

Review: Apple Music impresses a subscription skeptic

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I've never been a fan of subscription music services, but Apple Music might make me change my mind.

Apple's new streaming music service has a lot to like, including a huge music library and spot-on recommendations. I'm still not thrilled at the prospect of paying \$120 a year to rent music - but Apple Music at least has me considering it.

At base, Apple Music works much like Spotify and other rivals. Users can play any available song or album in its library on demand on their computers or handheld devices for \$10 a month. Users can put together playlists, save songs to their devices so they can play them when they are offline, browse particular genres of music and listen to streaming radio channels.

Apple is largely trying to distinguish its subscription service from those of its rivals through offering a much more curated experience. The home page of the Apple Music app on iPhones and iPads is a section called "For You" in which [users](#) will find artist, album and playlist recommendations that are geared just for them. When users sign up for the service, Apple Music walks them through a customization process where they can tell it which artists and genres they like, love or hate. Based in part on those preferences, the service is able to get a pretty good idea of users' individual musical tastes.

I was impressed by Apple Music's recommendations. Not only did it

suggest old favorites, it highlighted albums that I don't personally own from artists that I like including the Pixies and John Lee Hooker.

Similarly, it put together playlists that combined both music that I own and love and songs that I don't have, but enjoyed listening to. Best yet, Apple refreshes the "For You" page frequently, so there's always something to tempt you to tune in.

Besides the curated experience, the other big selling point of Apple Music is that the company has integrated it into iOS and iTunes.

What that means is that you don't have to download the app or program separately, like you do with other services.

And unlike Spotify or Rdio, you can sign up for the service at the normal price straight from your iPhone.

Besides making it easier for users to access and subscribe, integrating Apple Music into iOS gives it one other cool feature. Users can listen to any song or album by simply telling Siri to play them.

There are lots of albums I haven't listened to in years, because I never got around to replacing the cassette tapes or LPs I owned with digital versions. I would try to think up some of those albums and get Siri to play them as soon as they came to mind.

That ability to tap into what's essentially a universe of music is one of the key selling points of any subscription music service.

You can take a chance on an album you've heard about without committing to buying it.

Or you can listen again to a dopey album you loved as a kid without

forking over \$10 just to hear it once.

But Apple Music has a number of shortcomings that may give you pause.

Although Apple Music has a selection of some 30 million songs, its catalog, like those of its rivals, isn't complete.

The Beatles and Prince are two of the most prominent artists whose works are missing. But you may find other holes. In a moment of reverie for my college years, I asked Siri to play "The Sign" by Ace of Base only to find out that Apple Music didn't have it. (Apple later added the song.)

Although I loved the "For You" section of the Apple Music app, much of the rest of the app is confusing or underdeveloped. To browse individual genres of music, you have to know to go into the "new" section of the app and then tap on the "all genres" area. Even then, it's much easier to find individual artists or albums by just searching for them.

One of the key features of Apple Music was supposed to be "Connect," a social networking component that lets users interact with their favorite artists.

It's still early days, but I only saw two posts in my "Connect" section, despite following more than 40 artists.

It's also unclear in Apple Music which music you actually own and which you are renting. The app has a "My Music" tab, but it mixes music from your personal collection with subscription songs and albums that you've saved there.

That can be a little disconcerting if you want to see what songs might disappear if you cancel your subscription.

Other users have reported bugs with Apple Music that have messed up their playlists, album covers and even song libraries.

But the biggest reservation I had with Apple Music was simply its price. Unlike Spotify and other rivals, Apple is only offering one tier of service for Apple Music at \$10 a month.

That's about double what I typically spend on music. I've gotten by for years using free services such as YouTube and Pandora and buying the occasional song or album. I'm not sure that the extra convenience is worth the price.

But Apple Music's personalized recommendations and its link to Siri have given me something to think about - and with a catalog ranging from Delta bluesman Charley Patton to Australian pop star Sia, a whole lot more to listen to.

7.5 OUT OF 10

What: Apple Music subscription song service

Likes: Huge library of songs; well-tailored song, album and playlist recommendations; allows users to call up songs or albums using Siri; integrated into iOS and iTunes, so doesn't require extra downloads and allows users to sign up at regular price straight from the app.

Dislikes: Requires \$10 monthly ongoing fee; no free or discounted levels of service; interface can be difficult to navigate; [social networking](#) "Connect" section underused by artists; mixes owned and rented music without distinguishing one from the other; some users have reported bugs that affect personal playlists and song libraries.

Price: \$10 monthly

Web: apple.com

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