Cracking the encoding

Niall Magennis gives you a step-by-step guide to encoding MP3 files from your CD collection.

The controversy surrounding the distribution of MP3 files on the Internet has tended to cloud the fact that the MP3 format can be used as a great way of managing the music collection that you already legally own. Encoding songs as MP3s allows you to store loads of tracks on your hard drive, yet use very little space. If you've got a CD burner, you can use the MP3 format to create a single CD that will hold up to 12 of your favourite albums. This means, for example, that you could carry a fair chunk of your CD collection to work on a single CD for playback on your computer.

However, *PCW* still gets a lot of email from readers who are having problems with CD rippers and encoders, so I've decided to do a walkthrough of MP3 encoding. I've chosen Audiograbber as an example, mainly because it has a fantastic interface and is extremely easy to use, but also because a functional demo is available for free download. On the next page you'll find a simple guide to encoding MP3 tracks.

After you've tried the walk-through you may think the encoding is taking longer than it should. This has nothing to do with Audiograbber, it is a symptom of using the BladeEnc encoder. This a fine encoder and is available for a large range of operating systems, including Linux, but unfortunately it can't compete with commercial encoders in terms of speed.

If, after trying a bit of encoding with the above method, you really want to encode a lot of files with good sound quality, then your best bet is to plump for AudioCatalyst from Xing (www.xingtech.com). This is exactly the same program as Audiograbber except it is bundled with the commercial MP3 encoder from Xing. The Xing encoder is a good example of a commercial encoder. It offers very fast encoding speed and good sound quality, with a host of other features, such as variable bit rate encoding for creating even smaller MP3 files and a choice of encoding rates ranging from 32Kbits/sec right up to 320Kbits/sec. Best of all is that it only costs around £19 if you buy it online.

Sadly, the original and perhaps the best encoder is no longer freely available. L3enc from the Fraunhofer Institute used to be available for purchase in a format that Audiograbber could use, but due to the ease with which the file could be pirated, the Institute now only sells the encoder to software developers.

Two-way traffic: Converting MP3s to .wav files

Screenshot 1

There may be times when you want to convert an MP3 file into a wave file. For example, you may want to load it into an audio-editing package to apply effects.

One of the easiest ways to do this is to use Winamp, the popular MP3 file player that can be downloaded for free from www.winamp.com. It's not immediately obvious from Winamp's interface (see screenshot 1) that it can be used as a file converter, but if you dig a little behind the scenes, you'll see it's quite easy to convert any MP3 files back into a .wav file.

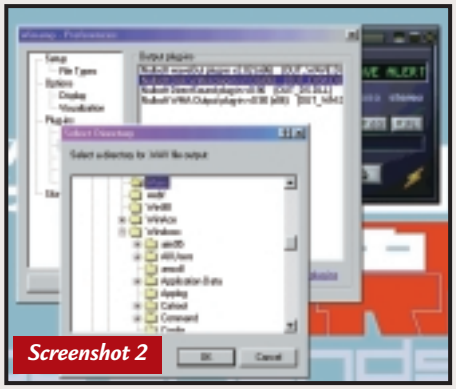
Here's how:

1 Click on the button in the top-left-hand corner of Winamp's main window. This will bring up a menu. Select Options and then Preferences.

2 The Preferences menu will pop up and from here click on Output under the plugins tree. From the output plug-ins menu, select Nullsoft Disk Writer plug-in and then select Configure to navigate to where you want the .wav files to end up (see screenshot 2).

3 Now load the files you want to convert into Winamp's playlist and hit play. The converted files will be in the folder you specified.

4 To return Winamp to normal operation, where it will play MP3 files, go back to the Preferences menu and under Output Plugins select either Nullsoft DirectSound plug-in, if your sound card has DirectX drivers, or select Nullsoft waveOut plug-in, if it is an older card that does not (see screenshot 3).


Screenshot 2

Screenshot 3

The idiot's guide to ripping MP3s

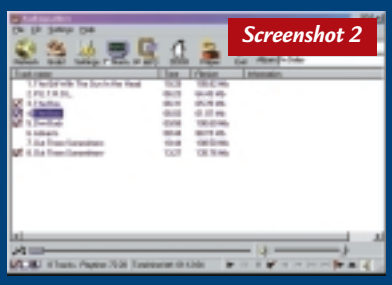
1 Download Audiograbber from www.audiograbber.com-us.net – it's a 1.3MB file. Install Audiograbber into c:\audiograbber.

2 Next, download the BladeEnc MP3 encoder DLL file from http://bladeenc.mp3.no. The file you need is only 141KB in size and is called BladeDLL-0XX-intel.zip, where XX corresponds to the version number. Unzip the contents of BladeDLL-0XX-intel.zip into the same directory as you've installed Audiograbber (c:/audiograbber).


Screenshot 1

3 Run Audiograbber. Place an audio CD in your CD-ROM drive. If you have a modem installed you can click on the button with the picture of a penguin on it. This will start your Internet connection and download the name of the album, artist and all the names of the songs from an Internet database called CDDB. If you don't have an Internet connection, don't worry, you can just type in the name of the song by double clicking on the track number (see screenshot 1).

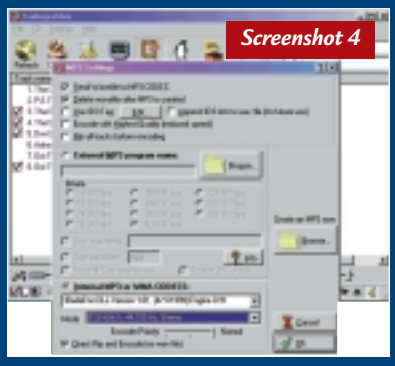
4 Because this is the trial version of Audiograbber not all the songs will be available for copying. Those that are, have a box next to the name of the track. Choose one of these by clicking in the box next to its name so that a tick appears in the box. Make sure you've only selected one track (see screenshot 2). I've chosen Orbital's *The Box*.


Screenshot 2


Screenshot 3

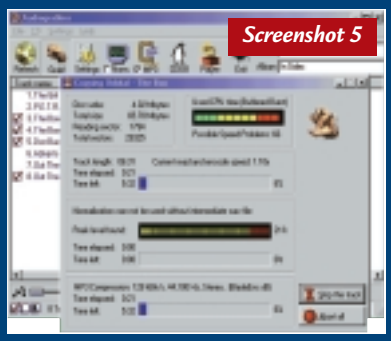
5 Click on the Settings button with the picture of the cog wheel on it. This will bring up the main settings window (see screenshot 3). Under 'CD-ROM access method' there are three choices. Not all of these will be available. If the MSCDEX or ASPI options are available click on one of these. Both of these options allow the CD-ROM to read the raw digital data directly off the CD at faster than normal playback speed. This also means that your recording will be slightly better quality. If neither of these options are available, or if you experience problems with them, click on the analog box. This will sample audio in real time as it is played through your sound card. All CD-ROM drives support this option, but make sure that your sound card is set up to record from the CD-ROM player under your sound card's mixer application. From this main Settings window you can also change the directory that your final MP3 file will be saved in by clicking on the browse option. I've left it at c:\Audiograbber. Click OK to exit the settings menu.

6 Click on the MP3 button with the picture of the clamp on it. This will bring up the MP3 settings window. Make sure that the following options are ticked: 'Send Wav file to MP3 Codec' and 'Delete wav file after MP3 is created' (see screenshot 4). Also make sure that you click the 'Internal MP3 or WMA codec CODECS' box and that you have selected the BladeEnc DLL in the box under it. In the Mode box choose 128Kbits/sec, 44,100Hz, Stereo. Tick the 'Direct Rip and Encode (no wave file)' box. Click

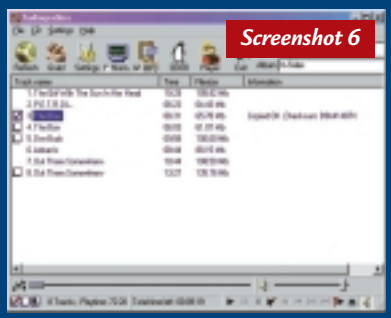

Screenshot 4

OK to close the MP3 settings window.

7 Click on the Grab button with the picture of the hand on it. The program will first copy and then encode the audio on to your hard drive (see screenshot 5).


Screenshot 5

8 The encoding has now finished (see screenshot 6) and you'll find the MP3 file in your Audiograbber folder.


Screenshot 6

CONTACTS

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