

Internet music sees shaky future

BY JOEL MARSH

It seems that there is always something trying to revolutionize the way people do things in one way or another, making everything easier and us lazier.

Since the inception of the world-wide use of the Internet, methods of obtaining information are continually being changed by

the "technological revolution." One such change is the availability of music on the Internet.

For those who haven't had the opportunity to surf a great deal, or who are part of the "email-only" elite, a few definitions should be outlined. In the world of computers, audio (which is any intentional sound that can come from a computer) can be in many digital formats. For all intents and purposes, the difference between formats is only apparent in the quality of sound, and in the amount of memory it takes up on your computer's hard drive. Different software is required to play different formats of audio, and most of this software either comes with the computer or can be found on the Internet at no cost.

With stiff competition building on the Internet for the title of "number one" audio format, some are struggling, and others stand to change the face of the industry. RealAudio can be heard as streamed audio, essentially the same as radio, or as a download to play later. Liquid Audio only allows streaming, which is convenient and fast, but doesn't allow the listener to keep the file. This is where another format has stepped up, and is starting to cause some concern within the music industry.

MPEG audio layer 3 (MP3's) are a format that very closely simulates CD-quality sounds and lets people download music so they can play it whenever they want on their computer, or through a stereo system just by connecting an MP3 player, or by converting the file format. This format was immediately popular, and became more so once software to create your own MP3's became widely available on the net.

However, while being great for listeners who wanted songs without having to buy a whole CD, or wanted to share songs with friends, the music industry has sat up and realized that there was the potential for record sales to be hindered.

Many major record labels have combined on the opinion that MP3's should be illegal, while other labels are breaking industry taboo and releasing singles on the Internet in the controversial format. Although people are still buying CDs, we are no more than a year from the point where any full album could be downloaded from the Internet, and burned (copied to a CD) for personal use. In fact thousands of albums are already this accessible.

At least one company has produced a Walkman-like player specifically for MP3's, which has gained popularity, but still lacks enough material to make it a worthwhile purchase. This may not be the

case for long. The same group of record labels is lobbying against MP3 players, saying that they promote illegal copy and sale of copyrighted materials.

Many producers of portable CD players and stereos have put into place a plan (although it has not yet been approved) to encode all future CDs with a watermark that will be digitally encoded into the audio on the disc. The players will look for the watermark, and play or not play the CD depending on whether the mark is found. This would inhibit people from illegally copying songs from the Internet, since those files would no longer contain the watermark after being transferred into any computer audio format.

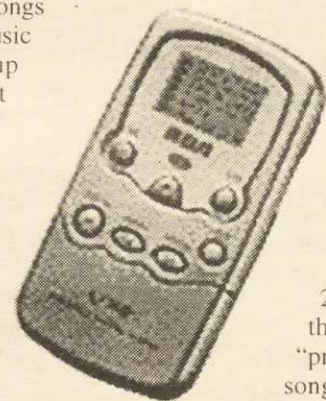
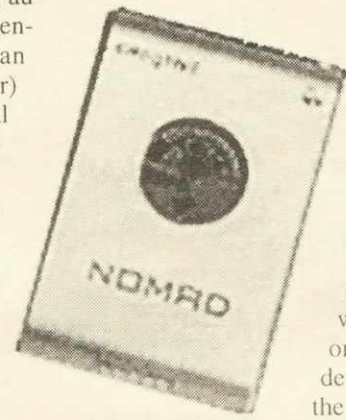

Stereos and portable players that have this security feature in place would also be able to play CDs from before the development of the feature, so old CDs would still be more than colorfully reflective Frisbees.


Another problem across the Internet is licensing fees for Internet Radio Stations, or Webcasters. This arises in a debate between the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) and the Webcasters themselves, where the former is trying to impose larger fees on the latter, in comparison to land-based radio stations. The support in this matter typically lies with the Webcasters, however the RIAA does have its supporters.

Similarly, the royalties that radio and TV stations pay for the use of songs are not collected on the Internet because there is no set organization (such as ASCAP or SOCAN) in place to monitor the use of digital music.

New laws and additions to existing laws are slowly being introduced to maintain some security of artists' rights and record label's revenue. These laws include stipulations such as "no more than three songs from any particular album," including "no more than 2 consecutively in a three hour period" and "prior announcements of song or artist playlists are not permitted." Both of these stipulations are found in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. This is somewhat inhibited, though, by the Digital Home Recording Act, which stipulates that copies of digital music for private, non-commercial use is allowed, and may not be prosecuted. Although this act also states that Serial Copying (copies of copies) is not allowed, and that copyright owners are entitled to modest royalties if they are inclined to press for them.

If these laws are established, there will be consequences for MP3 lovers. They may find themselves paying for songs over the Internet.

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