

# Buy Music Unfettered by Digital Rights Management

BY ZACK STERN

DIGITAL RIGHTS management (DRM) music restrictions are finally on their way out. Apple, which accounts for most U.S. music sales, released its 10-million-track catalog from those limitations in April (see [find.pcworld.com/62793](http://find.pcworld.com/62793)). DRM constraints have restricted the number of PCs that can play songs and even the kinds of devices that can read the files. With the restrictions lifted, you can buy music for use however you want.

Millions of DRM-free files are available from Amazon, eMusic, Napster, Rhapsody, and Zune, as well as from iTunes. But each store varies in its pricing, file quality, selection, and other quirks. Here's how they stack up.

## iTunes

Apple's music store ([find.pcworld.com/62794](http://find.pcworld.com/62794)) requires you to shop through iTunes software and is designed to work with iPods, but you can move purchased songs into Windows Media Player,

Although restrictions are easing, DRM can still be problematic for digital music lovers. Here's where and how to buy unrestricted tunes.



AT THE ITUNES Store, you can discover music through many points of entry, but the search bar takes you directly to results, too.

with a caveat: iTunes doesn't actually sell MP3 files.

Its iTunes Plus tracks—the DRM-free ones—are AAC (advanced audio codec) files. Aside from playing on iPods, DRM-free AAC tracks work on nearly all music players, including the Zune and even many mobile phones. Just be sure to buy the iTunes Plus songs and not the Apple-only DRM tracks until the transition is finalized.

You can upgrade previously purchased restricted songs to open files for 30 cents per track or \$3 per album. Apple says that all of its DRM-free AAC tracks are encoded at 256 kbps at a variable bit rate. Although AAC is very widespread, MP3 is still more-commonly supported.

The strong iTunes store interface is an easy pick if you use Apple's iPod or iPhone. Previously, Apple charged

\$0.99 per song; however, the company is now introducing \$0.69 and \$1.29 prices for some tracks. Album pricing will vary more, too, although \$9.99 will remain typical.

## Amazon MP3 Store

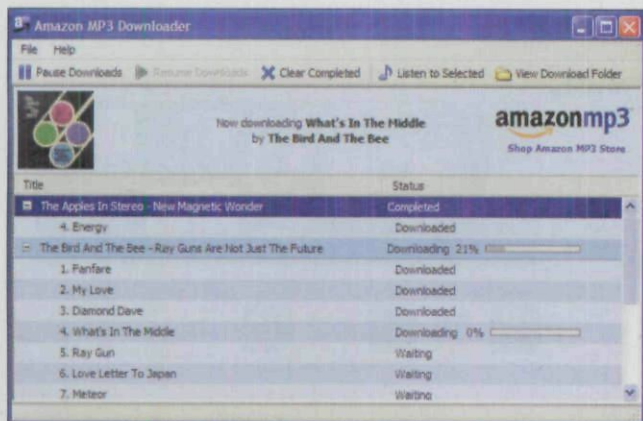
Amazon ([find.pcworld.com/62411](http://find.pcworld.com/62411)) regularly offers sale prices—and is now undercutting iTunes on some top-selling music. (Nonsale prices are about \$9 apiece for new albums; less for older titles.)

You can sort offerings by price, genre, and other standards, and Amazon's recommendations bounce you to new songs you might like.

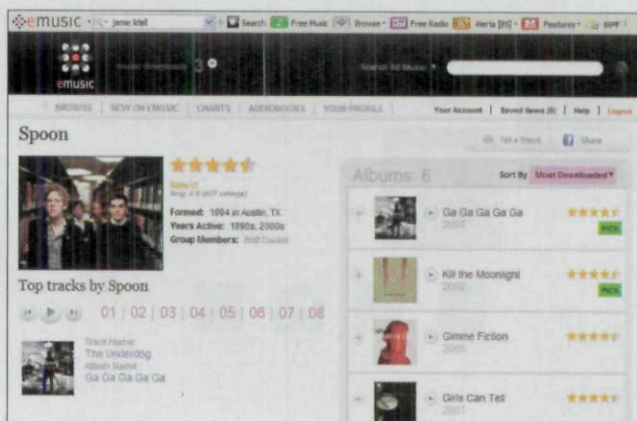
For single tracks, you won't have to install additional software. Album purchases require Amazon's download utility. Most of the music Amazon offers is encoded as 256-kbps MP3 files. Its 7 million songs are aimed at a mainstream, pop audience. Tracks cost \$0.79 to \$0.99.

## eMusic

eMusic ([emusic.com](http://emusic.com)) mixes DRM-free MP3 downloads with a subscription service. >>



AMAZON'S SIMPLE MP3 Downloader utility for albums from its music store usually runs unobtrusively in the background.



EMUSIC'S OPTIONAL TOOLBAR adds more ways to search for tracks and hear new music; the site itself offers lots of help to music fans.



A monthly fee brings a fixed number of tracks. Often, you'll end up with a few credits to spend one track at a time, instead of on a whole album. Low prices offset these annoyances. Monthly plans vary, but one option is a 100-song, \$25 plan where songs cost \$0.25 each.

eMusic's 5 million tracks are 192-kbps, variable-bit-rate MP3s—not quite as good as most competitors' content, but okay. eMusic's catalog favors smaller, more-independent record labels rather than the big names.

Lots of editorial content helps subscribers navigate the lesser-known music. Top-selling and theme-based lists aid beginners. Social networking features allow you to see what songs other, similar users or friends like.

## Napster

The current Napster ([napster.com](http://napster.com)) invites you to choose between a DRM-restricted subscription and DRM-free MP3 downloads, so look for the MP3 icon before buying.

A big catalog of 7 million MP3 tracks gives Napster a wide reach. A spokesperson



**NAPSTER SOFTWARE MANAGES** and plays your tracks, but it offers few features beyond the similar-looking Napster Web interface.

for Napster reports that the "vast majority" of tracks are variable-bit-rate at 256 kbps, while a "handful" are sold at 128 kbps. (The shopping card says which one you'll get just before you buy.)

The Web interface feels clunky and is best suited to finding music you already want, not for making new discoveries. Its optional software works slightly better, though the look is nearly the same. And you can't see prices until you're almost ready to buy, which makes bargain hunting difficult.

## Rhapsody

Rhapsody has a Web-only interface for browsing its 7 million songs ([rhapsody.com](http://rhapsody.com)). The service is split between

subscription and DRM-free MP3s, so surf the MP3 list to get the DRM-free songs.

The weak interface forces users to browse by searching. You have little power to resort lists, and sometimes the store sells albums only as \$0.99 individual tracks—annoying if they have many short songs. Album prices are often about \$10 or less.

Rhapsody's strong preview system lets you sample the full track before buying. But unless you purchase the DRM-laden, unlimited service, you can hear only 25 tracks each month. Its 256-kbps MP3 files have good quality, and you can download tracks as zip files if you don't want to install Rhapsody's download utility.

## Zune

Before downloading from the Zune marketplace ([zune.net](http://zune.net)), you'll need Microsoft's Zune marketplace software (a stand-alone download). The tool serves mostly as a Zune-oriented replacement for Windows Media Player. But if you use a different MP3 device, the software plays nicely with WMP.

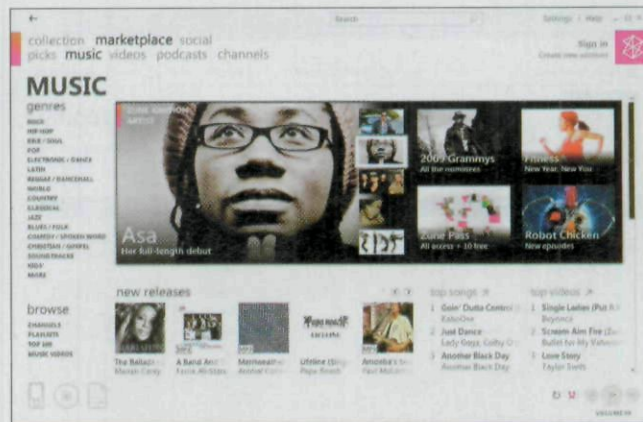
The catalog offers a mixture of DRM-free MP3 tracks and DRM-restricted songs (you may find a restricted track on an otherwise open-MP3 album). Look for the MP3 icon.

The 5 million tracks cover most mainstream favorites. They usually cost \$0.99 each, but you have to buy with Microsoft's points currency, common on the Xbox 360. Music is encoded at either 256 kbps for the major record labels or an impressive 320 kbps for the indie labels.

For Zune users, Microsoft offers an all-you-can-download monthly service with typical DRM restrictions for \$15. But each month, you can also download and keep ten DRM-free tracks as MP3 files for use anywhere.



**RHAPSODY'S SPARSE INTERFACE** may look like a placeholder—you have to browse by searching—but it lets you preview full tracks.



**A WELL-DESIGNED, all-in-one music app,** Microsoft's Zune software manages your tunes even if you don't own the Zune MP3 player.

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