

Our friend Rob's propeller is really flying this time. Here's an erudite and funky analysis of digital music. Mrs Rob has sent him to bed until he calms down a bit.

What are MP3s?

To people unfamiliar with digital music, all compressed music files are MP3s, but the term actually applies to one specific format. (Compressed means that they take up much less space than CD files) There are in fact a number of others, some more widely used than others. If it's a wet day and you're really bored, this will make you into an expert. <http://www.nch.com.au/acm/formats.html>

The following article covers some of the better known (Apple orientated) ones in more excruciating detail:

<http://www.ilounge.com/index.php/articles/comments/beginners-guide-to-compressing-your-cds/>

Still awake? This gives a lot of Microsoft Media player orientated information:

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/player/faq/default.mspx>

The more proprietary file formats also include Digital Rights Management (DRM). The intention of this is very worthy, it's designed to stop you buying one copy of a song or CD, and literally sharing it with the rest of the world, but it can also stop you doing what you'd really like, with music you've bought.

The big companies like Microsoft and Apple also use the proprietary file formats to try and tie you to their software and business partners, so you can't play songs bought from iTunes on the new Microsoft Zune portable player.

This link tells you more about DRM:

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/player/faq/drm.mspx>

Now for the stuff you really need to know. What's good about music bought from the iTunes online shop?

You can buy one track from an album

You get immediate delivery

It integrates superbly well with the iTunes on your PC, iPod and other Apple equipment

There's a very wide range of music available

What's bad about music bought from the iTunes online shop?

You can only play the music on an iPod or other Apple equipment, because of the format used. When you want a new portable player, it has to be an iPod again.

If you want to move music between PCs, you have to do it in line with the DRM restrictions. Something to remember if you plan to buy a new Vista PC, and want to move your existing library on to it.

Most tracks are ripped at a relatively low bit rate, so you have a quality cap (128kbps)

It's expensive per track in the UK (as are most things compared to the US)
If you want a whole album it is slightly cheaper

But, iTunes is changing!

iTunes Plus has albums at 256kbps and no DRM, but is more expensive. Tracks are £0.99, compared to £0.79, but albums are mostly the same price as the DRM version. But it does still use an Apple file format, so won't play on everything.

However there is a sting in the tail, Apple does imbed personal information about you in these files (as it does in all iTunes Shop files) so if you buy iTunes Plus files with the thought of sharing them with friends or putting them on a P2P site, Apple can keep track of you!

<http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20070530-apple-hides-account-info-in-drm-free-music-too.html>

Contrary to popular belief the CD isn't dead and has a place in the MP3 age!

If you have the CD, you can play it at full resolution on your HiFi

If you have the CD, you can rip it to MP3:

- Just about anything will play MP3s, all MP3 players, car CD players, DVD players

- You can move MP3s easily between computers

- If the worst comes to the worst, you have the CD as a backup, it will take time and effort to re-rip your library, but it won't cost you any more

You could re-rip CDs to any other new format that comes along in the future

Albums from iTunes store are £7.99, CDs from Amazon or www.play.com tend to be around the £9 mark for chart albums. So it costs you an extra £1 for those benefits.

So, what could you do with your newly created MP3s?

Play them on the new Microsoft Zune Player:

www.zune.net

Play them on a PC with Windows Media Player

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/default.aspx>

Play them on any apple devices: iPods, Apple TV, Macs

<http://www.apple.com/uk/itunes/>

Stream them from room to room with Airport Express

<http://www.apple.com/uk/airportexpress/>

Play it on the Sony portable players

http://www.sony.co.uk/view/ShowProductCategory.action?site=odw_en_GB&category=Network+Walkman

Stream them from room to room with a Wi-Fi music streamer

http://www.rokulabs.com/products_soundbridge.php

You can even play them on your breast implant!

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/10/13/mp3_breast_implant/

Say goodnight, Rob-boy