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News Desk

iTunes vs the Listening Room

By *Jon Iverson*

▶ **May 03, 2004** — *Stereophile* readers are clearly in favor of our coverage of products like Apple's iPod. But judging by some of the comments we receive, they're split on whether it's been a kick in the pants for music lovers or just added to the downward low-rez spiral of digital audio.

The Audio Engineering Society (AES) New York Section is also wondering about the effects of digital portables on the sound of music. The organization has announced what it terms a "controversial and essential" industry forum on the relevance of 16-bit and high-resolution formats such as DVD-A and SACD in a market "where consumers are flocking to the portability — and significantly lower sonic quality—of digital media players such as Apple's iPod."

The event will take place on Wednesday, May 12, 6:30pm, at Tinker Auditorium at the French Institute—Alliance Francaise in New York at 55 East 59th Street (between Park and Madison Avenues). On hand to discuss how the "various constituencies comprising the audio industry are attempting to thrive during a tumultuous time in the business" will be recording engineer David Baker; Chris Byrne, general manager and co-founder of NHT home loudspeakers and NHTPro professional studio monitors; Kevin Clement, senior director of new technology for BMG Music; audio retailer Elliot Fishkin from Innovative Audio; record producer Elliot Mazer; and Adam Sohmer from PR firm Sohmer Associates.

They should have plenty to talk about: Apple recently released several iTunes-related announcements, including the news that a total of 70 million songs have been downloaded from the iTunes online store since its launch one year ago last week. With these numbers, the company is claiming a more than 70 percent market share of legal downloads for singles and albums.

Apple adds that iTunes customers are now purchasing songs at a rate of 2.7 million per week, indicating a present rate of 140 million songs per year. According to the company, there are now 700,000 songs from all five major music companies and over 450 independent music labels available on iTunes.

Apple has also released an updated version of its iTunes playback software, version 4.5, which, in addition to various new playback features, adds compatibility with more digital formats. The company says that the player can now automatically convert Windows Media Audio (WMA) files to iTunes native AAC format.

However, there's a catch. iTunes 4.5 can only convert unprotected WMA files that do not include any digital rights management (DRM) wrappers of the sort found on files downloaded from services such as the relaunched Napster. This is the same problem that WMA players have with iTunes AAC files, which have their own

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proprietary DRM, as noted when we [interviewed](#) Microsoft at the CES show earlier this year.

So, while software and hardware digital players are adding compatibility with an increasing number of digital audio formats, the various proprietary DRM wrappers that most legal audio downloads come with preclude these files' use across more than one or two platforms.

Another issue with DRM downloads, which many find troubling, came to light with the iTunes 4.5 announcement. The parameters regarding how the DRM restricts a file's uses can be changed mid-stream on unsuspecting consumers—even affecting songs that were downloaded prior to the change in DRM behavior. Here's how Apple put it last week: "Honoring our commitment to discourage music theft while preserving fair personal use rights, the number of times a user can burn the same playlist onto CDs with iTunes is being reduced from ten burns to seven. Users can still burn a single song an unlimited number of times and listen to their music on an unlimited number of iPods."

At the same time that Apple reduced the number of times someone can copy a playlist to a CD, the company increased the number of personal computers a file can be played on from three to five. Reaction was swift, condemning this flexing of iTunes' DRM muscle as users around the Internet voiced their concerns.

Other enhancements should prove more audiophile-friendly. An Apple spokesman explained that the volume slider in iTunes is now logarithmic, like most stereo volume knobs. "We got complaints that iTunes didn't have log volume, which means that when you adjust the slider, you can move it a lot at one end and it doesn't sound much different, while at the other end moving it a little makes a big difference. With log volume, moving the slider an equal amount changes the volume by the same amount throughout the entire range of the slider."

In addition to the AAC and MP3 formats, iTunes 4.5 also includes the new Apple Lossless (AL) encoder. Lossless encoders such as FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) and DVD-Audio's MLP have become popular among audiophiles since they don't actually reduce the sound quality of the digital file while cutting its size significantly. According to Apple, tracks encoded with AL, while still larger than compressed lossy AAC or MP3 files, will be about half the size of their uncompressed equivalents.

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