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MP3 Players That Let You Rock Out

The Apple iPod: 5th Generation

The term 'generation' is not usually applied to mechanical objects, but in the case of the Apple iPod, the word is fitting. This popular MP3 player has been evolving continuously since its introduction in 2001, with each new model expanding and adding to previous capabilities.

The current model of iPod is the 5th generation, and has added video playback to its audio functions. There are also two other players in the current iPod series--the nano and the shuffle--which we will look at in later articles.

The iPod 5G is available with either a 30 GB or 60 GB hard drive. It has a 2.5 inch display screen which is used for viewing photos, cover art and videos at a maximum resolution of 480 x 480 pixels. The display is also essential for navigating the contents of the hard drive and for accessing the various functions of the iPod.

It's fair to say that the iPod is first and foremost a portable music device with other functions added on ñ so let's take a look at how it handles audio. The supported audio formats are MP3, WAV, AAC, AIFF and Apple Lossless. These choices give users a good selection of files to work with, though formats such as Ogg Vorbis have not been integrated.

The AAC format is used for songs, which are downloaded from the Apple iTunes Store. This online service allows iPod users to buy individual songs or albums and download them to their computer and then transfer them to the iPod. The AAC format allows music files to be protected from unrestricted copying and distribution--a major concern of the music industry.

The iPod 60 GB hard drive has a capacity of 15,000 songs in 128 kbps AAC format. This format is near CD quality and is acceptable to the majority of listeners. Who would want 15,000 songs in a portable music device? Well, probably no one, so the hard drive space can also be used to store images and videos. But more about that later.

How about the sound quality? The iPod consistently ranks high on the list of portable music devices. It boasts impressive specifications (20 Hz-20 kHz \pm 0.5 dB) that translates into real-world quality. One of the main reasons for the iPod's runaway popularity is its great sound.

However, the ear buds that come with the iPod leave a bit to be desired. They lack bass response and generally sound a bit flat when compared to better quality buds. Your first stop after buying an iPod should be to check out better earbuds/earphones.

The new buzzword in portable entertainment devices is video, and the iPod delivers--so much so that the 5G iPod is sometimes called the 'video iPod'.

The storage capacity for video is up to 150 hours for the 60 GB model. Compared with dedicated portable video players the iPod screen is on the small side, but adequate for viewing previously recorded TV shows.

The iPod has external connections so that the video can be viewed on a TV set, but the small resolution of the video files (320 x 240 pixels) produces a low-quality image on a large TV screen.

The final verdict ñ this is a great audio player that packs style and function. The video is a nice added touch, but if video is your main interest (as opposed to music), you are better off with a Portable Video Player.

Apple iPod Nano

There are currently three models of iPod - the iPod 5G (fifth generation), the iPod shuffle and the mid-range iPod nano.

The nano is a flash-memory MP3 player that is available in 1, 2 or 4 Gigabytes. It has a color display that can be used for viewing photos or cover art and for displaying information about the current song selection.

With no hard drive, the nano has a smaller storage capacity but with the advantage of being smaller than the iPod 5G. It is the successor to the iPod mini, and is even more mini than the mini! It measures just 3.5 by 1.6 inches and is about a quarter of an inch thick. The weight is just 1.5 ounces.

Despite its tiny size, the nano packs a big sound and can store up to 1,000 songs in the 4 Gigabyte model. The advantage of flash-memory over a hard drive for storage is that there are no moving parts, which can cause the music to skip. The nano can be used during almost any type of vigorous activity - the ideal exercise MP3 player.

Another advantage of flash memory is greater durability than hard drives. Even though it looks fragile, the nano will survive lots of abuse.

The nano can play several audio formats including MP3, AAC, WAV and image formats include JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIFF and PNG. Slide shows can be programmed with various options for timing and transitions.

The 1.5 inch screen, however, makes image viewing almost pointless. It's OK for viewing headshots, but how many people have a photo collection of passport shots?

Besides playing music and viewing images, you can use the nano as a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). The PDA functions are somewhat limited but you can synchronize the nano with the Microsoft Outlook and Outlook Express contacts and calendars and contacts can be sorted by first or last name.

There are also games, a stopwatch and a world clock. The stopwatch is sure to be useful for those who use their MP3 player for workouts, and can record lap times and automatically saves all times with time stamps so that a valuable training record can be built up

There is a screen lock on the nano, which can be used to limit access to the functions. A 4-digit code is entered in by the user and when activated, the only controls which function are the Play and Pause buttons.

Like all of the iPods, the nano can be connected to a computer for synchronizing your music collection. The iTunes software can be used to organize your music and photo collection and transfer new songs and images to the nano automatically.

One of the distinctive features of iPod MP3 players is the circular click wheel that is used for controlling all the functions. The nano click wheel can be operated with one hand and is so intuitive that users can learn to use it by touch.

The built-in battery is recharged when the nano is connected to the USB port of the computer. The battery is rated to last a respectable 14 hours before needing to be charged, but when the battery dies - as it surely will after about 500 hours of use - the nano has to be sent to Apple for battery replacement.

The Apple iPod: A Quick Overview

The most popular MP3 player by far is the Apple iPod. It has such a broad public acceptance that many people refer to all kinds of MP3 players as 'iPods'. Its popularity is due to its stylish design, functionality and (last but not least) aggressive marketing.

The original iPod was introduced back in 2001 and had a 5 GB hard drive. Despite the high price tag it was a commercial success and quickly became the number one MP3 player. The original model had a circular control pad that has become a standard feature on later generations of iPods.

The current lineup includes three models of iPods--the iPod (with a 30 GB or 60 GB hard drive), the iPod nano (a flash memory model in either 1 GB, 2 GB or 4 GB sizes) and the iPod shuffle (with flash memory in either 512 MB or 1 GB sizes).

The latest generation (the fifth generation) of iPod has a color screen and can play videos as well as audio. It has a 16 bit display (65,536 colors) which is 2.5 inch in size. The player can be connected to a TV set for viewing.

The iPod nano was introduced in September 2005 as the replacement for the iPod mini. The nano has a color display for viewing photos and has many extra features integrated into its operating system such as a world clock, a stopwatch and password protection.

The iPod shuffle does not have a screen. This means that songs cannot be selected individually, instead one has to play back randomly or according to a playlist that was built on a computer

and transferred to the iPod shuffle. Because there is no display the iPod shuffle is tiny ñ less than one ounce and about the size of a pack of gum. The random play feature was promoted in Apple's advertising campaign: 'Give chance a chance' and 'Life is random' were two of the slogans used for promoting the iPod shuffle.

There are several discontinued models of iPod left behind on the march to the current iPod lineup. As mentioned above, the nano was the successor to the mini ñ a hard drive player with monochrome display.

The iPod mini was very popular despite its high price. It was available in five different colors and featured the click wheel ñ a navigation wheel that could be operated with one hand.

Another discontinued model is the iPod photo, which had a color display for viewing digital images. This model was dropped when color displays became standard on all iPod models in 2005.

Like most MP3 players, all of the iPods can be synchronized with a computer for transferring music back and forth. Unlike other players, however, the iPod requires the use of Apple's proprietary software--iTunes. This software has an integrated front end for buying music from the Internet, and a large part of Apple's iPod revenues comes from these online music sales.

The iPod connects to the computer through the USB port. A cable runs from the USB port to a 'dock' - a device which holds the iPod for data transfer while also recharging the battery. Any new music, which has been downloaded to the computer is transferred automatically each time the iPod is placed in its dock.

The Apple iPod: Apple iPod Shuffle

The Apple iPod shuffle is the smallest iPod in the current lineup of iPod models. It is a flash-memory MP3 player available in either 512 MB or 1 GB sizes.

Unlike the iPod 5G or the iPod nano, the iPod shuffle has no display. Instead it relies on the shuffle function to play songs in random order. If desired, songs can also be played according to a playlist, but this playlist has to be built on the computer and transferred to the shuffle.

Because there is no display, the shuffle is tiny - about the size of a pack of chewing gum. Despite the size, the 1 GB shuffle has enough storage space for 240 songs.

On one end of the shuffle is a USB connector covered with a cap. The shuffle plugs directly into the USB port of your computer for transferring songs and recharging the battery. The iTunes software has a special function for the shuffle - autofill. Every time you plug the shuffle into your computer, it will fill with a new selection of songs.

The shuffle can also be used as a data storage device for any kind of computer data. This is a handy function when you need to transfer large files from one computer to another.

The click wheel found on other iPod models has been replaced with a circular control pad. The buttons allow you to play or pause the current song, scroll through the song list and adjust the volume. There are also controls for turning the player on and off and checking the battery level.

Thanks to this pared-down design, the shuffle makes an ideal MP3 player for workouts or other vigorous activity. It is extremely light weight (about the same weight as a house key) and there are no moving parts so the audio will never skip--a problem with hard drive MP3 players.

The idea for the shuffle was reportable inspired by the fact that many iPod users always use the random play function. This iPod will certainly appeal to that crowd, but the lack of display means that you can't build playlists on the fly or pick and choose songs.

No display also means no features like clock or stop watch, but it seems there is a need for a straightforward MP3 player that does just that--play music. Today the shuffle is one of the most popular MP3 players on the market.

Part of that popularity is the stylish design. With its elegant lines and plain white casing the shuffle is suitable for wearing as an ornament around the neck--possible with the lanyard which is included with the unit.

Another big factor in the popularity of the shuffle is the sound - absolutely superb. It offers near CD quality sound with low noise and distortion specs. To get the most out of the shuffle, though, you should replace the ear buds. They are adequate--but no more. If you are interested in seeing what kind of sound the shuffle is really capable of, get yourself a good set of third-party ear buds.

Have no doubts--despite the relatively low price tag, this is a true iPod, and has the features and sound to prove it.

iriver MP3 Players

iriver is a Korean company that has been producing MP3 players since 1999. Most iriver players are multi-functional--combining FM radio, voice recording, picture viewing and data storage with music playback.

The iriver lineup currently (May 2006) includes three flash memory models, one hard drive model (available in 5 GB, 6GB or 20 GB) and one multi-media player for playing music and videos.

Flash Players

Each of the three flash models comes in 512 MB or 1 GB sizes, with a \$50 price difference between the two. The T-10 model is a compact player capable of handling MP3, WMA, ASF, Audible (for audio books) and OGG formats. It has a FM tuner and FM recorder as well as a built in microphone for voice recording. It operates on a single AA battery with playback time up to 45 hours.

The T-30 is slightly smaller than the T-10 and operates on a AAA battery which give about 24 hours of playback time. It has many of the same features as the T-10 with the addition of a line input for recording external sound sources. The screen size is a bit smaller than the T-10 but displays information about the current song and allows you to browse through your music collection.

The U10 model has a 2.2" screen which can be used for viewing videos or photos. As well as the supported audio formats supported by the T-10 and the T-30, the U10 can play MPEG4, QVGA and Flash Lite multimedia files.

All of the iriver flash players have a USB 2.0 interface for speedy data transfers, a customizable equalizer and support for music subscription services such as Napster. These are great sounding players, which offer good value for the money.

Hard Drive Players

The H10 is reminiscent of the Apple iPod--same basic shape and similar control pad. Audio support includes MP3 and WMA, and JPEG photos can be viewed on the 1.8" 256K color screen. Surprisingly, there is no support for video or OGG - both of which can be handled by the flash memory U10 model.

The screen does, however, offer lots of viewing space for the menu and most functions can be accessed within a few clicks. Also on the plus side is the FM tuner/recorder and the voice recorder.

Multimedia

The video functions that are missing from the H10 are compensated for in the PMC-120. This player handles WMV (Window Media Video) types 7, 8, 9 and has full support for Windows DRM (Digital Rights Management) so video content can be purchased from online vendors and transferred directly to the player.

The screen on the PMC-120 is larger than most other players. It's a 3.5" LCD display and has integrated speakers so that several people can watch and listen at the same time. The player can also be connected to a TV set.

There is no FM radio on this model and it is also missing the voice and line recording functions that are found on most other iriver players. Perhaps iriver sacrificed these features in the interest of keeping the cost down, but with a suggested retail price of just under \$500 this is not a cheap MP3 player.

Still, the video quality is good and the built-in speakers are a nice touch. This model is not the earth-shaking product that is going to remove iPod from the top of the heap, but it does what it does well and is sure to find lots of fans.

iTunes and the iTunes Music Store

Just as the Apple iPod is the most popular MP3 player on the market, the Apple iTunes Music Store is the most popular Internet music vendor. iTunes is, after all, bundled with the iPod, so it's normal that most iPod users will take the path of least resistance and use the supplied software to organize their music collection and buy new songs.

iTunes does both these functions. It can be used to rip CDs, convert them to AAC (Advanced Audio Coding) format, and transfer them to the iPod. It is also the front end to the iTunes Music Store - Apple's highly successful music vending service that lists more than 2 million songs in its catalog.

Individual songs or whole albums can be bought. Videos, podcasts and audio books are also available.

The iTunes software is well designed and easy to use. The search function allows you to narrow down choices by artist, album, song or genre, and the first 30 seconds of all songs can be previewed for free.

The playlist function allows you to organize your music collection manually or automatically according to music style. The software will recommend other songs similar to your current selection - a great way to explore new artists.

All of the songs from the iTunes Music Store are in AAC format. This is a compression format that discards certain parts of the audio spectrum to reduce file sizes. AAC also has a form of Digital Rights Management (DRM) that restricts how files can be used. This includes a limit on the number of times songs can be burned to CD and the number of computers the songs can be transferred to.

The Apple iPod is one of the few portable music players that support AAC format, so if you use another brand, you are pretty well out of luck. Apple doesn't seem to mind - they appear to be looking for market domination in both music sales and hardware sales, and have succeeded in both counts.

What's Wrong?

On the surface, there's nothing really 'wrong' with iTunes--it offers lots of choice and is easy to use. Consumers seem to have accepted the idea of online music sales, and iTunes and other online vendors have the blessing of the music industry.

The main thing that is wrong with online music distribution is sound quality. AAC, MP3 and WMA files are compressed, and they are compressed by removing part of the audio spectrum. Sure, Apple and the other online vendors will tell you that their songs are 'CD quality' but compare them side-by-side with the original CD and you can hear the difference.

Compressed audio files lack presence and the stereo field has been reduced. Some of the subtle audio clues that add to the atmosphere of a good recording are lost.

Not only the audio quality, but the audio conception of a complete album is lost by selling songs individually. Even if you buy a complete album from the iTunes Music Store, the songs are in individual files. This means that there will be a pause between tracks that wasn't present on the original CD. This may not be a big deal for generic pop music, but albums that have been carefully structured will lose the original organization and placement of tracks.

Of course, iTunes is not to blame for this situation. Apple is simply following the trend and capitalizing on the latest marketing methods. Given the size and clout of the iTunes Music Store, however, it could be a major force in changing this second-class way of distributing music.

Creative MP3 Players

Creative got its start as a manufacturer of computer sound cards. In recent years they have produced a number of popular models of MP3 players including the Nomad, the Zen and the MuVo.

The Nomad was discontinued in 2005, but it was one of the first hard drive MP3 players on the market. The original Nomad was quite bulky compared with the slim compact designs of modern MP3 players, but featured a massive (for the time) 6 GB hard drive and an innovative search function.

There are currently two basic lines of Creative MP3 players, although each (the Zen and the MuVo) has several models to choose from. Most Zen players have a hard drive, while all of the MuVo players are flash-memory devices capable of both music and data storage.

Zen

There are 12 Zen models, including the flagship Zen Vision--a portable multimedia device with audio, video, FM radio, built-in microphone and extensive calendar and organizer functions. The relatively large 3.7" screen makes it one of the best portable devices in its price range for viewing videos.

The Zen Vision has a 30 GB hard drive, big enough for 120 hours of video or 15,000 songs. It supports many audio and video formats including MP3, Microsoft's WMA and WMV, DivX and MPEG 4.

Another popular Zen model is the Zen Micro. It's available with a 4, 5 or 6 GB hard drive, which can be partitioned so that part of it is available as a computer removable hard drive. It has a FM radio/recorder, a microphone and can synchronize with the calendars and contact lists of Microsoft Outlook.

One of the flash memory Zen models is the Zen Nano available in either 512 MB or 1 GB sizes. Its small size and skip-free audio playback make it suitable for workouts, though the tiny screen can only display a limited amount of information.

MuVo

Creative is big on choice ñ just like the Zen, the MuVo line has 12 models. MuVo players have flash memory, so are lighter and smaller than their hard drive-based cousins.

Style is the keyword of the MuVo. These are colorful, slim devices that are designed for looks as much as for sound. But make no mistake about the sound ñ it's as good as you'll find in any MP3 player.

All of the MuVo players can function as a USB memory stick for data storage. Simply plug it into the computer and it will recognize the MuVo as a removable drive. Some models have special features such as lyric display or video playback. Many of the MuVo players have an integrated FM radio and a built-in microphone.

Combining the functions of a USB memory stick and MP3 player is a useful feature, and Creative emphasizes this in their advertising. All of the MuVo models are compatible with USB 2.0 for speedy data transfers and any amount of the memory can be used for data storage. Transferring files--either MP3s or data ñ is done by dragging and dropping.

MP4 Players

Move over MP3--here comes MP4!

Well, not really, because MP3 is compatible with MP4. But when it comes to portable entertainment devices, MP4 is the next big wave.

MP4 players are also known as Personal Video Players (PVP) or Digital Media Players. They do much more than just video--they play music, audio books and can include extra features like video games, FM radio, voice recording, TV reception and even video recording.

All this comes at a price--in both dollars and size. MP4 players are bulkier than their MP3 cousins, mainly because of the larger screen. You can forget about putting a MP4 player in that tiny pocket in your jeans, but it's still small enough to hold in the palm of your hand. In terms of price, MP4 players are about twice as much as MP3 players although you can find some bargain models at just over \$100.

Just as with MP3 players, there are two basic types of MP4 players - hard drive and flash memory. Given the relatively large size of video files, however, a flash MP4 player is not likely to be very practical. These players also tend to have a smaller screen size - not the best for seeing the details of your favorite movie.

If you're serious about portable video, you should go with the hard drive MP4 player. These start at about 20 GB and go up to more than 100 GB. Hard drive players can also be used as data storage devices for transferring data from one computer to another.

The screen size of MP4 players can vary widely. Some of them come with tiny 2 inch screens hardly big enough to view photos let alone movies. If you're shopping for a MP4 player, do your eyes a favor and get the biggest screen you can afford.

Generally speaking, MP4 players support more file formats than MP3 players. This is because the MP4 format itself is compatible with a wide variety of media formats. At the very least, a MP4 player should be able to play MP4, MP2, MP1, (for video) and MP3 files (for songs). Other popular video formats include DivX, AVI and WMV. Audio formats include WMA and Ogg Vorbis.

The MP4 format is also compatible with digital images in the form of JPEG or PNG files. You will be able to carry around your entire photo collection with a MP4 player.

Several MP4 players have an integrated TV tuner, while others have TV reception available as an accessory in the form of a docking station. TV can add an extra hundred dollars to the price of a MP4 player, a bargain to the hard-core TV addict.

Another feature, which adds to the cost, is an integrated camcorder. This is a good idea--rather than carrying around several electronic gadgets, why not just get an all-in-one unit. And since the primary function of the MP4 player is video, a video recorder is the perfect complement.

Will MP4 players be as popular as MP3 players? There is no reason why they shouldn't be the next big thing. Practically the only people who can't use the video capabilities of MP4 players are drivers and joggers and they can still enjoy the audio features. For commuters and anyone with some time to kill, video players can be the ideal way to pass the time.

Napster

Many people remember Napster as the company at the center of a controversial court case in which the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) sued the file sharing service for copyright violation. The RIAA won, and Napster was shut down, but it has since been re-born as a commercial service that has the full blessing of the music industry.

In its current incarnation, Napster is a music subscription service that allows users to download an unlimited number of songs for a set monthly fee. There are currently (May 2006) three Napster services: Napster light (a simple online music store that sells tracks for 99¢ each), Napster and Napster To Go.

Napster

The regular Napster service is available at \$9.95 per month. For this price, users can listen to (almost) the complete Napster lineup of more than 1 million songs. Music can be downloaded or streamed from a choice of over 50 commercial-free radio stations. You can also create your own custom radio stations that play music from specified artists or genres.

Sounds great! Is there a catch?

Well, yes, there is a substantial catch. All of the music that you download from Napster is only accessible as long as you are a paid member. Let your membership lapse and that music is gone, finished, kaput. The reality of Napster is that it is a service which rents music rather than sells it.

Of course, part of Napster is a music store where you can buy songs for 80¢ to 99¢ each. Purchased songs can be burnt to CD or transferred to a portable MP3 player. That may seem like a good deal compared to the \$15 or so for a commercial CD, but remember, Napster songs are in WMA format--compressed audio files that do not have the same sonic quality as CDs.

On the plus side--for \$9.95 you get to check out a tremendous amount of music--bands and genres that you might not otherwise be exposed to. You can read reviews by other Napster users and browse Billboard charts from the past 50 years.

Napster To Go

If you have a portable MP3 player (and who doesn't?) you can subscribe to Napster To Go for \$14.95 a month for the privilege of transferring an unlimited number of songs to your portable device. Same catch, though, as with the regular Napster service--as soon as you stop paying your monthly fee all that music is inaccessible. Napster To Go includes all the features of the regular Napster service, so you can download songs to your computer or your MP3 player and listen to streaming audio.

There is a good selection of MP3 players that is supported by Napster To Go including popular models from Creative, Dell, iriver and Rio. How about the iPod? Sorry--iPod owners are stuck with Apple's iTunes Music Store, and purchasing each song individually.

Some of the songs in Napster's catalog are only available for purchase, and some major names such as the Beatles and Led Zeppelin are not available at all. For those interested in exploring new music, however, Napster offers good service.

Philips MP3 Players

Philips has a long track record in the consumer electronics field. Even though they've been making electronics since the word was invented, however, they've had plenty of ill-fated products such as the Digital Compact Cassette and CD-i (interactive CDs that never achieved market acceptance).

Their line of MP3 players also seems to be ill-fated--attractive but just a little 'off'. The HDD082/17 Micro jukebox, for example, is a 2 GB hard drive MP3 player. In these days of 6 GB flash players, why would anyone buy a small capacity hard drive MP3 player? This is definitely a product that shouldn't have been born.

After all, hard drive players exist because of their larger storage capacity. People put up with their drawbacks (greater fragility and tendency to skip) only because they can store gazillions of songs on them. A 2 GB hard drive MP3 player is combining the worst of both worlds.

Moving up to the GoGear HDD6330, we have a player that better suits consumer needs. This is a 30 GB hard drive player that supports MP3 and WMA and also has a FM tuner. The 2' color screen can be used to view photos as well as browse through your record collection.

Unfortunately, the HDD6330 has trouble with its operating system. When the music is playing the controls are frustratingly sluggish, so if you like to browse your music collection while listening to songs this unit is not for you. Sound quality is adequate, but when compared side-by-side with the top players there is a noticeable difference.

When it comes to flash players, Philips still seems a bit behind the times. Most of their flash MP3 players are 512 MB, with just one (the PSA242/37 Sport audio player) having 1 GB of memory.

Most other manufacturers offer flash players up to 2 GB, and the tendency is for larger capacity memory as flash players have the advantage of greater durability over hard drive players.

Flash players also guarantee skip-free playback, and this feature is emphasized with the PSA242/37 since it is aimed at the sports crowd. It also has a talking stop-watch and is equipped with a sports armband and headphones. The SD memory slot is a nice touch, but this player is a bit overpriced to make much of an impact.

External speakers are available as an accessory for most MP3 players, but Philips is one of the few companies that offers a MP3 player with integrated speakers.

The Shoqbox is available in either 256 MB or 512 MB memory configurations. At just over 7 inches in length, it is too big to fit in your pocket, but small enough to easily fit in a suitcase. With the built-in alarm clock and FM radio, Philips seems to be aiming this model at the traveler. The LCD display is attractive and functional, allowing you to access all the functions and browse through your music collection.

The Shoqbox speakers are tiny, but produce a surprisingly big sound. 'Big' as in 'loud' and relatively undistorted, but certainly not high fidelity. This is a cute MP3 player, but seems to belong to the novelty section. It makes a good travel alarm but it's just too big for a MP3 player.

RCA MP3 Players

The Lyra range of MP3 players from RCA has some attractive and functional choices. There is a good selection ñ eight flash models, three hard drive models and two multimedia players.

The flash players range from 128 MB to 1 GB in memory. In this age of 100 GB hard drives and 6 GB flash memory, it's unusual to see 128 MB MP3 players, but three of the eight RCA flash players are this size.

These small players are a good choice for budget-conscious buyers. Even at 128 MB, they can hold about 32 songs, and all of them have a SD/MMC slot for expandable memory.

In the 1 GB flash memory size, RCA has the traditional stick shape player (M1001GB) and also a nicely designed player that places a circular control pad at one end (RD2317). This last model has an optional built-in FM transmitter that will beam the signal to any FM receiver in your car or home. This is a great feature that expands the usefulness of the MP3 player.

The hard drive players come in 4 GB, 5 GB and 20 GB sizes. Again a bit on the small side, but they make for less expensive players when compared with large-capacity flash memory MP3 players.

The two cheaper models (list price under \$200) come with monochrome displays, but the 20 GB model has a color screen.

Those interested in video playback should take a look at the two video models offered by RCA. The RD2780 has an ample 3.5" screen, a memory card slot and comes complete with a full range of accessories including AC/DC adaptor, cables and a car adaptor kit. It can record analog sound sources and analog video sources, converting them on the fly to MP3 and MPEG4 respectively.

On the audio side, the RD2780 supports MP3, WMA and MP3 pro. This is one of the few MP3 players on the market that supports MP3 pro ñ an advanced compression scheme that offers better sound and smaller file sizes than MP3.

The Lyra X3000 has a 3.6" screen, built-in speakers and a 20 GB hard drive and memory expansion slot. Video playback formats include MPEG4, DivX and WMV9, and it can record video directly from a TV, VCR or camcorder.

With a retail price just under \$400 the X3000 is a great deal. It has tons of features and is at this time one of the few Personal Video Players on the market with recording functions. The rechargeable lithium-ion battery is user replaceable--a nice touch that puts this RCA player above the Apple iPod in many people's books. Lithium-ion batteries have a limited lifespan, and usually need to be replaced after about 2 or 3 years. The iPod battery cannot be replaced by the user. The entire unit has to be sent to Apple for battery replacement.

Lyra MP3 players offer great value. Although a bit on the small side in terms of storage capacity the addition of a memory card slot on many models makes up for this. The sound is great and RCA has seen fit to include relatively decent Sennheiser ear buds. These should satisfy all but the most demanding of listeners.

Rhapsody

Rhapsody (<http://www.Rhapsody.com>) was one of the first commercial music services on the Internet. It started back in 2001 as the first music vendor to offer streaming audio to subscribers. It was acquired by RealNetworks in 2003 and is currently one of the most popular music subscription services available, with more than 2 million members. Rhapsody is currently (May 2006) only available to users in the United States.

There are four types of Rhapsody memberships including the free Rhapsody 25, which allows users to listen to 25 radio stations and download 25 songs per month. This is a good marketing ploy as the free account allows users to try out Rhapsody and be enticed by the features available to paid subscribers.

The three paid services are Rhapsody Radio, Rhapsody Unlimited and Rhapsody To Go, all of which can be tried for 14 days free of charge. All accounts can be used to purchase music from the Rhapsody music store.

Rhapsody Radio

If your main interest is streaming audio Rhapsody Radio is worth a look. Subscribers get access to more than 100 streaming audio stations. Users can even create their own stations by specifying which artists or genres they want to listen to. All of this music is commercial free, and unlike your car radio, if you don't like the current song you can skip over it. This is a great way to hear old favorites or a variety of new music.

Rhapsody Unlimited

This service gives users on-demand access to the entire Rhapsody library of more than 1.6 million songs. Songs are arranged by artist and genre so you can browse through the collection or search for a particular song. Rhapsody Unlimited subscribers have access to an unlimited number of pre-programmed or customized commercial-free radio stations, and recommendations are available according to your previous listening choices.

Rhapsody To Go

This service includes all the options of Rhapsody Unlimited plus the ability to transfer music to your portable music player. There are currently a limited number of MP3 player models that are supported. Check the website. If you own one of the supported devices (or are planning to buy one) Rhapsody To Go is ideal. Otherwise you might be better with another service.

Software

To access the Rhapsody services you must download and install the Rhapsody software. This is a complete front end for searching, selecting, buying and playing your music choices. Unfortunately, the software is hyper aggressive in ignoring your previous choices for default file associations and players. It also installs pervasive desktop and menu shortcuts.

You can choose to retain your previous file associations and limit the number of shortcuts by using the custom install method, but most users are just going to use the defaults and get stuck with Rhapsody all over their computer.

Besides this complaint, Rhapsody delivers in terms of music selection and ease of use. Downloads are fast, the software is well-designed and it is easy to save playlists and burn songs to CD.

Rio MP3 Players

Rio MP3 players hold a special place in the history of portable entertainment devices. It was the Diamond Rio model that spurred the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) to file a lawsuit attempting to outlaw MP3 players. The RIAA lost their case, which paved the way for the growth of the MP3 industry.

The company that made that original Rio folded soon after winning the case and the Rio trademark was taken over by a Taiwanese company called S3 (later Sonicblue) which lasted until 2003 before declaring bankruptcy. Rio was then acquired by the Japanese firm D&M Holdings, who recently announced they would be discontinuing the Rio line.

Despite this rocky corporate history, Rio MP3 players are well-respected and have a loyal user base. Even though they are no longer being produced, they are still available on the retail market and are sure to have re-sale value once the current stock has been depleted. D&M has announced they will honor all warranties on future sales.

Several Rio models have been produced over the years, but the versions that are still available include the Rio Carbon, the Rio Forge and the Rio Karma.

Carbon

This is a palm-sized MP3 player with either a 5 GB or 6 GB hard drive. It can play MP3, WAV and audio books, and supports Windows, Macintosh and Linux operating systems.

When attached to the USB port of a computer the Carbon is recognized as a removable drive allowing audio files to be transferred by dragging and dropping. The USB port is also used for charging the battery, which can operate the Carbon for up to 20 hours before needing to be recharged.

Other features of the Carbon include a built-in microphone and a 5-band equalizer.

Forge

The Rio Forge is a flash-memory MP3 player that is clearly aimed at the sporting crowd. It is available in 128MB, 256MB or 512MB sizes and includes a USB 2.0 port for transferring songs between player and computer.

Among the sports features are a stopwatch and a lap timer, and the Forge can be worn strapped to your arm by using the included arm strap. It supports MP3 and WMA formats and has a FM tuner.

Karma

The Rio Karma has a 20 GB hard drive and has a number of distinctive features. It supports the regular MP3 and WMA formats, and is one of the few portable audio devices to handle Ogg Vorbis and FLAC files. These two formats are popular with audiophiles--Ogg Vorbis is an open

source format that offers better sound than MP3 and FLAC is a lossless compression scheme ñ none of the audio data is removed.

The Karma can also play MP3 files without any gaps between them. This feature allows you to listen to albums exactly as they were intended--especially important for live albums and classical music.

The Karma has a 5 band equalizer, animated menus and playlists can be created on the fly. It supports USB 2.0 as well as Ethernet for data transfers and can be used with a wide variety of music and data organizers. Even with all the innovative features, however, the supremacy of the iPod in the MP3 industry meant that the Karma as well as the other Rio models received a small portion of the overall market share--not enough to keep the Rio name alive.

Samsung MP3 Players

With Apple at the top of the MP3 player heap, it seems that other manufacturers try to compensate for their lesser position by offering more models. Creative does this--they have more than 20 different MP3 players and Samsung also does this with 23 current model numbers.

Granted, some of these choices are the same player with different memory sizes. Samsung flash players usually have a 'V','X' and 'Z' suffix which means 256 MB, 512 MB and 1GB memory respectively.

Still, knock out the duplicates and you still have about 12 different models, whereas Apple is offering just 3 different iPods. It's nice to have choice, but sometimes too much choice is overwhelming and confusing.

That said, Samsung does have a nice line-up of both flash and hard drive MP3 players. Their answer to the iPod 5th Generation is the YH-J70SB--'The Intelligent Multimedia Jukebox' according to their promotional material. This player is available with either a 20 GB or 30 GB hard drive and features a 1.8i 256K color screen. A bit smaller than the iPod's but the greater color depth (only 64K on the iPod) makes for a more vivid display.

Supported audio formats include MP3, WAV and OGG. This makes Samsung one of the few manufacturers that support OGG--an open source audio compression format that is starting to gain popularity for its good sound quality.

The supported video formats are MPEG4 and DivX, and the player can also be used to view JPEG photos. Other functions include FM radio, voice recording, equalizer and a line-in for recording external devices like CD players. The built-in lithium-ion battery is good for 25 hours of audio or 7 hours of video--much better specs than the iPod.

The Samsung YP-T8QW is one of the biggest flash players on the market--2 GB. It's got the same color display as the YH-J70SB mentioned above, and can handle all the same audio and

video formats. The re-chargeable lithium-ion battery has a slightly shorter playing life than the hard-drive player--20 hours of audio and 6 hours of video.

Flash players are preferred by many people because they are more durable and offer skip-free audio playback due to the lack of moving parts. The 2 GB model is sure to find market acceptance--enough storage for about 900 songs or 10 hours of video.

Samsung also has a good selection of 'traditional' flash MP3 players. The YP-T55 model is available with 256 MB, 512 MB or 1 GB of memory and has FM radio, FM recorder, voice recorder, line-in recording and plays files in MP3, WMA, ASF and OGG audio formats. It operates on a single AAA battery that lasts for about 20 hours.

Samsung players can be used as USB computer drives, so transferring files back and forth from computer to player is a simple matter of dragging and dropping. Models with an integrated lithium-ion battery can be recharged from the USB port.

Navigation controls are well-designed and follow a logical structure so it's quite easy to find all the functions by playing with the controls for a few minutes. All the players have a digital sound processing engine that can be used to add stereo depth and other effects.

We've come to the point where all MP3 players must be examined next to the iPod, but in the case of Samsung players, they compare quite favorably with the 'i' machine. The support for OGG files is sure to be appreciated by audiophiles, and the extra features for recording give Samsung a definite edge.

SanDisk MP3 Players

SanDisk is a company which manufactures flash memory for products such as digital cameras and USB removable drives. They have their own line of MP3 players, which have a price advantage over other MP3 players since SanDisk makes their own memory.

The Sansa series of MP3 players ranges in size from 512 MB to 6 GB. There are currently three lines--the 'm' series has basic monochrome displays in a compact USB stick shape, the 'e' series features an expansion slot for extra memory capacity and the 'c' series has a color display for easier navigation and viewing photos.

All models have a recordable FM tuner, a built-in microphone and a USB 2.0 interface for speedy data transfers. SanDisk players appear as a USB drive so transferring songs to the player is a simple matter of dragging and dropping. They can be used as data storage devices as well as MP3 players.

Supported formats include MP3, WMA and Audible (for audio books and other spoken word content). Typical capacity for 1GB is 16 hours of MP3 or 32 hours of WMA.

Sansa 'm' Series

These are ultra compact players that can be hidden in your hand. They are ideal for all kinds of portable audio as the lack of moving parts (as would be found on a hard drive MP3 player) guarantees skip-free playback.

The memory range of the 'm' series is from 512 MB to 4 GB, and they operate on a single AAA battery for up to 19 hours of continuous playback. There is support for MP3 tags so you can view information about the current song being played as well as browse through your song titles.

The FM tuner has 20 presets and the player comes with a carrying case and armband.

Sansa 'e' Series

The 'e' series range from 512 MB up to 6 GB of internal memory, and all models have an expansion slot for memory cards. This is an ingenious way to quickly add new content--simply stock your memory cards with music and quickly switch the song selection.

The larger models use a rechargeable lithium-ion battery, which is user-replaceable, and the 512 MB model uses a AAA battery which provides playback time of up to 17 hours. The screen on the larger models is a 1.8" TFT color display, which is suitable for viewing video clips.

Sansa 'c' Series

The color screen on the Sansa 'c' series MP3 players enhances navigation and menu access. The screen supports 64K colors and is suitable for cover art and photo thumbnails. These players operate on a single AAA battery, which has enough power for up to 15 hours of music playback.

All SanDisk MP3 players have excellent sound quality, but the included earbuds don't expose the true sound capabilities. Although comfortable to wear, they are definitely weak in the bass range, so if you want to hear what these players are really capable of get yourself a good set of third-party earbuds.

Overall, these players represent excellent value. Because of the price advantage SanDisk enjoys by manufacturing their own memory these players are comparable with other more expensive brands including the iPod (which also carries a 'fashion' premium). Quite simply, SanDisk MP3 players have more features at less cost.

Sony MP3 Players

From the company that introduced portable audio to the world (remember the Walkman?) comes a modern offering of portable entertainment in the form of MP3 players.

Sony has revamped the Walkman name and is cashing in on the popularity of MP3 players. It has several flash based models and even a few hard disk based players.

The Walkman Bean is a flash memory MP3 player available in either 512 MB or 1 GB sizes. Its ergonomic shape fits comfortably in the hand and it can handle several different audio formats including MP3, WMA, WAV and Sony's own ATRAC. This last format is found almost exclusively on Sony devices. Sony claims it offers similar sound quality to MP3 at half the file sizes, but independent testing has not verified these claims. For those interested in sharing files, a more commonly used format such as MP3 would be a better choice.

The Walkman Bean (aka NW-E305 and NW-E307) has a FM radio with digital tuner, a one line display and a clock. The lithium-ion battery can be quick-charged--3 minutes of charging time gives 3 hours of power and the fully charged battery will last for up to 50 hours.

The Walkman Core (NW-E505) is a stick-shaped device about the size and shape of a pack of gum. It has 512 MB of memory--enough to hold 345 songs in ATRAC format or about 250 MP3 songs. This unit has a 3-line display and features the same quick-charge battery as the Bean. Both the Bean and the Core have USB 2.0 connections for transferring songs from a computer.

Another model is the Circ (NW-E103PS)--a round device available with either 256 MB or 512 MB of flash memory. Unlike the Bean or the Core, the Circ only has a USB 1.1 interface. This means that song transfer from computer to player will be much slower, but with the smaller memory size of the Circ, this may not be a problem. The Circ operates on a single AAA battery, which lasts up to 70 hours.

Hard drive MP3 players include the NW-HD5, the NW-HD1 and the NW-A3000. All three of these models have a 20 GB hard drive, which holds about 5,000 songs in MP3 format. If you use Sony's ATRAC format this number goes up to 13,000.

All of Sony's MP3 players are functional and sound great, but they just don't seem to have what it takes to be a winner. The controls on some models are awkward to use, the software for transferring music from computer to player needs a major re-haul and the FM tuner, although a nice extra touch, only brings in the strongest signals.

The ATRAC format for sound files seems like a dead horse--almost no other manufacturer supports it and it has questionable value when compared with other formats such as WMA. To be fair, many (but not all) Sony MP3 players support WMA, but it would be nice if Sony would ditch the ATRAC in favor of another format such as OGG or FLAC.

Where Sony players shine is in the battery life--50 to 100 hours for most models. Sony has a lot to learn about function, but they have a lot to teach about power use.

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