



REVIEW

Next-Generation Stereo Bluetooth Headsets



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[PCWorld](#) |

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AT A GLANCE

Motorola MotoRokr S9-HD



Sony Ericsson HBH-IS800



LG HBS-250



Altec Lansing BackBeat 906



Samsung SBH700



Imagine a world where you can listen to music and **make calls** with a set of luxurious wireless headphones that fit your ears perfectly. You encounter

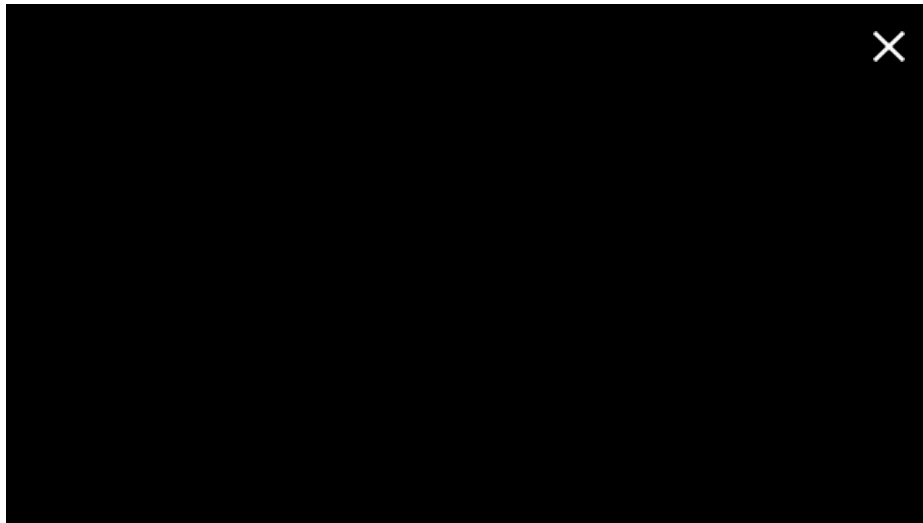
astounding audio quality, intuitive controls, and seamless switching between music and calls. And you can wear your headphones all day without feeling as though your ears are getting stretched to Easter Island statue proportions.

Well, keep dreaming. Stereo Bluetooth headphones, alas, have a long way to go. After testing the latest crop of products, which enable you to listen to music tracks and manage your phone calls wirelessly, we were disappointed.

Unlike [monaural \(or mono\) Bluetooth headsets](#), which require you to insert a single earpiece in your ear, stereo units consist of a separate earpiece for each ear. As the name suggests, these devices are designed to deliver stereo sound. The whole listening experience should feel richer, with a more natural, lifelike audio--a bit like a surround-sound effect. (For more information about Bluetooth standards, see "[How to Buy a Bluetooth Headset](#).")

[Further reading: [The best universal remote controls](#)]

Stereo Bluetooth headsets generally come in two styles: earbud-oriented units, in which a narrow-gauge wire connects the two buds, and headphone-style units, in which a band or stiffer cord connects the earpieces. All of the units on our chart are worn with the cord or band behind the head.



I tested each set of stereo headphones across a wide range of objective and subjective criteria. I integrated the headphones into my daily life, examining audio quality, range performance, comfort and fit, layout and button design, and intuitiveness (or nonintuitiveness) of the controls. I found that each product excelled in one or two areas, and that's about it. For example, I liked how cushy the \$80 [LG Electronics HBS-250 earpads](#) felt on my ears, but I struggled with the small controls, which were tricky to access. And while I

enjoyed the rich music played through the [Motorola MotoRokr S9-HD headphones](#) (\$130), the device's headband and earpiece design felt awkward after a while. Even our top-rated product, the superlight [Sony Ericsson HBH-IS800](#), had shortcomings--failing to include volume controls and track skipping on the headphones themselves, despite costing \$200.

Some good news: Except for LG's HBS-250, all of the headphones did a great job handling incoming calls while I was listening to music. When a call comes in, the headset pauses the track, and pipes a ringing tone into your ear; when you end the call or reject it, the music (or whatever you were playing) resumes. With the LG headphones, though the music stopped, there was no further indication that a call was coming in--just dead silence. A company spokesperson for LG suspected that our test unit was defective in this regard, saying that the headphones typically do multitask and alert users of incoming calls. (In every other respect the LG headphones seemed to work normally.)

Company-advertised maximum playing and talking times for these units range from 4 hours of play time or 5 hours of talk time (for the Sony Ericsson HBH-IS800) to 10 hours of play or talk time (for the LG Electronics HBS-250). I didn't attempt to measure the [stereo headphones](#)' battery life for this review.

Before buying, you should make sure that the stereo Bluetooth headphones you're considering are compatible with your Bluetooth cell phone. Your phone must support the Advanced Audio Distribution Profile (or A2DP) and the Audio/Video Remote Control Profile (or AVRCP). A2DP is the Bluetooth profile that enables your music source and the Bluetooth headset to stream music wirelessly in stereo; AVRCP is a Bluetooth profile that enables your Bluetooth headset to wirelessly control your music source. Most Stereo Bluetooth headphones also support the Handsfree and Headset profiles, permitting you to make and receive phone calls with your stereo Bluetooth headphones.

Note that the iPhone currently does not offer stereo A2DP Bluetooth support, though Apple's upcoming [iPhone 3.0 software](#) will. The update is planned for release in this summer.

For complete reviews of each of the five stereo Bluetooth headsets I examined and tested, click the following links: