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Lyons' Den

iTunes: Making your Digital Hub Work For You

Part One: Getting Burned by iTunes

By Daniel J. Lyons

You've all heard of Apple's newest "i" addition to the family, iTunes, and most of you have probably given it a try by now.

There are some things to keep in mind however. MP3 players, from Apple or from anyone else take a lot of processing power and you'll want a reasonably fast system for proper playback. That means that you won't be able to convert that dusty old SE into a retro-MP3 player, sorry. Anything before a G3 will probably not give you a satisfactory performance. You can get slower computers to play MP3s but if you try to do anything, the music will skip like you just threw your CD player down the stairs. Even on faster systems, you may hear skips when your system needs to do a lot of disk access at the same time (saving a large Photoshop file or copying a large amount of information to a Zip disk for example).

You'll also need at least OS 8.6 to use iTunes, and 9.1 to burn CDs. Using iTunes on 8.6 requires a third party patch to allow the installer to install on a pre-9 system. (Available at VersionTracker.com http://www.versiontracker.com/moreinfo.fcgi?id=10036) Also remember that, like iMovie, iTunes is not yet ready for use on that copy of Mac OS X that you just pre-ordered.

iTunes is available from Apple computer

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Finder
Internet Explorer
Email
Applications

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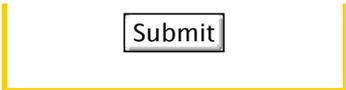
While Ripping MP3s is no problem (just click the import button), burning CDs requires a little more work. Toast users and people who don't have an Apple-supplied CD-RW mechanism have been left out in the cold as far as iTunes''s CD authoring capabilities, but at least we've been able to use it as a free MP3 creator and player. If your CD-RW drive came with Toast, you will need a separate extension set to burn with Toast which turns off all of iTunes''s CD burning extensions and vise-versa for burning with iTunes. The current publisher of Toast, Roxio, has promised a fix with version 5.1 of Toast due sometime in April.

This all assumes, of course, that your CD burner has been built with one of the compatible CD-RW mechanisms. Since many companies use different suppliers for their components, it can be difficult to determine if your burner will work.

For example,say you purchased a Que!Fire 12x10x32x CD-RW drive you may have either a Plextor or a Teac mechanism inside of it. If you have a Teac mechanism (CD-W512EB), you can't burn with iTunes. If you have a Plextor mechanism (PX-W1210A) you can burn with iTunes, unless the drive's mechanism has a firmware revision before 1.0.7 where it won't work at all. These aren't different models, just drives that were assembled by Que! at different times. Confused yet? Well you're not alone.

While I applaud Apple for increasing iTunes' compatibility list from one mechanism to thirty in under two months, it would be nice if we could get a list of CD-RW drives that we could purchase to work with iTunes instead of having to figure it out after the fact.

For those of you with a dedicated internet connection, iTunes will automatically download album information from one of several web based libraries, you can also access streaming radio stations. For those still getting by with dial-up connections, you can still enter MP3 tags before or after ripping tracks from an audio CD, and you can get a radio for $5 at Wal-Mart.

There are several ways that you can view your MP3 collection in iTunes. Click the Browse button (it looks like a badly infected eye in the upper right hand corner) and you get two additional boxes near the top of your screen, one for Artists and one for Albums. Assuming that your songs have MP3 tags, you can sort your music library by clicking on an entry from either box. You can also type a search criteria in the Search field beside the Browse button. Your music library sorts dynamically as you type or select an Artist or Album. The search can come in handy if you want to hear a song and can't quite remember the name of it (I know it starts with an S) or if you want to hear only love songs (or hate songs if you're in one of those moods).

Despite some burning problems, I've grown very fond of iTunes, i find that I like it much more than the Windows Media Player or any of the other MP3 players that I've tried.

Next we'll look at how to convert those old audio cassettes into MP3 files.

Talkback

The Lyons' Den

Daniel J. Lyons started with the Mac back in 1989 laying out a High School newspaper on an SE and was immediately hooked.

Now, several computers later, he is hoping to share his thoughts and

experiences and maybe even a few gripes with anyone who will listen.

Daniel has worked in several computer labs and built and maintained numerous office networks over the past ten years. He is currently employed as a Technology Manager and has experience with both AppleShare and NT networks.

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