GEAR & GADGETS

It's Time to Make Your CDs Obsolete



Harry Campbell for The Wall Street Journal

IF YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH to have accumulated a sizable CD collection, you need to take the next step in becoming a mature, music-loving adult: clearing out the plastic discs that are cluttering your living space and transferring them to a hard drive. Here's a pain-free, future-proof approach.

—Michael Hsu

Why do you still have this Vanilla Ice CD?

Weed out anything you can't imagine wanting to listen to again (the CDs you decide to keep will require time to rip and hard-drive space to store). Selling CDs, especially the duds, is more trouble than it's worth, but the Salvation Army and Goodwill accept donations of ones you no longer want. And discs sent to cdsweep.com—they'll email you a prepaid FedEx label—are resold to benefit the Autism Science Foundation.

Lossless vs. lossy

The price of disk space has plummeted since the early days of MP3s. Back then, converting CDs to digital-audio files required finding a balance between file size and audio quality (in general, the smaller the file, the worse it sounds). But these days, it makes sense to convert to archive-quality audio files.

Formats like MP3 and Apple's AAC—known as "lossy" formats—shrink file sizes by discarding the frequencies that most people won't notice are missing. But "lossless" audio formats—like Apple Lossless (also known as ALAC) or FLAC—compress data, kind of like a ZIP file. Because they have the exact same fidelity as the original CD, you're no longer ripping for your portable music player. You're ripping for posterity.

So should you go with ALAC or FLAC? Given Apple's dominance of the digital music field, Apple Lossless seems like a safe long-term bet—and many non-Apple devices, such as Android and Windows smartphones, can play the files using third-party apps. Thankfully, one lossless format can be converted to another after the fact with a few clicks.

The only drawback of lossless files is that they're bigger than MP3s. (A three-minute song we ripped to Apple Lossless came to about 18 MB; the same song ripped to MP3 at 320 kpbs was 9 MB.) To cram as much music as possible onto a portable device, a "lossy" format is still the way to go.

You could keep your entire collection in both lossless and lossy formats. (Most computers can take care of the process overnight.) But a far simpler approach for iPod, iPhone and iPad is to use iTunes to down-convert the files automatically when you load them to your device.

Rip it good!

At some point in your life, you probably set aside a long weekend to rip your entire CD collection to MP3. And most likely you gave up at "Billy Joel's Greatest Hits, Vol. 3." Loading and unloading discs is tedious work—there's no reason you should go this alone—but if you do, at least get an autoloading CD drive. The Acronova Nimbie NB11 ($645, acronova.com) is billed as a CD duplicator, but it's perfect for ripping large CD collections. You can load it with a stack of 100 CDs and connect it to your computer via USB. It comes with software that lets iTunes, Windows Media Player and other programs work their way through the discs, one by one, automatically. There's a steep learning curve to get the settings on your computer and conversion software configured correctly, and although the NB11 is technically Mac compatible, the software that lets it operate fully unattended with iTunes is only available for PC. Still, if you're technically savvy or don't feel comfortable shipping your CD collection to a conversion service, this is the way to go.

Even if you have a lot of time on your hands or can hire a team of neighborhood tweens to rip CDs for you, it's worth leaving this task to the pros. Professional conversion facilities use high-end CD drives that rip more reliably than the drive on a home computer. (Our test shipments to various services contained lightly scratched CDs that were all converted successfully.) Most importantly, they have access to professional tagging databases and use software that checks the final conversions to be sure they match their source CDs perfectly.

We looked into MusicShifter, ReadyToPlay, RipDigital, Ripstyles, Riptopia and Terra-San. It turns out that ReadyToPlay handles conversion for Ripstyles (which, in turn, used to do Geek Squad's ripping service). And RipDigital, Riptopia and Terra-San are all one company. All of the services work pretty much the same way: You ship them your CDs (some provide prepaid shipping labels and packing materials), and a few days later you'll get your CDs back along with digital files loaded to a hard drive that you've provided or to DVDs. Think of a DVD as a storage format rather than another disk to deal with. One DVD can hold several CDs-worth of music, in a format that you can drag and drop onto your computer's hard drive.

MusicShifter was the least expensive of the services that we tested, charging 69 cents to rip a CD to an archive-quality format. The fee includes packing supplies and shipping both ways. And for $40, they'll send your discs back to you organized in a CD wallet. Price-wise, their deal is hard to beat.

Fans of classical music—which can be a challenging genre to tag correctly—should check out ReadyToPlay, which provided the most consistent classical music tags. Their "Artist" field always contained the lead performer of a piece (e.g., "András Schiff"), while the composer's last name was appended to the "Album" field (e.g., "Bach - Goldberg Variations")—which made it easy to search by performer or composer. The service cost $1.29 per disc (discounted to $1.19 for orders over 300), with a possible surcharge if your collection contains a lot of obscure titles that need to be tagged by hand.

Cloudy days

Once your music is ripped, you can upload it to a cloud service—like Amazon Cloud Drive, Google Play or iTunes in the Cloud—to download or stream your collection using a smartphone or computer.

Of the three services, Google Play is the most affordable: It will store up to 20,000 of your songs free. If your collection is bigger than 20,000 songs, consider Amazon Cloud Drive; the free version comes with a relatively paltry 5 GB of space, but $20 per year gets you unlimited music storage. Apple's service, meanwhile, is ideal if you have iOS devices. For $20 annually, you can store up to 25,000 songs online, and using iTunes Match, you don't have to upload your entire collection: Any song on your computer that's also available through iTunes will automatically appear in your iCloud account, whether you purchased it from Apple or not.

The services, by the way, won't back up your lossless audio files. Even though lossless formats are supported by iTunes Match and Google Play, the files are converted to a compressed format before they get uploaded to the cloud. You'll still need a separate system to keep them safe.

To the recycle bin

Now for the big step. Assuming you can overcome your emotional attachment to jewel cases and liner notes, converting to a lossless audio format means you can—at last—throw away your stash of CDs. It's illegal to sell or donate CDs that you've ripped. To follow the letter of the law, you need to destroy them. Ship them to the CD Recycling Center of America (cdrecyclingcenter.org). Their service is free (although donations are encouraged); they just ask that you send them CDs separated from the liner notes.

SHOP RIGHT

MORE THAN A BOX

A humidor is a good investment, even for the occasional cigar indulger

FOR MOST FOLKS, sparking up a stogie is only a sometimes thing, reserved for special occasions—the birth of a child, a wedding or having successfully returned from the Caribbean with a computer case filled with (wink, wink) "exotic" cigars. Problem is, unless you light up within a couple of days of purchase, your investment is sure to go stale. Which is where the humidor comes in.

Even if your cigar intake is limited to every month or two, that's OK. You don't need to be a pinky-ringed Tony Soprano to maintain a small cache of fresh, well-kept cigars at the ready. It's not unlike always having a bottle of Champagne around—you should be able to indulge whenever you see fit, without trekking to the store. And a personal humidor allows your tastes to grow as you experiment with a wider variety of tobaccos and wrappers, as your collection builds and diversifies, and even as you start to age your own cigars so that their flavors become richer and more complex. Buying your first one can be intimidating as they all just look like boxes with wildly varied prices, but it's easier than you think. Here's how.

—Rafi Kohan

1. Choose your box

Start off with a desktop humidor—they're space-efficient and often handsome. Most importantly, you don't have to fill them with hundreds of sticks. Expect a desktop to hold 25 to 100 cigars. They range in price from $25 into the thousands.

2. Before buying, check the seal

Two seal-checking tricks are the "car door" and "dollar bill" tests. For the former, lift the lid a few inches, release, and listen for a car-door-like whoosh—that means it has a good seal. For the latter, insert a greenback halfway into your humidor, shut the lid and slowly pull on the bill. While you don't want the seal to be completely airtight—which can lead to mold inside the box—you want to meet a fair amount of resistance; pull hard enough, though, and the bill should release.

3. Remember: money isn't everything—or is it?

It's true, money can't buy you love or happiness, but in the world of humidors, it seems it can earn you peace of mind. Most humidors do what they're supposed to do—keep your cigars fresh. Ultimately one's choice of humidor comes down to aesthetics and a willingness to monitor the box's humidity levels (see step 5). What top-of-line models like Davidoff Macassar Dome (*$5,080, www.davidoffmadison.com*) offer, in addition to handcrafted luxury, is ease of use. Less expensive models, like the Adorini Torino Deluxe (*$184, humidordiscount.com*), may require a more vigilant watch.



4. Season it right

Seasoning is hugely important for Spanish cedar boxes because a dry box will steal your cigars' moisture. Almost every manufacturer offers a variation on seasoning, but in general this involves wiping down the interior with a damp-but-not-soaking-wet cloth several times over the course of a few days. It's important to note that the cloth should not be oversaturated—pooling water can warp the wood—and that you should use distilled water to avoid mold-inducing bacteria. Some higher-end models do not need to be seasoned (it'll say so in the instructions) since they are crafted from nonporous exotic woods that do not absorb humidity. Nonabsorbent boxes typically have a slight gap in their seals to promote air circulation and prevent over-humidification, so don't be alarmed.

5. Keep things humid

To be considered useful, a humidor should maintain a relative humidity (RH) level between 65% and 75%. Any lower, and the tobacco dries out. Any higher, and the cigars may prove difficult to keep lit, or worse: tobacco beetles may hatch, thanks to the incubator-like climate. Ideal conditions are between 68% and 72%. To monitor these levels, you'll want a digital hygrometer, which are generally more reliable than their analogue equivalents, which require finicky calibration. Pretty much every humidor comes with a humidifier, although quality varies greatly. If your box isn't maintaining a good RH level, try switching to a crystal- or bead-based humidifying technology or to Boveda packs. The latter can both absorb and release humidity, and only need to be swapped out every few months.



SMOKE 'EM IF YOU GOT 'EM
Above: Adorini Torino Deluxe. Left: The Davidoff Macassar Dome.

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal (2)