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Jukebox is reborn for the Internet age

The Boston Globe

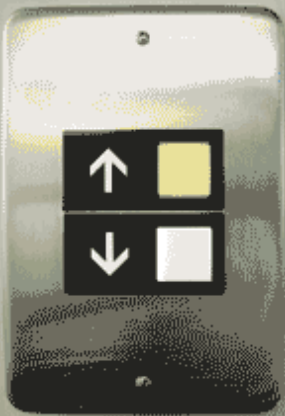
Makers turn to broadband and wireless technology

By Chris Reidy, Globe Staff | January 3, 2005

The Internet has changed the way people listen to music in their personal space. (Think iPod and other portable music players.) Now, it's also changing the way people listen to music in public places, such as restaurants and bars.

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For the jukebox, digital technology and broadband Internet connections offer the hope of a comeback -- and the possibility that, someday, for 50 cents or so, a customer could play any one of 2 million songs.

Need to hear Solomon Burke or George Jones hurt an old sad song? No problem. Internet jukeboxes also feature contemporary artists such as Usher, U2, and Gretchen Wilson. Many Internet jukeboxes take credit cards.

Some are WiFi enabled, so a music lover with a laptop can dash off an e-mail to an old boyfriend while listening to a favorite song from a long-ago prom date.

The jukebox is overdue for an upgrade. Once a technical marvel, it started losing popularity about the time disco was the rage. From the 1970s on, bars and restaurants have gravitated toward other entertainment options, such as live dee-jays and Muzak. (Muzak, perhaps, is the jukebox's archenemy.)

Meanwhile, the advent of cable and satellite television gave saloonkeepers plenty of sporting events to display on big-screen TVs.

The jukebox market was "in some decline," said Robbie Vann-Adib, chief executive of Ecast Inc., a private San Francisco company that is betting the Internet can rejuvenate the jukebox and change the way people listen to music in public.

One possible consequence: Megastars on the scale of Elton John could gradually be eclipsed by niche artists, said Vann-Adib, whose Ecast provides a broadband Internet connection and a licensed music database to 3,000 digital jukeboxes nationwide.

In the old days, when the Beatles wanted to hold your hand and music was often sold on 45 rpm records, a typical jukebox held 200 songs, most of them hits made popular by radio stations.

In the late 1980s came the CD jukebox, which could play 3,000 songs. But even with added capacity, a jukebox operator had to dispatch someone to a bar or a restaurant to replace old CDs with new ones.

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One reason jukeboxes saw "an erosion in market share" was that they were infrequently updated, Vann-Adib said. Tired of hearing the same songs, customers played the jukebox less and less. Worse, they might even seek out a tavern with a better sonic atmosphere.

But a jukebox linked by the Internet to a database offers virtually unlimited choice. In Europe, Internet jukeboxes can theoretically access 2 million songs, Vann-Adib said. In the United States, where licensing laws are stricter, Ecast jukeboxes can dial up 150,000 songs, with more songs added every week.

"It lets people listen to almost anything they want," said Christian Vara, president of Melo-Tone Vending Inc., a jukebox operator.

Almost anything, anyway. Some artists, such as Bruce Springsteen have yet to agree to allow their music to be part of Ecast's database.

Still, give people nearly unlimited choices, and they will take advantage of them. During a recent three-month period, 86 percent of the songs in Ecast's data base were played at least once, Vann-Adib said. Give people more choices, and bar patrons stay longer and spend more money.

"A typical CD jukebox generates about \$400 a month in revenue," Vann-Adib said. "With our product, a jukebox generates an average of \$1,000 a month."

That extra revenue is a big plus in trying to convince a saloonkeeper that a jukebox is preferable to Muzak, Vara said.

Melo-Tone operates about 500 jukeboxes. It's gradually replacing its CD jukeboxes, which cost about \$3,500, with digital jukeboxes, which retail for about \$6,500, he said. Melo-Tone operates about 50 Internet jukeboxes in such establishments as Flash's, Cornwall's, and J. J. Foley's.

At first glance, choosing a jukebox over Muzak would seem to be a no-brainer. A jukebox generates revenue; Muzak charges an establishment about \$65 a month.

Besides, most people think of elevator music when they think of Muzak, conceded David Moore, Muzak's chief technology officer.

But since the late 1980s, Muzak has been a satellite network of sorts, somewhat like the consumer satellite radio services that are now emerging, like Sirius and XM. Using a satellite dish on the roof, many Muzak clients have access to 70 different programs, nearly all of them music by the original artists.

Moore said a Muzak programmer can blend just the right mix of music to help "brand" a bar or a retail chain. Muzak disc jockeys create programs for big clients such as the Gap Inc. These programs are designed to resonate with the chain's core customers and reinforce the store brand.

At the moment, such customized programming is not feasible for small clients, but Moore thinks the Internet could change that by augmenting Muzak's satellite network.

"The advantage of broadband delivery over satellite is the ability to personalize the music experience on an individual basis," Moore said. "What about the guy who owns an Italian restaurant in Boston? We want to give him the tools to customize his brand, as well."

For some establishments, such as fine restaurants where the atmosphere seeks to be elegant and restrained, Muzak would seem to be a clear choice over the jukebox. Conversely, a jukebox might be preferable for a Texas honky-tonk.

But in locations where both Muzak and jukeboxes could be suitable, the issue comes down to who should control the music, management or customers.

Muzak favors management.

"Muzak is about understanding what music is appropriate to a particular retail experience," said

Moore, before referring to a disco anthem of the late 1970s. "Everybody loves 'YMCA.' But you don't want to be in a situation where someone can load up on the jukebox and play 'YMCA' 15 times in a row. To allow your customer to change your brand is a dangerous thing.

"It's like handing out a bucket of paint to every customer who walks through the door and letting them paint the walls in any way they wanted," he said. "With a jukebox, somebody can turn an atmosphere around on a dime, and that's not always a good thing."

Meanwhile, Ecast is experimenting with "genre-blocking," which would prevent its jukeboxes from playing boisterous Saturday night music during the tender moment of a romantic dinner. One possibility is a filtering method that could be applied at different times of the day and on different days of the week.

Still, when it comes to determining what music should be played in public venues, "power to the people" is Vann-Adib's mantra.

"We've lived in a hit-driven world for a long time," he said.

"When you give people access to a wide range of music, what you find is that people go deep into the catalog. People will listen to everything. Once you give people the ability to search a wide variety of content, that's exactly what they'll do.

"I'm not sure the age of the megastar will remain. What we could see is a lot of niche artists. Our top hundred artists today account for about 20 percent of the plays."

At National Jukebox Exchange in Mayfield, NY., which sells and restores classic jukeboxes, president John Papa is no fan of digital technology.

"This is going to be the last nail in the coffin of the traditional jukebox," he said.

"With digital jukeboxes, the era of seeing something spin inside is gone. The digital jukebox sterilizes the whole thing. It changes the flavor. These things aren't jukeboxes anymore; they're music machines."

Once upon a time, saloons could pride themselves on jukeboxes with music keyed to their clientele. There were jazz bars and folk cafes and juke joints keen on R&B. When the jukebox played a favorite song, what resulted sometimes could be a shared experience among kindred spirits.

In the old days, "The songs in a jukebox tended to be smash hits," like "Mack the Knife," Papa said.

"The music that got played over and over again tended to be very popular. Now you can dial up some obscure Frank Zappa song from 1982 that nobody else in the room has ever heard before except you."

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