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April 7, 2003

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## Sony Revisits Online Offer of Custom CD's

By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL

In a venture similar to the custom compact disc sites that looked promising during the early years of the dot-com boom, Sony Music Entertainment has started a Web site where online shoppers can buy CD's containing songs of their choosing. But rather than appealing to casual consumers with a broad mix of music, the site is designed to promote particular artists. Currently the site offers only songs by Bob Dylan and the alternative-rock quintet Train.

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[Sony](#), which opened the site, [www.custommixcd.com](#), in February, will begin promoting it today on [Microsoft's MSN.com](#).

For \$15, plus shipping, consumers can select up to 12 songs or 78 minutes of music. While many songs by the two artists are available on the service, there are noticeable gaps: Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" is not available, and the version of "The Times They Are A-Changin'" is taken from a recent live album.

Yet the site does have 14 rare Dylan tracks taken from

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soundtrack CD's, European singles and other hard-to-find sources and 21 live tracks by Train. Those live and rare tracks are not available as file downloads from PressPlay, the online music-subscription service that Sony owns with the Universal Music Group, which is part of [Vivendi Universal](#).

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The point is to allow customers to compile customized CD's easily and quickly. But that idea is not new. Personics tried to sell custom audio cassettes at retail kiosks in the 1980's. Several custom-CD ventures were on the Web in the mid-90's. SuperSonicBoom, iMix, MusicMaker and CDuctive all promised to give consumers the ability to create personalized CD's, but they are no longer online.

The earlier businesses faced significant hurdles because major record labels, which feared that selling individual songs would cannibalize album sales, would not license their hits. And once Napster became popular, online music fans were more interested in downloading free MP3 files than in buying CD's that might take days to arrive.

Marcel Garaud, a vice president of business development for Sony Music Digital Services, said, "We're trying it in a different way this time." Sony is hoping to draw Bob Dylan and Train fans with rarities while giving curious listeners the ability to sample their catalogs. Mr. Garaud declined to disclose how many custom CD's had been sold so far but said that the initial results were good.

Josh Bernoff, a music industry analyst at [Forrester Research](#), said he remained skeptical of the venture's potential. Although he praised the site for offering rare tracks, he said, "What consumers have demonstrated by their use of file-trading services is that they're very interested in assembling the pieces of music they want from a wide variety of sources for use in whatever format they want."

He continued: "What they're not willing to do is back up and have only certain stuff from certain artists from certain labels."

Officials at Universal and RCA Records said they had no plans to offer a custom-CD service. Last week, though, Humpty Records, an electronic dance music retailer in Germany, began selling custom CD's at [www.humpty-records.com](#). Shoppers can choose from among 400 tracks issued on the Mole Listening Pearls label. The price is

issued on the more expensive Teens label. The price is 12.95 euros (about \$14) plus shipping.

Again, exclusivity is key. Many of the tracks have been issued only on vinyl, so this will be their first CD release. Alexander Hendorf, the record label's founder, acknowledged that the custom-CD business seems to have fallen from fashion. But, he said, "Haven't we learned that in e-commerce there is often a fruitful second life?"

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