but for the targeted items they carry in each category. Getting back to my Soundbar story, I wanted to know learn more about them so I went to several stereo shops to hear the sound quality they offered.

By now, you're probably one of the 49 million Americans who own a flat-panel TV. Great! But unless the sound measures up to the visuals, you're only halfway there. If you want a home theater that truly rivals the local Megaplex - minus the braying laughter and sticky floors - the next step is to get serious about audio, and that means surround sound.

The problem is, the current standard - the so called 5.1 surround sound - requires a receiver, at least six components and usually a tangle of wires. (What 5.1 refers to is the separation of audio into five channels: two speakers in the front, two in the back and one in the center. The 0.1 is the sub-woofer, which produces the lowest bass.) You get wrapped in sound from every direction but

you also get a room stuffed with unsightly electronics.

Enter the Soundbar. Measuring about five inches high and 36 inches across, it usually packs multiple speakers, along with a receiver and at least one internal woofer, into a single piece of equipment. The bar can go either inside a media cabinet or on a wall. Because you have to plug in only one device (two if you add an external subwoofer), setup takes just minutes. You can play CDs through these babies and plug in MP3 players, as you can with 5.1 surround systems. A Soundbar costs about the same as a low-end 5.1 system: roughly \$500 to \$900.

So how exactly does a Soundbar work? According to manufacturers, it pumps out audio in specific directions, altering the sound waves and bouncing them off the walls to trick your brain and ears into thinking that what you're hearing is coming from the front, sides, and back of the room. It's not really surround sound, in other words, it just seems that way.

To find out how well Soundbars deliver, I went to several stereo stores to test them out. A Soundbar's quality is highly dependent on the space it's in - the makers say they work

best in rooms that are completely walled off,

with no open windows or doors. So, Soundbars aren't as good at moving sound around as separate speakers are, but they're heck of a lot more convenient.

Bottom line: If you're looking for a bit more oomph than your TV's built-in audio provides, you refuse to cramp your aesthetic, and your TV is in a room you can close off - not, say, a family room/kitchen combo - a Soundbar may be just the thing for you. Specifically, consider the Sony RHT-S10, which sounded the closest approximation to surround sound in my tests.

However, if you really want to hear *Iron Man* crush his enemies, shop for a traditional 5.1 system - you'll get more surround for your money. Be sure to get an amplifier, and buy speakers from the same brand and line for a more even sound.

Check out what I tested.



Sony RHT-S10 \$620	Samsung HT-X810 \$699	Yamaha YSP-900 \$699	Soundmatters SLIM-stage40 \$899	Philips HTS8100 \$599
Size: 44.5"x6.8"x5.5"	Size: 39.3"x7.5"x6.4"	Size: 31.5"x6"x4.5"	Size: 39"x3.5"x3.7"	Size: 36.8"x5.4"x5.7"
What's Inside: Three speakers featuring mids and tweeters (for mid- and high-frequency sound), plus an internal woofer.	What's Inside: Two tweeters (left and right), four woofers (two left, two right) and an external wireless subwoofer.	What's Inside: 21 (two watt) speakers, which handle highs, and two built-in woofers for lows	What's Inside: Four speakers that handle both mids and highs (two left, two right), three woofers and two bass radiators that boost lows.	What's Inside: Two tweeters, six mids and an external subwoofer.
Sound Quality: The RHT-S10 delivered "more dimension" than the rest. The internal woofer was quite bitty, and I heard some noise from behind - not a lot, but more than from the other models. Overall, it was the most similar to 5.1 sound	Sound Quality: This bar took advantage of left and right speakers to deliver audio that swooped in from the sides - but the "surround" effect was minimal. The audio is far better than your TV can provide, but don't expect to be enveloped by it. It's more like having regular stereo sound.	Sound Quality: That's right, the YSP-900 has 21 speakers (!) -all very low wattage - meant to beam sound at slightly different angles. I thought it was more center-focused and lacked the dimension and bass of Sony. The woofers also didn't deliver much bass.	Sound Quality: The slimmest of the bunch, this one comes in different lengths to match your TV. Nice looking. But while it did better than the TV alone, it's "small sound" and overall lack of dimension was noticeable.	Sound Quality: Don't get fooled by the sleek styling. You tell the Soundbar its placement in the room, which is supposed to help calibrate the system. Yet the audio isn't drastically better than that from a TV's built-in speakers. This one delivers more style than function.
Rating: B+	Rating: B-	Rating: C+	Rating: C	Rating: C-