

Music lovers seek to pump up digital audio quality

December 11 2013, by Rob Lever



David Chesky, a composer with his own record label, poses for a photo at his studio in New York, on December 10, 2013

When he sees people listening to music on portable digital devices, David Chesky cringes.

"You can have an \$8 million Stradivarius, and it sounds like you bought it at a local hardware store," says Chesky.

A composer who also has his own record label, Chesky began a [music](#) download site in 2007 called HD Tracks, offering "[high resolution](#)" music which retains much of the fidelity lost in most digital music.

"We are making a quality product for someone who is passionate about music," Chesky told AFP.

"No artist goes into a studio and slaves for six months over each detail, to have their music listened to on a laptop and \$5 headsets."

Chesky's was among the first offering high-res digital music which captures more quality than typical MP3 audio files, but the segment is growing, with music labels, electronics firms, musicians and others joining the push for better-quality formats.

Increased broadband speeds are another factor, allowing high-quality music downloads without the compression that many say is detrimental to sound quality.

Jared Sacks, an American living in the Netherlands who is preparing an expanded launch of a site called [natedsd.com](#), said he believes the market is evolving.

Sacks said many consumers under the age of 35 have never heard high-quality audio, and "now some people are waking up and saying 'we want this quality.'"

The outlook is brighter, Sacks said, because of the availability of hardware, download sites like his and lower-cost digital storage and Internet access.

"A year and a half ago you had only two (high-resolution audio) players and now there are over 60," he said.

"People who want good quality are willing to pay for it, but a lot of people have never heard better quality."



David Chesky, a composer with his own record label, pictured at his studio in New York, on December 10, 2013

Sacks's site and HD Tracks are among six partnering with Sony, selling high-resolution audio files which can be played on the Japanese firm's recently launched HD audio equipment.

HD audio will cost more than what most consumers are paying, but many audiophiles appear willing to pay roughly \$20 to \$30 for an music album, and individual tracks close to \$3.

"I think the digital stars are aligning," says Jeffrey Joseph, senior vice president at the Consumer Electronics Association, a trade group for the tech industry.

"Our research indicates the market for high quality music products is extending beyond the enthusiasts."

Joseph said debate over music quality has been around for decades, with the advent of the CD, which "lacked the warmth" of vinyl recordings. Digital technology allowed music to reach more people, but often sacrificed quality.

"What is particularly exciting about high resolution is that it has the high quality sound that you want but all the benefits of digital—the portability, the customization," he said.

At the CEA's annual International Consumer Electronics Show in January, a space will be dedicated for the first time to high-resolution music. CEA said its survey found 39 percent of consumers with a moderate interest in audio indicate they are willing to pay more for high quality audio electronics devices and 60 percent would pay more for higher quality digital music.

Sony has joined the effort both as a music publisher—by making its recordings available in high-definition format—and as an electronics maker with a range of high-resolution audio devices including music players, headphones and speakers.

"What the consumer needed was products that supported everything they could get their hands on" fore higher-quality [digital music](#), Sony Electronics product manager Aaron Levine told AFP.

Sony maintains that high resolution audio helps recreate the experience

of an original studio recording or live performance.

After home [audio](#), the next frontier for high-resolution is portable. Sony has been selling a portable HD player in some markets, and South Korea's Astell & Kern has devices selling at \$700 to \$1,300 which promise HD sound.

But some music lovers are waiting for a device being developed by pop star Neil Young, who is promising a portable player in early 2014 called Pono.

"Miraculously, there's a wealth of music & soul (or if you must, 'data') trapped on millions of recordings made over the last half century, that we're hoping to unleash for the very first time," Young said in a Facebook post.

"We're still toiling away on making this happen."

Some experts say new formats are unlikely to take hold because most consumers cannot tell the difference.

"I hate to use the term 'snob appeal' but that's really what it is," said Colby Leider, director of music engineer at the University of Miami's Frost School of Music.

Leider, who has studied both electrical engineering and music composition, said while it is true much data is lost when music is compressed to the MP3 format, "it works because it removes the portions of sound that most humans can't hear."

"There are people who buy a \$20,000 power cable to plug it into their system. But science says there is no difference between your \$20,000 power cable and a coat hanger."

Digital music on CDs is based on a "sampling" at 44,1000 times a second, transferring 16 bits; MP3 music has less data, and HD is higher, often sampling at 96,000 times a second with 24 or 32 bits of data.

"Some people can tell the difference," Leider said. "But if it's a great song, you are still going to love it even if it's not HD, and if it's a bad song, it doesn't matter."

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