Whenever his cell phone rings, which is a lot, Delvon Murray, 18, hears "My Boo," the Alicia Keys-Usher duet. Whenever his girlfriend's cell phone rings, she hears "In Love Wit Chu" from hip-hop artist Da Brat.

These days, your cell phone identity goes beyond whether you get free weekend minutes or an expanded nationwide calling plan.

It's in the model of the phone you choose -- a $602 Motorola V3 that weighs about three ounces, or one of those giveaway phones you get just by signing up? It's in the ringing of your phone, too -- and the good ol' Ring! Ring! Ring! in your cell phone, Murray says, is so two years ago, when your choices in ring tones ranged from "The Star-Spangled Banner" to Beethoven's "Fur Elise."

This is a breakout year for tones, the 20- to 30-second synthesized versions of songs that play when cell phones ring, like an audible caller ID. They've been the rage in Western Europe and Asia, particularly in South Korea and Japan, in the past two years, says IDC, a market research firm based in Framingham, Mass. But the United States, with younger consumers leading the way, is catching on fast.

It's so in vogue that Billboard magazine introduced its Hot Ring Tones list in October, with "Drop It Like It's Hot," "My Boo" and "Lose My Breath" topping this week's chart. IDC estimates that ring tones -- usually a pop or hip-hop song downloaded from Web sites for a fee, from 99 cents to $2.99 -- brought in $316 million this year, up from last year's $98 million.

In a short time, in a public way -- while on Metro, or in line at Starbucks, or inside a movie theater -- ring tones signal who you are. Or who you want people to think you are. It's a special stamp, a personal touch. Are you a Maroon 5 kind of guy? Are you a Shakira kind of gal?

Murray's ring tone is a one-way street -- the other person on the line, after all, can't hear it.

But in the fast-changing world of cell phones, where wireless companies are pushing more and more customization, ring tones are entering a new phase -- and to the industry's delight, it is being greeted by a gotta-have-it consumer.

Next year, Murray might be able to hear a song ("Goodies" by Ciara) or a recorded message ("I'll be right with you, baby") or a classic line from a film ("You had me at hello," from "Jerry Maguire") as he waits for his girlfriend to answer.

First launched in southern Illinois in October and now being test-marketed in southern California, this new feature is the "ringback" -- a specific ring tone that a specific person who's calling your cell phone could hear. It's yet another addition to the increasingly particular way the country's estimated 170 million cell phone subscribers use their phones.
Brian Carkhuff makes a living pushing cell phones with the ever-personal touch. He works at a T-Mobile kiosk, clocking in about 60 hours a week, in the ground floor of the Pentagon City mall.

"Folks are willing to pay good money to put their favorite music and favorite photos on their favorite cell phones," says the 37-year-old, who can sell you pretty much whatever you're looking for. Motorola A630, which looks like a mini-BlackBerry, with instant messaging and e-mail capability, goes for about $300 list price. The Samsung P735, a flip phone with an MP3 player, sells for about $500.

Carkhuff has switched his own phone no less than 10 times in the past five years. He considers his current, clear-cased cell phone -- a Nokia 6600, retail price $399 -- a prized necessity. The phone, which he wears on his belt, takes up to 30 minutes of video clips and has a camera. Its screen saver is a photo of his daughters, 14-year-old Jordyn and 12-year-old Erin, in a pool at his parents' house.

He's got ring tones, too, of course, more than 20, which he buys online at $1.99 each, and they're sent to his phone within 15 to 20 seconds.

"Between the Sheets," by the Isley Brothers, plays when his girlfriend of six months calls; "Devil Went Down to Georgia," by the Charlie Daniels Band, plays when his supervisor calls. The rest of the callers, friends or not, bring up "Lean Back" by Terror Squad.

"That way, when the phone rings, I know who's calling. If the person isn't important -- you know, if I just hear 'Lean Back' -- then I won't necessarily pick it up. But when ringback ring tones come, I'll probably change the song that my supervisor will hear," says Carkhuff, standing behind the kiosk.

Tyler Shulman, hanging with friends at Saki, the ultra-chic sushi bar/club in Adams Morgan where cell phones and cocktails rested side-by-side on tables, paid nearly $350 for his Sanyo VM4500. "It's the whole package," says the 27-year-old events planner. Indeed it is. He especially likes this feature: He sends pictures, taken with the phone's digital camera, to his parents in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., sometimes with an attached voice message or a text message.

He has 13 ring tones; "Toxic," from Britney Spears, plays when his girlfriend, Lauren, calls. "Why just have a normal phone, anyway?" he says.

A few doors down in Tryst, a popular coffeehouse, Amitava Mitra laments the nine months he had to endure the embarrassment of carrying his "ghetto cell phone" -- a Samsung, nothing too fancy -- to daily meetings. He's a lobbyist for Starpond, a technological firm. "It's like bringing a cup of McDonald's coffee with you," says Mitra, 35. "You place that phone on a conference table and people think you're definitely not cool, you don't have style."

So, on Tuesday, he bought a T-Mobile 7100t, a cell phone and BlackBerry in one, for $199. It doesn't have a camera, but it has all the other bells and whistles.

"I tell you: It's an image thing," says Mitra. "In my two meetings today, when I placed this new phone on the conference table, people think, 'Oh, this guy is connected. This guy knows what's hot.' " He likes jazz -- when the phone rings, a jazzy tune plays.

In a way, programming your cell phone is akin to programming your iPod, laptop or TiVo.

"The key point here is personalization -- anything you do to that cell phone reflects who you are. It's a statement," says Lewis Ward, senior research analyst in wireless and mobile communications for IDC. In the past three years, cell phone users under 24 years old have been quick in adapting new phone programs, says Ward. "Soon enough, though, everyone else catches on," he adds.
The graphics content on cell phones -- the caller ID graphics, screen savers, etc. -- brought in a little under $150 million this year, he says, and he expects it to grow to more than $1.1 billion by 2008.

The music industry is hanging a lot on the customized cell phone, too. The revenue from ring tones and ringbacks is a "significant addition and a significant replacement for some of the sales we've lost because of declining CD sales and online piracy in the U.S.," says Thomas Hesse, president of global digital business for Sony BMG. "The CD collection you have is always something you showed to friends. The ring tone is a public manifestation of this."

Murray, who works at the Island Shades kiosk at Pentagon City, is a simple kind of guy. Unlike his girlfriend, who paid extra for a camera and special screen savers, he just took the phone that came with his service.

"That ringback thing is a tight idea," he says, though, thinking about his relationship. "So when my phone rings, we can both hear 'My Boo.' "

It's teen love, six weeks strong.