

# Review: Tuning in to music service Spotify

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This screen shot shows the home page for Spotify.com. The service brings free, ad-supported access to more than 15 million songs on computers, while ad-free versions of the service cost \$5 or \$10.(AP Photo)

I've been listening to a lot more music than usual for the past week, including tons of the "guilty pleasure" tunes I hate to admit I adore. I won't get into details, but let's just say that Britney Spears and songs covered by the "Glee" cast were in heavy rotation.

All this comes courtesy of the online streaming [music service Spotify](http://www.spotify.com), which made its U.S. debut last week. It brings free, ad-supported access to more than 15 million songs on computers. Five bucks a month lets you listen without all those ads. Ten bucks lets you listen to music offline and on a smartphone as well.

I started rocking out with both a \$10 Premium account and a free one, the latter of which is harder to come by because the service is now by invitation only.

So far, so awesome - mostly. The free version, in particular, is a dream come true for cheapskates like myself.

Once you sign up, you have to install software that lets you search for and play music. There is no Web-based application, so you have to get this software on every computer, smartphone and [tablet computer](#) you want to use it on. How annoyingly retro.

Fortunately, the software is simple and easy to use.

It's impossible to ignore the resemblance to Apple's iTunes software and its three columns. Your library and playlists are on the left, songs in the middle and a social component on the right. You can see the latest releases added to Spotify's catalog under the "What's New" tab, or check out the top music by clicking "Top Lists."

The service automatically draws in any music in your iTunes or [Windows Media Player](#) libraries. If you have an encyclopedic collection, you'll be able to access it easily through Spotify.

Much more impressive was the size of Spotify's music catalog, which dwarfs competitors such as Rdio, Mog and Rhapsody. Although I couldn't find British singer Adele's popular album "21" or anything by '60s girl group The Shaggs, Spotify had most of my favorites, both mainstream and obscure. I compared its selection to the top 20 albums and artists available on [iTunes](#). Almost all of them were available on Spotify.

Playback was excellent. Songs sounded crystal-clear, and there were no

annoying gaps between songs as one finished playing and another queued up. Oddly, the playback controls are in the bottom left-hand corner of the software, rather than somewhere on the top. Spotify says paid accounts include improved sound quality, but I couldn't tell the difference.

One of Spotify's best features is available to both free and paid users: the ability to use Facebook to connect with friends who are also using the service. Once you allow the program to access your Facebook profile, it will automatically pull in all your buddies who have done likewise and let you access the playlists they've chosen to share. It was fun to click through my friends' profiles and see what they were listening to. I could see this replacing my occasional pleas for music recommendations.

There, the similarities between the free and paid services stop.

If you're using the free version, you'll notice the occasional banner ad or audio ad, the latter of which interrupted the flow of my playlist every 15 minutes or so. For now, they are mostly advertisements for the paid Spotify service. I'm not opposed to having ads, but I found the banner ads distracting because they would sometimes appear or disappear as I used the software, slightly changing its layout.

For now, at least, the biggest problem with the free version is getting an invitation to use it. You can sign up for an invite on Spotify's website, but it's not clear when you'll get it (the site says Spotify will send it to you "as soon as we can").

And chances are, the sooner you can snag an invite the better. In Europe, users can only listen to 20 hours per month during the first six months after signing up. After that they're limited to 10 hours a month with limited plays per song. There is currently no listening limit in the U.S., though Spotify says it may institute one after studying listening habits

here.

If you can't wait to try it, the paid service allows you to bypass the need for invites - and you'll get some free invites to dole out after you sign up.

You'll get many of the other benefits simply by paying \$5 a month. Your listening won't get interrupted by ads, and you won't be subject to caps once Spotify imposes one. But you'll be restricted to listening on computers with an Internet connection.

For \$5 a month more, you can also listen on your smartphone, even when you don't have Internet access. You can sync up to 3,333 songs with three computers or phones. Spotify has a decent mobile application that quickly updated itself every time I added a new playlist on my laptop.

Of course, you'll still need online access if you want to try out recommendations you haven't synched yet. Streaming is probably best over a strong Wi-Fi network. Often when I tried to stream over the phone's wireless data network, tracks took a while to queue up.

I wish Spotify had better music-discovery tools. Unless you have a ton of Facebook friends on Spotify, it isn't a great way to find new music.

When you look up an artist, Spotify will also recommend some similar ones. You can also check out the most popular tracks, albums and artists that users are listening to at any given time.

But it would be nice to be able to search people's public playlists. If I'm searching for songs by Ke\$ha, for example, Spotify ought to show me playlists containing that artist so I could see what else those users are listening to.

It could also use a better spell-check tool. Numerous times, I tried to search with an artist's name slightly misspelled. Spotify couldn't figure out what I was looking for.

Overall, though, Spotify has the makings of an excellent music service.

It's worth the \$10-a-month fee if you're a complete music junkie, though more moderate listeners can settle for the \$5 version. You won't get the mobile or offline listening features, but you'll still get to hear as much [music](#) as you want without ads.

As for me (and, I suspect, plenty of others), the free version is the way to go for now. It's not nearly as flexible, but it's free. I can always reevaluate the decision once Spotify imposes listening limits on us tightwads.

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