

Review: Apple Music has everything, perhaps too much

July 16 2015, by Ryan Nakashima



This combination of product images provided by Apple Inc. shows, from left, the "For You" section, the "Radio" section, and the "Connect" sections of the Apple Music app, displayed on an iPhone 6. Apple's new music service is a valiant effort to catch up in the emerging business of offering unlimited music on demand for a monthly price. It does so while acknowledging the legacy of iTunes, the world's most popular store for buying individual songs to own. (Apple Inc. via AP)

Apple's new music service is a valiant effort to catch up in the emerging

business of offering unlimited music on demand for a monthly price. It does so while acknowledging the legacy of iTunes, the world's most popular store for buying individual songs to own.

But Apple Music feels like an attempt to take on every competitive app from Pandora to Spotify to YouTube and advance the idea of online radio at the same time.

As a result, Apple Music feels crowded with features and buttons—unusual for a company known for promoting simplicity and ease of use. And as much as Apple Music tries to suit my personal tastes, I find many of its recommendations off-base.

Apple Music is several services in one.

— The core is an on-demand [music](#) streaming service like Spotify with a similar price tag—\$10 a month. You can pick any of millions of songs to play over Wi-Fi or your cellular connection. You don't own the songs, though. Although you can download them for offline playback, access disappears once you stop paying (of course, after the generous 90-day trial period ends). It's like renting rather than owning music.

— Apple Music is also a giant song recommendation machine. A "For You" section offers playlists created by staff acquired when Apple bought Beats last year for \$3 billion. It's meant to reflect your iTunes purchases and preferences you make using animated bouncing bubbles, though I found the choices limiting. A "New" tab features new music, videos and yet more playlists.

— Then there's the "Radio" tab, which debuts not only Apple's new 24/7 online radio station, Beats1, but contains several stations specializing in various genres. These are like playlists, but you can't see all the songs that are up next.

— A "Connect" channel offers a running stream of photos, videos and other content provided by artists for fans. The area feels empty, probably because not many musicians have participated yet.

Amid all this, two innovations stand out:

— One is Beats1. The concept of a radio station taken online and delivered to mobile devices in 100 countries around the world is refreshingly simple. Hosted by Zane Lowe in Los Angeles, Julie Adenuga in London and Ebro Darden in New York, Apple is presenting three tastemakers whom I'm just getting to know. They play music and conduct interviews. Live listening is fun, and I can switch when I want more control over listening.

— Siri, Apple's ever-evolving digital assistant, can now take voice commands and launch music immediately, even responding to relatively complex commands. Ask it to "Play the top songs from 1973," and you'll get that year's top 25, including "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree."

In fact, if Apple Music had only these two features, I'd feel satisfied.

Recommendations sound great, but they get overwhelming. Presented with dozens of options, the app turns back into a record store. I just want the app to say, "You like this? Then listen to this." Pandora does this well.

There's value to a playlist like "Bruce Springsteen: Deep Cuts," compiled of worthwhile Boss songs that somehow never get played on the radio. But the human compilers are presented as faceless entities like "Apple Music Rock." This feels impersonal and, to me, gets in the way of connecting with the artists.

Apple Music launched June 30 on iPhones and iPads as part of the free iOS 8.4 update. It ships with the new iPod Touch released Wednesday, though the previous model can get the update. A new Music app replaces Apple's online radio service, iTunes Radio. Apple Music is on Mac and Windows computers through the iTunes app. An Android version and integration with Sonos wireless speakers are coming this year.

The service benefits from being featured prominently on Apple's mobile devices, but I'm not sure that will be enough for people to switch from another service. If you've already spent time creating playlists on Spotify, for instance, you're not going to want to start over on Apple Music.

Apple has a better chance at luring people new to music streaming, especially those who regularly buy songs on iTunes.

Apple Music is now the default organizer of all tunes people have saved to iPhones. When people venture away from their personal purchases in "My Music" and explore playlists and other offerings, they might save some songs to personal libraries, where subscription-only music is commingled with purchased downloads. Keeping up with the subscription could be worth it to keep what's in one's personal library intact.

Apple Music is mainly a deal for people who spend more than \$120 on music annually, which is about double the average. However, there are also plenty of things Apple Music offers for free such as Beats1, genre-based radio stations and the ability to follow artists on Connect.

It's no doubt difficult to encapsulate the world of music in a product that aims to mold itself to millions of different tastes. But we've come to rely on Apple to address these very vexing problems. Usually it does so in a way that feels less cluttered.

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