

Pono may sound great, but don't expect it to stick around

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I hate to be the one to break it to rock-and-roll legend Neil Young, but his new digital music venture has about as much chance of succeeding as I have of winning a Grammy - maybe less.

Earlier this month at the South by Southwest [music](#) festival in Austin, Young unveiled Pono, a company that will offer a [digital music player](#), an online store and music management software all designed to work together much like the iPod and iTunes. What makes Pono different is that it is focused on delivering a better audio experience.

The company will sell songs and albums in a high-resolution format that its player is designed for. According to Young, Pono will take listeners back to the recording studio and allow them to hear music in exactly the way the artists intended it to sound.

The company has already drawn a huge amount of buzz, and endorsements from artists and industry executives ranging from Sarah McLachlan to Warner Bros. Records Chairman Rob Cavallo. Meanwhile, a Kickstarter campaign the company is using to get its service off the ground topped its \$800,00 fundraising goal within a day of Young's announcement and had exceeded \$2.6 million by the end of the week.

Yet, despite the enthusiasm surrounding it, Pono is an anachronistic and ill-considered solution to all-but-non-existent problem.

The service is modeled on how people used to listen to music 5 or 10 years ago, not how they listen today.

By and large, consumers are replacing stand-alone digital music players like the iPod with smartphones. And instead of plugging those players into their computers to sync their music, they're getting music on their smartphones wirelessly - either by syncing their songs over Wi-Fi or, increasingly, streaming them from services such as Spotify, Pandora or iTunes Match.

Pono would have consumers step back in time. They would have to carry around separate phones and music players again. And they would pay \$400 for that music device - which, in an increasingly connected world, is resolutely disconnected. The only way to get music on it is by transferring it from a computer over a USB cable.

You can't buy a song when you're away from your computer and you can't stream it to the device. The company's not even working on a smartphone application that might be able to offer Pono customers some connectivity or instant gratification.

Because the PonoPlayer isn't connected, it can't access to your entire music collection or the universe of available music. Instead, it can only play what's stored on it, which, if the songs are all in the high-resolution format it's promoting, is only about 800 songs.

For now, consumers will only be able to buy the PonoPlayer through the company's Kickstarter site. You won't be able to test it out in Best Buy, much less Wal-Mart. That's going to make it hard for the company to market its player to the masses - much less convince them that it really sounds better.

While Pono's store will work much like iTunes, it's unclear whether it

will have anything close to iTunes' selection. Even if Pono is able to secure a decent catalog and entice consumers with the promise of high-res music, those potential shoppers may well be turned off by the cost. Pono expects to charge between \$15 and \$25 for albums, which is about double what you'd pay for an MP3 album on iTunes or Amazon and \$5 to \$15 more than you'd pay for a month of Spotify.

If you want to have high-res versions of your existing digital songs or albums, you'll have to buy them all over again. Unlike Apple when it rolled out iTunes Plus and again when it rolled out iTunes Match, Pono isn't planning to offer consumers a way to upgrade their existing music.

Aside from the cost, there's the problem with the premise itself. Average consumers have shown repeatedly over the years that when it comes to listening to music, they care much more about convenience and low cost than quality. And quality is really not a problem anymore when it comes to digital music - at least with the files themselves.

When MP3s first came out, they were so compressed that the average listener could tell the difference between them and CDs. But the files consumers buy from Amazon and iTunes these days are much higher resolution than before - so much so that many experts have a hard time telling the difference between them and CDs. And as far as telling the difference between CDs and something higher-resolution, such as what Young's pitching? Forget about it - human ears generally can't detect it.

Young is surely right that what we hear when we listen to songs played through earbuds connected to our smartphones is a poor imitation of what the artists intended. But the problem is not the files themselves but the equipment - you're generally not going to get high-quality sound from an earbud, and smartphones aren't designed to be high-end audio devices.

Even if Young can convince consumers that the files themselves really are part of the problem, that doesn't mean [consumers](#) will turn to Pono. If the company ever threatened to take a significant portion of the music market, you better believe that Apple, Amazon, Google and others would quickly start selling higher-resolution songs and albums themselves, a move that would almost certainly doom Pono.

Ironically, that may be Pono's best bet for some kind of long-term success - that it could influence the major players in [digital music](#) to offer higher-resolution files and better audio components in their smartphones. Here's hoping that Young would be satisfied with a moral victory.

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