

# Soundcast Outcast all-weather wireless speaker system

## Test Report



By John Sciacca  
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Besides writing for *Sound & Vision*, I also work at a "regular" day job as a [custom installer](#). And after speaking to potential clients every day for the past 10 years, I can say that one thing they want is wireless audio. Whether it's because they don't want to pay for retrofitting wire into an existing home, or simply because they just want instantaneous results, "What do you have in wireless?" is an incredibly popular request.

While this might seem like a worthwhile path to go down, I usually try to steer my clients away from it because of all the inherent problems and limitations of wireless audio systems. Most deliver performance akin to what you get with a cordless speakerphone, with signal transmission that's prone to interference and dropouts. And these systems aren't truly wireless because they still require electricity to drive the speaker's amplifier. But one potential solution first caught my eye at the 2007 [Consumer Electronics Show](#): the Soundcast OutCast system, a setup that promised to address my wireless concerns and integrate with my iPod to boot. The system consists of the OutCast all-weather speaker and the iCast transmitter/iPod dock. The speaker features four 3-inch mid/high-frequency drivers arrayed around its surface to provide 360° of sound dispersion, with a single 8-inch, downward-firing woofer handling the low-end chores. A 100-watt digital amplifier powers the five drivers. While I'm generally not a big fan of digital amps for distributed audio systems, this coupling works well because the highly energy-efficient digital amp extends battery life. The iCast transmitter is simplicity in itself, having literally no buttons or controls at all. The big news is the iPod port that sits atop its curved, white shell, a dock that works with iPod and iPhone models as well.

The Short Form
\$699 / <a href="http://SOUNDCASTSYSTEMS.COM">SOUNDCASTSYSTEMS.COM</a> / 800-722-1293
Snapshot
The OutCast system totally delivers on its promise of plug-and-play wireless music, making it a great solution for adding tunes to remote listening areas
Plus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incredibly simple setup</li> <li>• Great wireless range</li> <li>• Mega-long-lasting battery life</li> </ul>
Minus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>
Key Features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weather-resistant speaker runs many hours on a single charge</li> <li>• Speaker features four 3-inch mid/high- frequency drivers and an 8-inch woofer powered by a 100-watt digital amplifier</li> <li>• iCast wirelessly transmits audio from an iPod or other source; also works with the iPod and iPhone</li> <li>• OutCast speaker: 11 x 26 x 11 in, 27 lb; iCast transmitter: 6 x 2 x 3 1/2, 3/4 lb</li> </ul>

## SETUP

Soundcast claims that its systems are "easy to set up, and they work," so I expected nothing too complex. What I didn't expect was just how simple the installation would be. The hardest thing about the entire process was unpacking the components. Without exaggeration, that took more time than setting up the system and getting music to play. For the record, setup requires connecting the iCast transmitter/dock to an electrical outlet and inserting the 24-volt nickel-metal hydride battery into the weather-sealed compartment on the bottom of the OutCast speaker. You then power on the speaker, dock your iPod, and press Play. That's it. You've just installed the whole Soundcast system and are now listening to music. Now that's what I call "plug and play"! While the system was definitely designed with iPod owners in mind, other types of audio sources can be hooked up to it as well. The back of the iCast features a 3.5-mm minijack connector that serves double duty. When an iPod is connected, it acts as an output for either driving a pair of headphones or sending your tunes to another audio system; when no iPod is connected, it becomes an input, letting you connect and broadcast any source, such as a cable box, a CD player, or a non-iPod MP3 player. Awesome! The system comes with the mini-to-RCA cable needed for this connection, as well as a mini-to-mini cable. The OutCast speaker also features a minijack input for plugging a source directly into it.

At some point, a flashing red light on top of the speaker will indicate that it's time to recharge the battery. A completely discharged battery takes about 3 hours to return to full power. Fortunately, the system is fully functional while charging, so a depleted battery doesn't have to bring the party to a crashing halt.

The iCast can broadcast on one of three channels, and both units have switches for selecting between Channels 1, 2, and 3. Beyond just avoiding broadcast interference, the real benefit here is that three separate Soundcast systems can operate within close proximity to each other.

## PERFORMANCE

The OutCast speaker offers little in the way of information feedback; basically, it's either on or off. When it's powered up, a green light indicates that the speaker is indeed on, and the light turns blue once the speaker has locked onto the iCast's signal. This process is automatic and takes about 2 seconds. A blue light on the transmitter also confirms that it has found the speaker. Besides volume up and down, there are some transport buttons on top of the speaker (play/pause, track skip forward and back) that control an iPod docked in the iCast. All click-wheel controls are functional while the iPod is docked, letting you browse and select tunes from your music library. Granted, a full-blown two-way interface would be more useful, but that would also significantly increase the price of the system.

As mentioned before, the OutCast speaker has a minijack input for connecting a local source, and the cabinet's handle doubles as a place to set your portable player. This means that, beyond its use at home, the speaker itself can be called into duty in any outdoor setting. It's the perfect companion for camping or beach trips, not just because things are apt to get wet and dirty but also because it's self-sufficient when there's no ready access to a power source for connecting the iCast transmitter. The speaker's minijack connection lets the good times keep rolling, whether from an iPod or a Zune or, just as perfect, a portable XM or Sirius tuner.

The speaker's only other "trick" is a button that kicks on some "mood lighting." I'm not sure what mood it creates, but the soft blue light would be useful in keeping people from walking into it and knocking it



The Outcast's wireless speaker is a streamlined cylinder with little in the way of controls or information displays.

into the pool after enjoying one too many libations.

As I said at the beginning, I'm generally skeptical when it comes to wireless systems, as they never seem to live up to their claims for distance or reception. Soundcast says that its system will transmit signals up to 150 feet through multiple rooms indoors, and up to 300 feet outdoors. Since my entire house isn't 150 feet from end to end, I couldn't fully check that claim, but I can say that the OutCast system did beam tunes from one side of my house to the other. It also broadcast from inside my house to every inch of my property, including down the driveway and across the street into my neighbor's driveway! Wireless range was outstanding, and the signal never once dropped out or crackled from interference.

Soundcast says that it has developed a unique frequency-hopping technology that prevents transmitted signals from being distorted by outside interference. The company has definitely hit on something. My home has two Wi-Fi [access points](#), a cordless phone, and a microwave oven, and none of them gave the OutCast system so much as a hiccup.

Battery life was nothing short of amazing. I expected the speaker to run for several hours, or just enough for an afternoon barbecue party. But it soon became a test of endurance to see which would last longer, the speaker's battery or me. In the end, the battery won by a landslide. My system played for more than 16 hours (nearly 240 songs) on a single charge!

The speaker puts out plenty of volume, and it will certainly fill your backyard with sound. As it nears the upper volume limits, however, the small drivers start to strain and the audio becomes brash and distorted. But this is at levels that would make it difficult for anyone within a 15-foot radius of the speaker to have any kind of conversation. The sound quality in general resembles the classic smiley-face EQ curve from the past: big lows and big highs. Yet this actually works in the speaker's favor, as sounds can be easily lost outdoors, and this kind of EQ gives the OutCast more punch. Placing the speaker on my wooden deck also produced a terrific tactile sensation, as the bass traveled through the wood boards and into chairs.

While I can't really comment on endurance, I did attempt to check out the "all-weather" claim by leaving the speaker outside. During that time, it endured several near-100°, high-humidity South Carolina summer days, and it also sat through a couple of afternoon showers.

So far, so good.

## BOTTOM LINE

As both a reviewer and an installer, I find it so refreshing to get a product that works exactly as promised. The OutCast system did everything it was supposed to do. The wireless range and battery life are outstanding, and the system puts out enough sound to fill your backyard with tunes. If you're looking for a simple way to add music to an outdoor living space, or to remote parts of your home where retrofitting wiring isn't possible, the OutCast won't leave you stranded.