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## Introducing . . . Your New Favorite Band

By Bob Massey  
Special to the Washington Post  
Sunday, February 19, 2006; Page F07

Pandora, a self-described "music discovery service," looks a lot like a streaming Internet radio station without the DJ.

But it's so much more than that.

The station is truly customized because it builds a play list around your personal tastes. Essentially, you create the station by naming favorite artists. Then Pandora analyzes the type of music that that artist plays and will find similar types of songs -- maybe a top-40 track or a lesser-known tune still trying to find an audience.

And that can make for an interesting mix.

Pandora boasts 300,000 songs from 10,000 artists -- with classical and world music excluded. But stations struggle to break narrow genre boundaries. An extreme example: Starting with Sigur Ros, an Icelandic rock band, resulted in a station of almost all Sigur Ros tracks. Only one other track sounded similar, though tourmates Radiohead did come up.

You can also expand a station's focus by saying yea or nay to each song Pandora plays or adding artists to give it a better idea of your likes and dislikes.

But entering wildly divergent artists -- such as the Carpenters alongside Swedish metal band Meshuggah, for example -- didn't result in an averaging of characteristics. It just dredged up "Flashdance" diva Irene Cara and pitted her against death metal champs Lamb of God.

Pandora claims each song gets evaluated, and thus linked, based on 400 musical characteristics.

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With a click, users can ask, "Why did you play this song?" But answers such as "mild rhythmic syncopation, major key tonality and vocal harmonies" describe just about every pop hit of the past 60 years.

So it remains unclear how to nudge Pandora out of its typical genre rut.

The point, of course, is not to discover soundalikes, but to find unfamiliar artists with a complementary aesthetic.

A Tom Waits-based station, for example, fared better. There were obvious suggestions such as Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello and the Replacements. But lesser-known gems such as Giant Sand, Spoon and obscure composer Samuel Andreyev also surfaced.

And that's where Pandora really shines: It does not discriminate on the basis of sales figures or coolness of haircut.

Pandora's artist library ranges from the self-published to the ubiquitous. You can remember finds on a "favorites" page or buy them from Amazon or iTunes by clicking on the album art.

The service allows users to discover some great -- but often overlooked -- music, putting the unknown artists on a level playing field with the big stars.

Pandora <http://--%20www.pandora.com/> -- is available for \$12 for a three-month subscription or \$36 for a year's subscription. It also offers an ad-based free service.

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