Whenever Jason Berkowitz listens to "You're the Best" on his iPod, he recalls that 1984 summer vacation in Fort Lauderdale and seeing "The Karate Kid" for the first time. ("I thought it was the best song ever. I still kinda do and I don't care what people say," says the 29-year-old.) Whenever he listens to Zero 7's song "Destiny," which he first heard at London's Heathrow Airport four years ago, he thinks about meeting his wife, Bethany.

The thing about the iPod is, it's what you bring to it.

"If a song represents a memory in your head, then you listen to your life's memories -- faster than a mixed CD, definitely faster than a mixed tape -- as you listen to your iPod," says the affable, fast-talking Berkowitz, a project manager

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for a software company, as he sits in his downtown Washington office.

"It becomes an extension of you," he says. "It's like a window to your soul."

Everywhere, at all times, it's with you, this personal narrative of who you are and what you've been. While shopping for Cocoa Puffs at Harris Teeter. While dozing off on the MARC train. While doing leg extensions at Gold's Gym. It takes you back to that first dance ("When Will I Be Loved" by Linda Ronstadt) and last dance ("I'm in You" by Peter Frampton) at your senior prom; that birthday party where you sang like Rick James so loudly ("Superfreak! Superfreak!") that the neighbors almost called the cops; that Whitney Houston breakup anthem that reminds you of you-know-who over and over again. It's an obsession, an addiction, a love affair, really, between a man and a machine.

To the iPodders around the world, the irresistible, indispensable, irreplaceable iPod is a personal memory bank.

"The iPod is a very powerful identity technology," says Sherry Turkle, director of the Initiative on Technology and the Self at MIT, where she teaches the psychology of the relationship between people and machines. The iPod, to be sure, isn't the only digital music player around, but it's without a doubt the most popular. With nearly 22 million sold, three-quarters of the U.S. market, "the iPod is just one more technology that uses the computer as the second self -- a reflection of who we are as people, a way of seeing ourselves in the mirror of the machine," she says.

Fatima Ayub, wearing a white chiffon hijab that matches her iPod's white earphones, is walking briskly on R Street in Northwest Washington on her way to work. You'd hardly ever see her, she says, without her 15-gigabyte iPod, which has more than 1,300 songs on it.

"Your taste in music is something very personal, very emotional. So when you have an iPod and you've got all your music on it, you're trying to say something about yourself," says Ayub, 22, an associate for the Asia division of Human Rights Watch and a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. She's listening to "A Perfect Sonnet" by the indie rock group Bright Eyes as she sits on a curb near 18th and R streets. Her boyfriend, Imran, learned to play that song on his guitar for her, she says, cracking a shy smile. "You're making a little collection of emotions and memories for yourself and you stick them all in this little machine and you carry it around with you wherever."

In the upcoming book "iPod, Therefore I Am," part memoir, part valentine, the English journalist Dylan Jones writes: "The big thing about the iPod, I thought, was the way in which it forces you to listen to your life in a different way."

"When I started just monotonously, relentlessly downloading and uploading my record collection onto this machine, it was only after awhile that I began to realize why it was taking me so long. It wasn't supposed to take you that long. But I started going off on these weird tangents, going backwards, to my youth, when I was..."
15 or 20 or 30," Jones, a 45-year-old father of two girls, says in a phone interview from his London home.

His iPod has more than 6,000 songs. "That's when I began thinking there was something bigger to this whole iPod thing. Every time I download a song to it, and every time I listened to that song, it forced me to go back somewhere where I haven't been to for a while."

Everyone who loves music -- and who doesn't? -- has hundreds, if not thousands, of records, Jones says. When was the last time you played everything in your music collection? he asks. Then Jones, in a pitch-perfect tenor, sings a few lines from "Wichita Lineman" ("I know I need a small vacation, but it don't look like rain. . . . I am a lineman for the county, and I drive the main road, searching . . . . It's a song he first heard when he was 12, "one of those songs that remains a secret," he says, "because it was never trendy enough."

In the middle of her typical 7:30 p.m. workout at Washington Sports Club in Clarendon, with her iPod clipped to her hot pink shorts, Kate Danser is listening to "Times Like These" by Jack Johnson, a surfer-cum-songwriter with a distinctive folksy, reggae-rock sound. Not exactly the upbeat, fast-paced, high adrenaline rush that is "Bootylicious," by the R&B group Destiny's Child. That song, in very high volume, can be heard from the iPod of a woman dressed in a matching gray halter-top and very short shorts who's doing sit-ups a few feet away. But "Times Like These," the 24-year-old Danser says, reminds her of her friend Casey, her student-teacher partner whom she met at the College of New Jersey. Casey introduced her to Jack Johnson a few years back.

"It kinda soothes me, relaxes me, calms me down," says Danser, putting her iPod back on, sitting on the leg extension station, about to do her third rep, with the Jack Johnson song and the memory of her friend Casey in the background.