

Music on the Web



MP3 is a digital compression standard that's changing the way we buy and share music. Rick Maybury explains how you, too, can tune in to this phenomenon

It has been variously described as the biggest innovation in recorded music since the introduction of the vinyl LP/compact cassette/ CD - take your pick. However, there is little doubt that a piece of computer software, generically known as MP3, could have a very big impact on the way we buy and listen to music in the future.

MP3 is short for MPEG-3, which stands for Motion Pictures Expert Group Layer 3. It is a software compression scheme for condensing digital audio data. That's really all you need to know on the technical front; the upshot of it is that it enables music and sounds - comparable in quality to audio CD - to be sent over the Internet. There's nothing particularly special about MP3: it's one of a number of compression systems that reduce the amount of data in audio files by leaving out sounds that either cannot be heard or are masked by other sounds. What sets MP3 apart is the fact that it is fast becoming a standard.

It's still early days, but already it is possible to download music from thousands of websites and play it through a PC's sound system. There the MP3 story might have

ended, since very few people would seriously consider using a PC as an alternative to a home hi-fi system. What has given MP3 a life of its own is a new generation of peripherals that make it possible to get those music files out of the PC and into mainstream home audio equipment.

The most obvious route is via a recordable CD-Rom drive; budget models are now available for less than £100. A CD writer can record or "burn" music files on to a CD-R disc, which can be played on almost any domestic CD deck. The other possibility is an MP3 player. They're roughly the size of a personal tape player and PC files can be downloaded to the player directly, or carried across on standard PC memory cards. Several models are now in the shops and prices start at around £150, though there is evidence to suggest that could fall to less than £100 in time for Christmas. One hi-fi manufacturer - Sharp - has also developed a mini hi-fi system that can be used in conjunction with a PC to download MP3 files and record them to MiniDisc.

Distributing music on the Internet via MP3 has raised a number of issues concerning copyright and royalties, and the music industry is naturally worried about the implications for software piracy, but you can be sure that it's an avenue that will be fully explored for its commercial potential. Already there's a large number of sites selling copyright-paid music, though at the moment it's mostly

confined to specialist areas, small independent labels and bands. It's likely to be a while before you can legitimately download your favourite Beatles album from the Internet, pick and mix the latest chart tunes or compile a custom CD of works from cherished composers.

If you would like to get a flavour of what MP3 has to offer right now there are an enormous amount of MP3 music and samples available free. The first thing you will need, apart from a PC with an Internet connection, is a program called a "player". At the last count there were more than 100 of them, covering most popular platforms and operating systems. You can find a very comprehensive list on the MP3.Com website, along with links to download sites, at www.mp3.com/software/playersrest.html

If you are using a fairly up-to-date PC with Windows 95 or 98, one of the best options is a freeware program called WinAmp. It's quite compact, only 650Kb in size, so it should take only two or three minutes to download via a 56kbit/s modem. The first step is to create two empty folders on your C: drive in Windows Explorer. Call one "Player" and the other "Music".

Connect to the download site above and click on the WinAmp link; you will be asked if you want to open the file or save it to disc. Choose the latter and use the Save button to navigate to your newly created Player folder. When download is complete, click on the WinAmp icon in the folder - it's a good idea to accept the defaults and the program will automatically install itself on your machine.

Now you are ready to begin. WinAmp comes with its own "mini" Internet browser, which opens automatically to show a list of musical and audio genres and a

selection of top tunes. You can click on any of these and it will establish a connection and link directly to the listed download sites. Again you will be asked if you want to open the file or save it to disc, which is where the Music folder comes in. Alternatively, if you want to explore the wider world of MP3 just type in MP3 and the name of an artist or musical style into the search field (ie "classical mp3" or "david bowie mp3", and see what that brings up.

The only real drawback to MP3 is the download time. For example, a track lasting three and a half minutes could occupy 3.5Mb, which could take a typical Internet connection with a 56kbit/s modem between 10 and 12 minutes.

When download is complete all you need to do is click on the file, though you may want to run it through your virus scanner first, just in case. WinAmp opens automatically and starts playing. The controls and displays are similar to a normal tape/CD player and as an added bonus it has a graphic equaliser.

WinAmp has many other applications. For example, you can use it to listen to radio stations on the Internet, play midi or wav files and audio CDs on your PC. MP3 opens up an exciting world of audio entertainment for PC owners and is a real taste of things to come.

Jargon filter

Graphic equaliser Sophisticated tone control, for precise setting of bass, mid-range and treble frequencies during playback on an audio system.

Samples Many record companies and bands now provide short snippets from forthcoming albums in MP3 format on their websites.