

Alexa and Google Assistant play together nicely, but not perfectly, on JBL's new speakers

JBL is very proud of its new Authentics speaker range. It's proud of the retro-inspired design, which harks back to its L-100 speakers from the 1970s. It's proud of the sound quality (obviously) and the range of streaming services and technologies they support. But the only thing I had on my mind when I got to try one of the speakers out for myself was its ability to run Google Assistant and Alexa at the same time, and listen for each wake word simultaneously.

This isn't the first time that the two popular voice assistants have been available on the same speaker, nor is it the first time *any* two voice assistants have been available simultaneously. Sonos already sells speakers that have both Google Assistant and Alexa built-in, but only one can be active at a time – you can't have them both listening and responding to commands. Alexa can also coexist for simultaneous use with Sonos's own Voice Control service, but not with Google Assistant.

So it's a big deal being able to have Alexa and Google Assistant, the most full-featured and popular voice assistants, listening for their wake words simultaneously.

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controls for adjusting treble and bass levels.

I was given a demonstration of the JBL Authentics 300, the middle child of the new Authentics lineup. The \$329.99 Authentics 200 is smaller and less powerful, and the \$699.99 Authentics 500 is bigger with an active subwoofer and support for Dolby Atmos. The \$429.99 Authentics 300 sits between them in size, power, and price, and is also the only member of the lineup to be battery powered (JBL claims you'll get around eight hours of playback from a charge).

So how well do Alexa and Google Assistant *actually* work together? From my brief time with the speaker, I'd say they work well, but with some caveats.

The two voice assistants don't clash, but they're not always on the same page

In my demonstration, I saw the best results from more general voice commands. Ask Google to start playing some music, and Alexa will have no trouble adjusting the volume after the fact. If you start a countdown using Alexa, then Google won't flinch if you ask it to silence the resulting alarm. Ask Alexa to play a news briefing, and Google will happily silence it with the command "Hey Google, stop."

But issues started to crop up if I used commands that were more specific to the content being played. I asked Google to set a timer before asking Alexa to stop it *before* it finished, and Alexa responded saying "there are no timers set." I asked Alexa to read the news, and then Google to "stop the news" and Google Assistant cheerily told me that "nothing's playing right now" (the more general command "Hey Google, stop" worked).

So the two voice assistants aren't always able to act as one, and I had to do a little trial and error to work out exactly how to get them working best in sync. But it felt similar to the trial and error process of speaking to a voice assistant

in the first place, working out which voice commands the various assistants do and don't understand.

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dark:[>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13
dark:[>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63">All three speakers have broadly the same controls, though only the Authentics 300 has a power button.

Aside from their voice assistants (which can be turned off with a physical mute switch on the back), the speakers seem thoughtfully designed and well specced. All three speakers in the lineup come with a trio of dials on top, one for volume (as you'd hope) and two more for manually adjusting the speakers' bass and treble levels. According to Jurjen Amsterdam, a director of product marketing at JBL parent company Harman, including these kinds of EQ controls on the speaker itself is meant for when multiple people in the household are using a speaker, but when only one of them has the JBL companion app installed. But he also admits that having lots of dials just plain looks nice. "It's part of the design," Amsterdam says, "this goes back to its retro look."

The lineup's most obvious retro touch is its front grill, which has the same texture as the company's classic L-100 speakers (as well as its more recent home speakers). The new JBL Authentics are only available in black for now, but when I ask about other colors like JBL's signature orange Amsterdam says the company wants to "make sure that black is a success first" before the company starts experimenting.

You get physical bass and treble controls

Alongside the three dials there's also a programmable "moment" button, which can be set to automatically play a playlist or radio station from any of the streaming services available within JBL's companion app. Unfortunately it doesn't extend to

services that work with the speaker but aren't available within JBL's app (Spotify being the prime example), but it opens the door to being able to set the button to play your radio station of choice via TuneIn without having to open an app each time.

For connectivity, JBL's Authentics speakers offer traditional Bluetooth and a 3.5mm aux input (plus Ethernet for wired internet), and there's also wide compatibility with different streaming services and multi-room systems. There's support for AirPlay, Alexa Multi-Room Music, Spotify Connect, and Chromecast built-in, and support for Tidal Connect is coming in a future firmware update (for now, Tidal can be played from within the JBL app). Also coming in future firmware updates are the ability to pair multiple JBL speakers together to create stereo and even multi-channel surround sound listening setups.

It's difficult to get a sense of how the speakers sound at a launch event demonstration where you're packed into a room full of strangers, and listening to music you're not familiar with. But from what I heard of JBL's three Authentics speakers it sounds like they pack a real punch. Even the diminutive Authentics 200 has weight to it, but as you move up the lineup the sound gets more expansive, culminating in the Atmos-enabled Authentics 500 which offered the best sound separation. That speaker is equipped with three 1-inch tweeters, three 2.75-inch midrange woofers, and a 6.5-inch active subwoofer. The step-down speakers in the range have fewer drivers and passive radiators.

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underline-gray-63 [>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13
dark:[>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63">*The speakers are wrapped
in synthetic leather.*

Finally, a note on sustainability. JBL advertises that the

Authentics speakers are made using 100 percent recycled fabric, 85 percent recycled plastic, and 50 percent recycled aluminum. The battery in the Authentics 300 is also designed to be easy to replace when it eventually degrades over time. Currently it's replaceable by authorized service centers, but the company is working towards having it be officially user-replaceable ahead of new EU rules that are due to come into force in 2027.

My big question, and the question that neither I nor my colleague Jennifer Pattison Tuohy got conclusive answers to in our interviews with Harman, Google, and Amazon, was whether we might see more speakers offering Alexa and Google Assistant simultaneously in the future. Clearly a lot of work has gone into the feature from the three companies, and my demonstration suggested most of the technical hurdles have been overcome.

But, for now, it seems simultaneous access to both voice assistants is being characterized as an experiment that may or may not be repeated. "This is the first trial," Google's director of product management for Google Assistant for Home Marissa Chacko told my colleague Jennifer. "We want to see how it goes and see if there's a demand for it."

Photography by Jon Porter / The Verge

<https://www.theverge.com/2023/8/31/23853487/jbl-authentics-200-300-500-hands-on-alexa-google-assistant-smart-speaker>