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**Behind the Files: History of MP3**

**By Gabriel Nijmeh**

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In just over a couple of years, the MP3 audio file format has caused a big stir and captured the minds and hard drives of millions of people worldwide. MP3, short for Moving Picture Experts Group, Audio Layer III is a compression format that compresses audio files with only a small sacrifice in sound quality. MP3 files can be compressed at different rates, but the higher the compression, the lower the sound quality. A typical MP3 compression ratio of 10:1 is equal to about 1 MB for each minute of an MP3 song.

It all started in the mid-1980s, at the Fraunhofer Institut in Germany, where work began on developing a high quality, low bit-rate audio format. In 1989, Fraunhofer was granted a patent for the MP3 compression format in Germany and a few years later it was submitted to the International Standards Organization (ISO), and integrated into the MPEG-1 specification. Fraunhofer also developed the first MP3 player in the early 1990s, which was the first attempt at developing an MP3 player. In 1997, a developer at Advanced Multimedia Products created the AMP MP3 Playback Engine, which is regarded as the first mainstream MP3 player to hit the Internet. Shortly after, a couple of creative university students took the Amp engine, added a user-friendly Windows interface and called it Winamp. The turning point was in 1998, when Winamp was offered to the public as a free music player, and thus began the MP3 craze.

As the MP3 craze mushroomed, it didn't take long for other developers to start creating a whole range of MP3 software. New MP3 encoders, CD rippers, and MP3 players were being released almost every week, and the MP3 movement continued to gain momentum. Search engines made it easy to find the specific MP3 files, and portable MP3 players like the Rio and the Nomad Jukebox allowed people to copy MP3 songs onto a small portable device, no different than your Walkman or Discman.

By early 1999, the first peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing software application was released, one which shook the world overnight. Napster, the killer app that will be remembered like no other MP3-related

software was developed by nineteen-year-old university student, Shawn Fanning and his idea for Napster was to allow anyone with an Internet connection to search and download their favourite songs, in minutes. By connecting people, Napster created a virtual community of music fans.

However, along came the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) which as a representative of the major record companies and owners of the sound recordings, successfully battled Napster for copyright law infringement and an injunction was issued that effectively shut down Napster. The RIAA argument is that all the free downloading is in breach of copyright laws and therefore promotes audio piracy. As a result, file sharing impacts their ability to sell CDs and make a profit. Despite the legal problems that Napster has faced and the fact that they are currently not operational, MP3 file swapping and has continued on, and for a number of reasons.

A big reason MP3s have become the de-facto audio standard is that the original patent holders made it freely available for anyone to develop MP3 software. This open source model allowed early MP3 pioneers to develop MP3 software that accelerated the acceptance of the MP3 audio format. MP3 being just one of several types digital audio formats is not necessarily the most efficient or of highest sound quality. Better compression technologies have existed for some time now, but the success of MP3 is due to the relatively open nature of the format. Companies such as Microsoft and Yamaha have developed proprietary formats, but have placed restrictions on how developers can utilize their technology. For example, Microsoft's Windows Media Audio (WMA) file format, which they claim is a higher quality audio format at smaller file sizes, is starting to gain more acceptance as it comes bundled as the standard audio format in Windows 98/2000/XP. Microsoft might be able to challenge the dominance of MP3s or at the very least offer a second, popular audio format choice.

All the downloading and swapping of MP3s has attracted the wrath of the RIAA because there are no digital security features associated with MP3, so millions of songs are freely shared everyday by millions of users. The files are small enough to be downloaded easily, or even sent to a friend as an email attachment.

Another thing that makes MP3s very exciting and compelling is that it is easy for people to become DJs by mixing their favorite songs. A lot of people have created their own compilation CDs where they take all of their favorite songs from different artists and bands and burn them to CD very quickly and easily.

Webcasting or Internet radio has also become very popular allowing listeners to "stream" audio on their computers. Unlike downloaded MP3s, streamed MP3 files aren't stored on your hard drive, but are broadcast like traditional radio through your MP3 player. Real Networks was one of the first to offer streamed audio software, which uses a proprietary format known as RealAudio. Microsoft allows offers their own proprietary streaming audio through their Windows Media Application. If you do a search for "Internet radio" or "webcasting", you will find hundreds of Internet radio stations offering every imaginable type of programming.

Of course, as exciting as MP3s are, there are some legal and business battles that are being waged. MP3 itself is not an illegal audio format, but when people offer up MP3 versions of copyrighted material that is considered a copyright infringement. The Home Recording Act allows you to make copies of your music CDs for personal use but by law, you are not allowed to distribute or share these files with

friends or family if they do not own a copy of the CD.

The debate rages on as to whether or not MP3 and P2P file sharing programs are good for the music industry. MP3 proponents believe that MP3s help promote music and musicians by getting the music heard far and wide. On the other hand, MP3 critics argue that free music will kill the music industry and the artists who depend on it. Essentially, it is a battle for control of music distribution. Artists can now bypass record labels and distribute their music very easily and effectively.

A balanced and compromised solution should benefit artists and music labels. There is no doubt that artists and musicians should be compensated for their efforts, yet a lot of new and upcoming bands distribute free MP3s as way to get their music heard. As the buzz and excitement builds around the band, people are more inclined to support the bands by buying their CDs, attend concerts and purchase other band merchandise. Ultimately, bands and music labels probably don't want to bite the hand that feeds them.

So, where does that leave us? Well, as we have seen many times over the years, hot technology

trends come and go. However, MP3s have really captured the ears of music aficionados worldwide. With millions upon millions of MP3 audio files out there, and hundreds and maybe even thousands of MP3 related software that has been developed by software developers worldwide, there is no doubt that MP3s are here to stay.

Gabriel Nijmeh is the software editor at MP3-CDBurner.com – <http://www.mp3-cdburner.com>, where we feature software reviews and downloads of MP3 software including CD rippers, MP3 CD burners, MP3 converters and more. Stay up-to-date on the latest and hottest MP3 software downloads and enjoy our MP3 tutorials, FAQs, music articles and shareware developer profiles.

### **Music Downloads – Staying Legal**

**By Ciara McGrath**

There are many music download sites on the Internet, though the legality of some of these services is debatable and the companies that produce CDs and records are trying to close some down.

The concept these sites use to justify what they do is that of file sharing between individual members. File sharing is probably legal, but the file sharing of copyright material may not be legal.

The MP3 format has changed the face of music. Music and speech can be converted to MP3 files easily. Some detail is lost but this is not detectable on most MP3 players. MP3 files take up much less space on a hard drive than a conventional audio file. This allows personal MP3 players to hold hundreds of MP3 files on their hard drives, whereas they would only hold 10 –20 conventional audio files.

Music download sites hold a database of files belonging to their members and you access members'

own computers to download the music MP3 files you are searching for. Many of the music files have viruses in them, sometimes deliberately put there. Many more files contain spy-ware, giving the provider access to data on your Internet use or even files on your computer.

Some of the download sites themselves install spy-ware on your computer and then sell the information gathered to third party users.

Better, probably, to pay the small monthly download fee from paying sites and download your MP3 music legally and in safety. This way the artist gets rewarded for their effort, and it only seems fair to pay them for the entertainment they give us. If you like an artist or group then encourage them to produce more music of the same type by paying the small fee that is asked, and stay legal at the same time.

Ciara McGrath has four teenage daughters. She travels widely. For more articles click

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