New iPhone Apps Put You in the Mix

By DAVID POGUE
Published: June 9, 2010

People always say that an app phone — an iPhone or Android, for example — is like a cross between a phone and a laptop. Sorry, but that’s nuts.

An app phone is equipped completely differently from either a phone or a laptop. It has a touch screen, audio inputs and outputs, video inputs and outputs, GPS, tilt sensor, light sensor, proximity sensor, three different kinds of wireless connections — it’s an utterly different beast. You can’t draw a straight-line graph that connects a cellphone, app phone and laptop; you’d need a triangle.

The result of this unique equipment list is that an app phone can run apps (small, dedicated-purpose programs) the likes of which the world has never seen before. Among the 200,000 programs available for the iPhone, for example, two new ones hammer home the point. Both are intended to transform your subpar singing voice into something professional and amazing, both represent a compelling intersection of pop culture and pop tech, and both rely on the iPhone’s unique feature inventory to do it.

Both will bring you more satisfying, creative joy than you’d ever expect from a phone.

First, here comes Mix Me In2 Taylor Swift, which is expected to arrive on the iTunes app store around June 20. (Culture check: Taylor Swift is the 20-year-old pop star who’s billed as the most-downloaded singer in the...
Mix Me In2 is expected to add songs from other groups in rapid succession over the coming months.

This $3 app comes with two of Ms. Swift's hits (“Love Story” and “You Belong With Me”). When you open the program and tap a song, you see little Guitar Hero-style, jerkily animated avatars of the singer and her band and the familiar recording begins.

But now for the fun part. You can tap one of the characters — the drummer, bass player, guitarist, singer, whatever — to open a new screen, where you can fiddle with the mix. For example, you can make Taylor’s voice quieter relative to her band, or shut her up completely.

You can also listen to that track in isolation, or even replace the instrument, changing the acoustic guitar with, say, a rock guitar or keyboard track.

For inspiration, you can listen to a few ready-made remixes, where all the decisions have been made for you. You can try out “Love Story” in a gritty urban version, an acoustic coffeehouse version, a piano-only version and so on.

In fact, there’s even a Record button. You can replace Taylor’s singing with your own, leading a mutiny of her band with no legal consequences whatsoever. The company says you can buy a special cable to connect a guitar, so you can replace that track, too.

When you’ve tweaked your mix, the company says you’ll be able to post it online, either on its own Web site (mixmein.com) or Taylor Swift’s. (Neither feature is in place yet.) More Swift songs will be available for $2 each, and the company says that it will be adding from other groups in rapid succession over the coming months.

Remixing commercial pop songs isn’t entirely new; over the years, Nine Inch Nails, Beck and other bands have offered albums in “dial up your own mix” editions. But being able to do it right on your phone is far better than doing it on your PC. The Taylor app is a fascinating time-killer when you’re stuck in line somewhere or waiting for your plane or, considering Taylor Swift’s audience, for your mom to pick you up.

The Taylor Swift app uses some clever technology, but I’ll admit that it lit up my 11-year-old daughter’s eyes a lot more than my own. The new Glee app, though, is another story.

“Glee,” of course, is the TV show about a competitive high-school pop chorale, all misfits with great voices (and, apparently, professional arrangers and recording engineers). The TV show’s plot and humor are fine, but it’s the pop-song performances that have made it so crazy popular.

The Glee app ($1) pushes all of it over the top.

It comes with the backup band and vocals for three songs from the show (“Rehab,” “Somebody to Love” and “You Keep Me Hanging On”); you can buy additional songs for $1 each, right from within the app (“Imagine,” “Lean on Me,” “Can’t Fight This Feeling” and so on.) These are absolutely beautiful, gorgeously performed backing tracks. All they need is your voice.

So far, though, this is just Music Minus One on a phone. The thrill begins once you start singing into this app. You cannot sound bad. Period.
The software uses a special, gentle version of auto-tune, the recording effect that rounds off your notes to the nearest correct pitch. (Most pop singers today are, in fact, routinely auto-tuned during the recording process.) You’re also given generous reverb and other effects; it’s the high-tech version of singing in the shower.

But the app also somehow multiplies you, duplicates your own vocal line and assigns your clones to other notes. Now you’re singing in lush four-part harmony with yourself, with absolutely zero effort. If you can carry a tune, you can turn off the processing and go it alone.

The result — professional backup band, you processed to sound gorgeous and perfect — is exhilarating, no matter how rotten a singer you are. It’s pop-star fantasy fulfillment for a buck, and everyone who tries it goes nuts.

There’s a giddy social aspect to the Glee app, too; you can release your finished recordings via Facebook, Twitter, MySpace or e-mail. Apparently Smule, the company behind the Glee app, has more liberal lawyers than the Mix Me In people.

If you gain 50 or 100 fans on a certain recording you’ve made, you unlock new songs without having to pay for them.

You can also listen in to other people’s recordings or — and here’s where things get heady — add new tracks to them. The Internet is spinning with Glee-app recordings featuring quartets of people who will never meet in person, but sound great together.

That the Glee app should be so technically, musically and cultural successful is no surprise. Its creator, Smule (co-founded by Ge Wang, a Stanford computer-music professor) is also behind two earlier iPhone hits. There’s Ocarina, which turns your iPhone into an actual wind instrument, complete with fingering, and I Am T-Pain, a fun but less ambitious auto-tune app.

Recording your own stuff on both Mix Me In and Glee requires an iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch, second-generation or later. The Touch and original iPhone models require an external mike, like the one on Apple earbuds.

What both apps teach you along the way is that to sound like a pop star, technical singing talent is not necessarily a prerequisite. (This is especially apparent when, ahem, you isolate Taylor Swift’s vocal track in her app.) With these apps, you now have the same support structure the pros do. You get all the benefits of state-of-the-art vocal processing — and even a taste of the public adoration — that comes with being a star.

The most exciting part, though, may not be what these apps can do for you and your previously thwarted singing career; it’s what app phones themselves are doing for culture. They’re combining technology and art in crazy new ways. When has $1 ever bought you so much happiness?

E-mail: pogue@nytimes.com.