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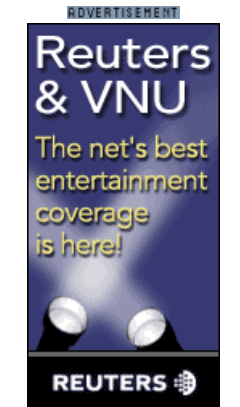
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THIS WEEK'S POLL

THE TANGLED WEB

Edited By Barry A. Jeckell. May 06, 2003, 10:00 AM

WILL APPLE MAKE 'EM BITE? Apple Computer's week-old digital music service, the iTunes Music Store, appears to be emerging as a huge hit with consumers, kicking off a new phase of the online music world's P.N. (Post-Napster) era. The service sold over 1 million tracks in its first week of existence, according to a statement from Apple, and will be adding 3,200 tracks to its virtual shelves today (May 6).



The iTunes Store offers roughly 200,000 songs for download at 99 cents apiece. There are no subscription fees or packages involved, just a huge cache of individual song files. As with Napster and its progeny, once users have obtained the goods, they own the files. The only rights restriction -- not letting a user burn more than 10 CD copies of a single playlist -- is designed to stop mass-market pirates, but isn't anything that would significantly affect an individual user.

As many in the music industry have noted, it's hard to compete with free music. Peer-to-peer technologies such as KaZaA, Morpheus, and LimeWire, which allow users to download unlicensed music files from other remote computers, have given millions of music fans worldwide the option to trade free files at will over the past few years. Nobody is suggesting Apple's new service will convert the majority of these users entirely back to legitimate methods of obtaining online music, but it is a step in the right direction.

The iTunes Store runs out of a user's existing iTunes computer jukebox. Once a user has signed up for the service and started an account, buying and downloading tracks is simple. Each track offers a 30-second streaming preview. The downloaded files -- AAC, or Advanced Audio Content files, which Apple contends have a higher sound quality than MP3s -- come with encoded information packets that include printable cover art. And for \$9.99, a user can download an entire album. In the case of the service's top-downloaded album as of Sunday (May 4), Beck's "Sea Change" (Geffen), it would cost \$6.48 more to buy the disc from Amazon.com, including shipping.



Another key aspect of the iTunes store is its ability to offer exclusive tracks. A portion of the menu of songs offered at launch consists of previously unreleased and hard-to-find cuts by 22 artists, including Bob Dylan, Sheryl Crow, Queens of the Stone Age, U2, Eminem, and Sting. A big part of the allure of peer-to-peer services has been that users in effect have access to an immense online "store" with a selection ranging from the latest hit singles to old album tracks, obscure b-sides, live recordings, and more. Apple's exclusive tracks -- for example, two quality outtakes from the Flaming Lips' latest Warner Bros. album "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots" -- could be a major draw for fans who might otherwise turn to peer-to-peer services looking for rare and live tracks.

Granted, for P2P fans who just want to get a passable copy of the new 50 Cent hit, it probably remains a more attractive option to search for and download an unauthorized free MP3 rather than open iTunes and spring for the 99 cents. Results of a search on a service like KaZaA can be sketchy, and the songs' audio quality varies widely, but enough remote users still offer music through the P2P services to give them vastly larger selections than Apple's. The fact that the files are free also tends to lessen the blow of downloading a poor-quality track.

But the iTunes service is positioning itself as an appealing option for fans who know what songs they want and want them in legitimate, high-quality versions. The service's ease of use is one of its prime selling points: any Apple user who listens to

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music through the iTunes jukebox has instant access to the store's interface. It also has great appeal for the marginally Web-savvy. Users who aren't tempted by the peer-to-peer services may prefer iTunes as a way to get started in the download world.

So while the P2P networks are here to stay -- at least for the immediate future -- Apple's new venture does have a big potential market, and it looks to be a key ally in the record industry's ongoing attempt to build digital marketshare. Until the iTunes launch, the major labels' best efforts to win back the business lost to Napster and its kin had been the subscription-based services MusicNet and PressPlay. While these ventures are necessary steps for the beleaguered industry, their working models are just not close enough to those of the peer-to-peer networks to truly be able to compete with them. Now that fans have something that offers quality and flexibility, a lot of eyes will be trained on the service in the coming months, especially as Apple rolls out a Microsoft-compatible version later this year.

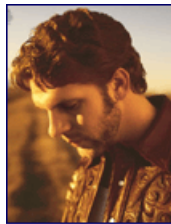
FEELING BLUE: The Blue Man Group's second album, "Complex," had an impressive debut last week at No. 60 on The Billboard 200. The performance art troupe's latest effort, however, fared even better on the Web. The album arrived at No. 6 on Billboard's Top Internet Albums Sales chart, with Web sales accounting for about 15% of the disc's first-week sales.



BLUE MAN GROUP

According to Nielsen SoundScan, "Complex" sold more than 16,000 copies in the U.S., and online sales alone totaled slightly more than 2,400. While the Blue Man Group certainly has a dedicated fanbase, Lava Records aggressively promoted the effort online. First single "Sing Along" featuring Dave Matthews has been streaming on the official Blue Man Group [Web site](#) for more than a week, and [VH1.com](#) has also been offering the clip. Additionally, the Blue Man Group site offers a number of essays that detail the making of the album, including a track-by-track analysis.

A breakdown of sales by retailers was unavailable, but a spokesperson for the troupe says a feature on Target.com provided a major boost in first-week numbers. The site, which sells its music through Amazon.com, has been offering the album at \$13.49.



BILLY CURRINGTON

THE STRAIGHT STORY: Up-and-coming country artist Billy Currington -- whose debut single "Walk a Little Straighter" (Mercury) snuck in at No. 56 on Billboard's Hot Country Singles & Tracks chart last week -- has joined the ranks of musicians streaming their new albums online.

But Currington has added a twist to the music section of his [official Web site](#). Alongside the RealAudio and WindowsMedia samples of each track from his debut album -- due in August -- the artist offers 90-second audio commentaries (also in both formats) describing the songs, and the writing process that went into them. He tells about each song's origin and the recording process with producer Carson Chamberlain, giving fans insight and a teaser for the forthcoming full-length.

-- Troy Carpenter

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