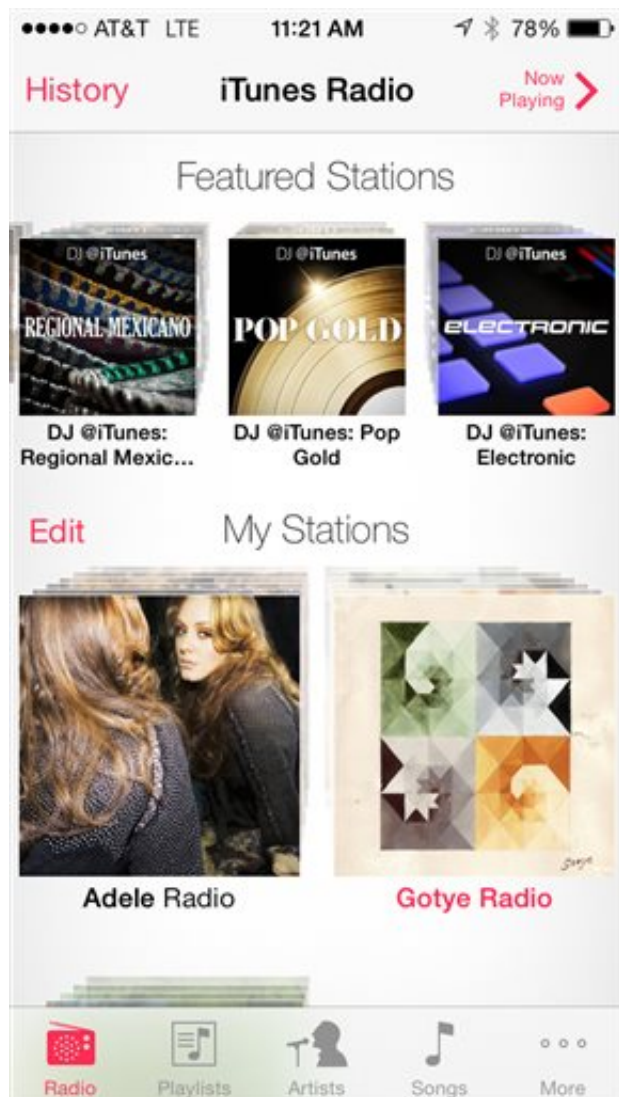


Review: Don't ditch Pandora yet for iTunes Radio

September 23 2013, by Ryan Nakashima



This screenshot of an iPhone 5, Friday, Sept. 20 2013, shows the iTunes Radio app. The iTunes Radio app comes with new iPhones and the free iOS 7 update. (AP Photo/iTunes Radio)

Now that iTunes Radio has shipped to millions of iPhone and iPad owners, does that mean you should delete Pandora? Not so fast, I say.

Apple's new [music service](#), which comes with new iPhones and the free iOS 7 update, lacks some of the mojo that has helped Pandora become the leader in Internet [radio](#). Mainly, it doesn't have the intelligence that Pandora has gained from tens of billions of interactions with listeners who have given a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to a song.

Providing an Internet radio service—in other words, making randomized playlists based on genres, songs or artists—is more difficult than it seems. Over several days of playing with iTunes Radio, I found the app frequently misjudged my tastes, and I ran out of skips more than once. (You can skip a song only six times per station per hour, the same as Pandora).

It could be my own fault: iTunes Radio takes a big cue from your song collection in picking what to play, and what I do own is mostly a patchwork of gifts and other songs that don't reflect my preferences. That said, I found iTunes Radio's song selection more miss than hit.

For instance, when I created a custom station based on Adele, instead of hearing soaring, yet up-tempo tunes sung with a huge vocal range, I got a bunch of what I consider mushy rock ballads over and over. I love Bruno Mars, but I didn't want to hear "Talking to the Moon" in Adele Radio. And it ignored my tap to "never play this song" again, as it was repeated three songs later. iTunes Radio also played artists that, to me, bear little resemblance to Adele: Kelly Clarkson, Beyonce, Jennifer Hudson and Maroon 5.

With Adele Radio in Pandora, I got artists that I closely associate with

Adele, including Kate Nash, Feist, Norah Jones and Regina Spektor. But then again, I had already given a "thumbs up" in previous Pandora sessions to three of the first seven songs that played, so the app knew that I liked them. That shows the time I've invested in Pandora deserves to not be wasted.

Meanwhile, Pandora lets you see song lyrics and the artist's biography. It also lists some of each song's hundreds of musical qualities, such as "acoustic sonority" and "major key tonality." That helps explain why Pandora considers it similar to other songs in a station.

iTunes Radio picks songs using input from recording labels, third-party metadata services like Gracenote and Apple's own editorial choices. But it doesn't show you lyrics, bios or explain why a song was chosen.

There are reasons to appreciate iTunes Radio, however.

UBIQUITY

iTunes Radio gets first-class treatment in iOS 7's new Control Center. This set of handy functions can be accessed by swiping up from the bottom of the screen no matter where you are in the device. It also appears on the lock screen. Along with typical media controls such as play/pause, volume and skip, iTunes Radio adds a little star where the "back" button usually is. That pops up a separate menu where you can tap "play more like this," "never play this song," or "add to iTunes wish list" so you can fine-tune your station while doing other things like playing "Zynga Poker."

A swipe down, or one press of the home button, gets you back to what you were doing.

In Control Center, Pandora has a back button that doesn't do anything,

and you can't thumb up or down without going back into Pandora's app itself.

EASY PURCHASES

iTunes Radio makes it really easy to buy songs you like from iTunes. If you're in the app, a box in the upper right corner shows the price of the song. Tap it twice. You might also need to enter your iTunes password.

The app keeps a running history of what you've listened to. You can get 90-second previews to remind you what you've heard, also with the ability to buy right there. A separate tab shows which songs you've specifically added to your wish list.

Pandora also has a history, but not song previews. Buying a song through iTunes takes a few more taps than in iTunes Radio. It's marginally more difficult to get back to Pandora after purchasing, by double clicking the home button and selecting it from the range of apps that are displayed.

FEWER ADS

iTunes Radio has noticeably fewer ads than Pandora, and there are no stand-alone graphical ads. Most ads featured someone speaking in a neutral voice about an artist or album that you can purchase on iTunes, sometimes accompanied by a graphic or photo. I imagine Apple is just getting started selling ads, and ones for products and services beyond music will come soon enough.

By comparison, Pandora is slathered with ads. If you're looking at the app, the bottom part of the screen is almost always covered with an ad that you can get rid of by clicking the small "x." I've seen video ads and heard audio ads. The audio ads in particular sound like traditional radio

spots and can be jarring.

Either way, you can pay to get rid of ads completely—by signing up for Apple's \$25-a-year iTunes Match service or Pandora's \$36-a-year Pandora One.

SO?

iTunes Radio is a contender in Internet radio by dint of being featured prominently in iOS 7. The Music app is at the bottom right on each home screen. You simply need to go there and choose "Radio." It's also reachable from the home page of the iTunes Store on the desktop app.

Apple's new music feature does a serviceable job of generating songs in a lean-back listening format. However, it is a step or two behind Pandora in fine-tuning your playlist.

The last thing I'll say in this regard: iTunes Radio has a slider function that allows you to adjust your station to favor "hits," "variety" or "discovery." I noticed no discernible impact on what was played.

iTunes Radio could get better over time. But I wouldn't get rid of Pandora. Not yet.

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