

Spotify doesn't quite hit the spot

September 16 2011, By Troy Wolverton

Subscription services have been touted as the future of music for the past decade. But at least in this country, they've never taken off.

However, a new generation of digital music services have started to crop up that have many tech pundits abuzz that the era subscription music has finally arrived. Much of this enthusiasm has been focused on the recent - and much anticipated - U.S. launch of Spotify.

Ballyhooed in Europe, where it got its start, Spotify has much in common with earlier subscription offerings. For a monthly fee, consumers can listen to any [song](#) in Spotify's catalog of 15 million tracks and play them as many times as they want. The service streams those songs over the Internet to users, allowing them to listen to the songs instantly.

But Spotify purports to offer a "new way" of listening to music that goes well beyond previous services. For example, consumers can listen to a limited amount of music from Spotify for free, choosing the songs they want to hear and creating playlists. Users have to pay for the service only if they want to listen to an unlimited number of songs each month or if they want to use the service on their mobile devices.

Spotify also touts that it was built with [social networking](#) in mind. Users can post on [Facebook](#) and Twitter a link to the songs they are listening to so their friends can listen in also. By signing into Facebook from the Spotify software, users can share playlists they've created and view and even download playlists posted by their friends.

The service has other cool features. One, called Artist Radio, is similar to [Pandora](#): It essentially creates a "[radio station](#)," or stream of songs, based on one particular artist. If you choose Artist Radio while looking at a profile of The Decemberists, for example, you might also hear songs by The New Pornographers, The Jayhawks and Wilco. It can be a great way to discover new music.

To use Spotify, you have to download the company's music [player software](#), which looks a lot like Apple's iTunes. The application allows you to play software not only from the service, but also songs stored on your computer. Additionally, Spotify offers apps for the iPhone and for Android devices that allow users to stream music from the Internet and to download songs to play when they are offline.

The basic appeal of services such as Spotify has long been obvious: The ability to instantly play any song without having to buy it or wait to download it. But the drawbacks have also been equally apparent: a recurring monthly fee whether you use the service or not - a fee that may well exceed what you would otherwise spend buying albums. Oh, and you don't own anything; your unfettered access to the songs disappears as soon as you stop paying the monthly fee.

I have never been a fan of subscription music services for precisely these reasons. Although all the music I listen to these days is digital - I long ago ripped all my CDs to MP3s - I'm a big believer in owning, not renting, music. I grew up buying cassette tapes, LPs and CDs and built up a substantial music collection that way.

Spotify does offer a free and a \$5-a-month offering. But neither plan is very attractive. With both, you are limited to listening to the service on your PC. Additionally, after a six-month introductory period, users of the free service will have a monthly limit of 10 hours of music listening and five plays of the same song.

Neither plan lets users listen to Spotify on the devices or in the places where much music listening is done: on their phones and mobile music players or in their cars. For that option, users will have to spend \$10 a month, which I think is just too much. That's the same price charged by longtime music subscription companies Napster and Rhapsody and by newer rivals such as MOG.

I was also disappointed by other aspects of Spotify. The company claims to have "all the music, all the time," but that wasn't my experience. It doesn't have any song by the Beatles, for example, even though you can find them on iTunes. You can chalk that up to the deal Apple stuck with the group, but that wasn't the only collection of songs missing from Spotify's library.

The gaps range from the obscure, such as the version of "All Along the Watchtower" that was played in an episode of "Battlestar Galactica," to the far more commonplace, such as Bob Dylan's original version of the same song. Even though you won't find either of those on Spotify, you could buy both versions on iTunes.

It's great that Spotify lets you view friend's playlists, but I found myself missing a key feature from iTunes: the Genius function, which automatically creates a playlist of 20 songs based on one particular track. The Artist Radio feature is a decent substitute for Genius. But you can't access Artist Radio through the Spotify mobile apps, so it can be difficult to generate a playlist on the fly.

All that said, if you're interested in a subscription music service, Spotify is definitely worth a try. It's easy to use, has a wide variety of music, offers some neat features and you can test it out for free.

But I'm going to stick to buying my songs. Renting music is not for me.

SPOTIFY DIGITAL MUSIC SERVICE:

-Troy's rating: 6.5 (Out of 10)

-Likes: Large catalog of music; offers a free service; allows users to easily share songs and playlists and view friend's playlists; Artist Radio feature provides a Pandora-like service

-Dislikes: Free service limited to just 10 hours of [music](#) play after introductory period; to use on mobile devices, users have to subscribe to pricey \$10 per month service; catalog missing numerous notable tracks; Artist Radio feature not available on [mobile devices](#)

-How much: Free for limited use; \$5 per month for unlimited use on a PC; \$10 a month for unlimited use on a mobile device

-Web: spotify.com

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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