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Prepare to pay a lot for the tunes you want

James Turner

WHAT'S NEW & NOTEWORTHY ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB— When cassette tapes first appeared in the 1960s, America's listening habits changed quickly.

An entire subculture began dubbing "mix" tapes, a collection of songs from diverse sources. On college campuses, there was endless debate about the best mix for a road trip, an intimate date, etc. And when your romantic interest sent you a tape that started with "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" and ended with "Hit the Road, Jack!" it was never a good sign.

Today, with CD recorders cheap and readily available, you would think a new wave of "mix" CDs would be the natural result. Unfortunately, just as in the days of taping from whole albums, you still need to buy the whole CD to get that one song you need to burn the perfect "Sorry, I Ran Over Your Dog" CD mix. (A few stores have begun offering self-service CD-burning kiosks where you can load up a disc for about \$2 per song.)

The convergence of high-speed computer networks and the MP3 music format, however, gave us other options.

More than 15 million people went the legally questionable route, using the Napster Web site to download MP3 music for free. But a court ruling last week, citing "wholesale infringement" of copyright law, had the site facing closure before an appeal kept it alive. The fight isn't over.

Even those who find copying music from the Web objectionable will have a hard time finding a good above-board source for tunes.

Sony Music's Web site (thestore.sony-music.com) sells selected single tracks from its current releases, but not its broader catalog. And its pricing strategy is mind boggling. Sony wants you to fork out \$2.49 for a typical single. Do the math and - yikes! - you'll learn it costs \$25 to put together a 10-song CD.

More reasonable pricing can be found at third-party sites. Emusic.com will sell you an MP3 song for a buck, which would make our example \$10. But what Emusic gains in price, it lacks in selection. Although its coverage of folk and world music isn't bad, mainstream music selections (with notable exceptions like Elvis Costello and They Might Be Giants) may best be described as "bands you've never heard of."

Musicmaker.com offers a decent selection of artists at the buck-a-song level, with such artists as Shania Twain and Billy Joel. But be sure to click on the MP3 icon at the top of the screen first, or the site will try to create a custom CD for you by default.

Finally, watch out for sites offering music that requires special software like Liquid Audio. While this software lets you download and listen to music, you have no ability to load it into a portable MP3 player or burn it onto a CD for use in the car, or even move it to a different computer! Supersite cdnow.com is especially obnoxious in this respect, charging about \$2 to \$3 per song and only offering Liquid Audio downloads.

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