

OPINION: Market for Digital Audio Players and Downloadable Music Grows 2

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How many times have you bought something, say a piece of computer equipment, and later felt ripped off? Ready to turn the tables?

Happily, new technology lets consumers become "rip-off" artists. Even better, we get to carry our guilty pleasure around in a lightweight device that fits in your shirt pocket.

Take it from me, being a rip-off artist is fun, pretty darn rewarding, and even legal. I mention that last part because I don't want some rogue recording-industry lawyer jumping down my throat with a cease-and-desist order.

The object of my affection is the diminutive, portable digital audio player. Where once there was one, all of a sudden there are many. As with most things tethered to a PC, these gizmos have a dark side, but more about that later.

The players are pager-size devices that weigh under 3 ounces, and work off rechargeable or disposable batteries for hours at a stretch. By processing compressed audio files known as "MP3s," they produce, as the phrase du jour goes, "CD-quality" music, though the term has no agreed-upon meaning.

The magic of rip-off artistry is moving tunes off a CD and onto the player.

Here's the deal: The players attach to the PC, either through a parallel or USB port. Software lets users "grab" cuts off CDs placed in the PC's CD-ROM drive. Once you've "ripped" your cuts, you convert them into MP3 files. The final step is transferring the MP3 files from the PC to the device for playback.

The precise sequence of steps and even the number of programs it takes to accomplish all of this vary with the device and software. It sounds more difficult than it is and remains more complicated than it should be. And, of course, the difficulty level varies with the device's software. The players have no moving parts. On the models I tried, a "hold" button locks in settings to ensure that tunes play steadily, even when I misstepped while mowing my lawn or working out.

The review unit with which I spent the most time is called Nomad and is made by Creative Labs. But get ready for RCA's Lyra, Sensory Science's raveMP, Saehan's MPMan, and I-Jam Multimedia's I-Jam. And

let's not forget the market-defining Rio player, made by Diamond Multimedia.

Since introducing the Rio last fall, Diamond has spun off a wholly owned subsidiary called RioPort, which is poised to ship a second-generation model, the 500, which works with Macs as well as PCs, and uses a USB instead of parallel port, quickening data transfers.

No doubt I am omitting some makes. New portables seem to be coming out of the woodwork every two seconds. Can you say holiday-shopping-season hot item?

By accident or design, this sudden onslaught of devices arrives in the wake of Diamond's success in fighting off a federal lawsuit brought by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). The Washington, D.C.-based trade group had contended the Rio was made for the illegal pirating of copyright music and could drain away billions of dollars in royalties from artists and publishers.

In a recent interview, Cary Sherman, the RIAA's general counsel, said the case "has been overtaken by marketplace events." He singled out the Secure Digital Music Initiative (SDMI), an ongoing forum with more than 100 participants from the recording, consumer-electronics and information-technology industries.

The participants are trying to develop a way to protect digitally distributed music against endless replication, robbing the artists and recording companies of revenue. Their goal is to come up with a protocol for initial public review by next June. Smoking the peace pipe with consumer-electronics manufacturers does not mean the RIAA has quit policing the Web to guard against unauthorized, digital uploads of mainstream artists' performances, Sherman noted. "We do that (check for pirates) every day," he said.

While the security work goes on, many MP3 players are cropping up, ranging from \$170 to \$270 (rebate deals make them cheaper), depending on the model and amount of memory. Most come with 32MB or 64MB of memory on board. An optional memory card is the most significant and expensive accessory, with a 32MB card costing about \$90.

For MP3 music files, the rule of thumb is one minute per MB, so a 64MB device will play roughly an hour of music. But this assumes you don't mess with the default speed of 128 kilobits per second (128 kbps). Audiophiles may demand 256 kbps for even higher quality sound, while the guy heading for the gym probably won't notice if the rate gets bumped down to 96 kbps ("near" or low-quality CD) or even 64 kbps (upper end FM quality).

Memory management is the biggest headache with these devices. It's still way too tough to sort out how many songs will fit onto your device. It's possible to fiddle with software that lets you raise or lower the bit rate. Lowering the rate diminishes file size and sound quality but makes room for more tunes.

Fiddling with this feature is a pain. I longed for a software option that said: "Make it fit." On the other hand, plain voice files take up significantly less room, and an increasing number of sites include content such as books, comedy routines, even newspaper articles.

Kurt Ohlfs, RioPort's business development manager, estimates that 64MB worth of memory holds about 28 hours' worth of voice playback.

What's exciting about these players is their lightness, the quality of sound and the freedom to put just about anything on them your heart desires. You can also delete files off the device, transfer them to your PC's hard drive and import new songs. Fanatics can also use the software to custom-build "albums."

The portables, as well as desktop MP3 players such as Microsoft's Windows Media Player, RealNetworks' RealJukebox, MusicMatch's JukeBox and Nullsoft's Winamp, are rapidly gaining popularity.

Just last week, MediaMetrix, a New York-based Internet-audience tracker, reported that there were an estimated 4 million users of digital music, including MP3 files, in U.S. households as of June 1999. That's up from just a few hundred thousand less than a year ago.

The existing music-distribution business was built on the premise that music takes physical form -- albums, cassette tapes, CDs. The medium was the music. Analysts say a new model is coming, one that cuts out traditional practices.

Taking over, says Mark Hardie, an analyst at Cambridge, Mass.-based Forrester Research, will be a direct relationship between the music source and the consumer, with an infinite volume of virtual shelf space. He forecasts that the music-sales download market will explode from \$1 million this year to more than \$1 billion by 2003.

Meantime, besides the security concern, a number of practical obstacles, chiefly bandwidth, stand in the way.

MP3 music files are just too big for speedy download from the Web at conventional modem dial-up speeds of 28.8 kbps or 56 kbps. (Another reason why I find CD-ripping rather than Web downloads so much more gratifying).

Another problem: Memory can be expensive, and then there's the lack of memory standardization. Some memory cards are proprietary; others are interchangeable with other devices, like digital cameras.

Also, while musical taste is highly subjective, many who follow MP3s say finding quality artists and recordings on the Web is very much a flea-market affair, aggravated by too many broken links and other dead-ends only a total nerd could overlook.

The makers of these devices and related software would do themselves and the rest of us a favor by simplifying MP3 file management and searches. While I was able to noodle my way through Creative Labs' software without too much fuss, it remains an enthusiast's ballgame.

Creative's Nomad comes with one program (the Digital Audio Center) to rip a CD, and a second (Nomad Manager) to transfer the song to the device. Neatly, Nomad also acts as a voice recorder and an FM tuner (nice touch, but why not throw in AM while they're at it?).

Nomad runs on rechargeable batteries (you can swap in alkalines if you like) and since it must sit in its cradle for PC-data transfers anyway, I don't mind if it rests there a bit longer to recharge. Nomad was scheduled for shipping this month.

The downside of Nomad's versatility (MP3 player, FM tuner and voice recorder) is that the buttons' functionality changes depending on the mode, which taxed my memory.

The manual could be improved as well. I was initially stymied, for example, because it neglects to mention that Nomad must be turned on before sliding into its cradle.

RioPort's new entry, the Rio 500, is slightly slimmer than the earlier, 300 model, and its sleeker buttons are less prone to being accidentally touched. It comes with 64MB memory onboard, twice Nomad's internal memory. The 500 is expected to be available later this month.

The accompanying software, called Audio Manager, was superior, though flawed. The location of the bit-rate adjuster was less than obvious, and I had trouble divining how Audio Manager assembled the list of "albums" it found on my hard drive, especially since I didn't recall making any.

On the plus side, it integrates ripping and transfer functions into a single program, and the interface does a nice job of keeping things relatively simple. Also, Audio Manager is intelligent enough to scan a user's hard drive for all songs, a term it uses loosely since the yield includes voice files, too.

The 500 will ship "Audible-ready," meaning it will be capable of downloading books under a partnership with Audible.com. However, the feature, which will be enabled via an upcoming software patch, won't occur until security concerns are ironed out, probably next month.

Also of interest to consumers is the deal Microsoft and RioPort announced this summer to develop a player that will support "WMA" formatted files in a third-generation model, a post-500 unit due out by Christmas.

Kevin Unangst, lead product manager in Microsoft's streaming-media division, says other manufacturers' players will feature the same capability, supporting both MP3 and WMA files.

He says the WMA format, still being perfected, will be a better deal for consumers because it uses a compression scheme that squeezes comparable quality sound into smaller files, significantly extending memory. In fact, he claims that compared with MP3s, WMAs will double a portable player's capacity without sacrificing audio quality.

My limited testing did not prove his point. But consumers can judge for themselves by visiting <http://www.media.globix.net/ms-webaudio/default.htm>, and downloading and comparing the MP3 and WMA file formats, listening with desktop players.

Meantime, my advice is, let 'er rip.

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THE FOLLOWING WEB SITES have additional information about portable and desktop digital audio players, MP3 files and related content:

<http://www.nomadworld.com>

<http://www.rioport.com>

<http://www.ijamworld.com>

<http://www.ravemp.comavehome.html>

<http://www.mpman.com>

<http://www.lyrazone.com>

<http://www.winamp.com>

<http://www.musicmatch.com>

<http://www.mp3.com>

<http://www.sdmi.org>

<http://www.shoutcast.com>

<http://www.audible.com>

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