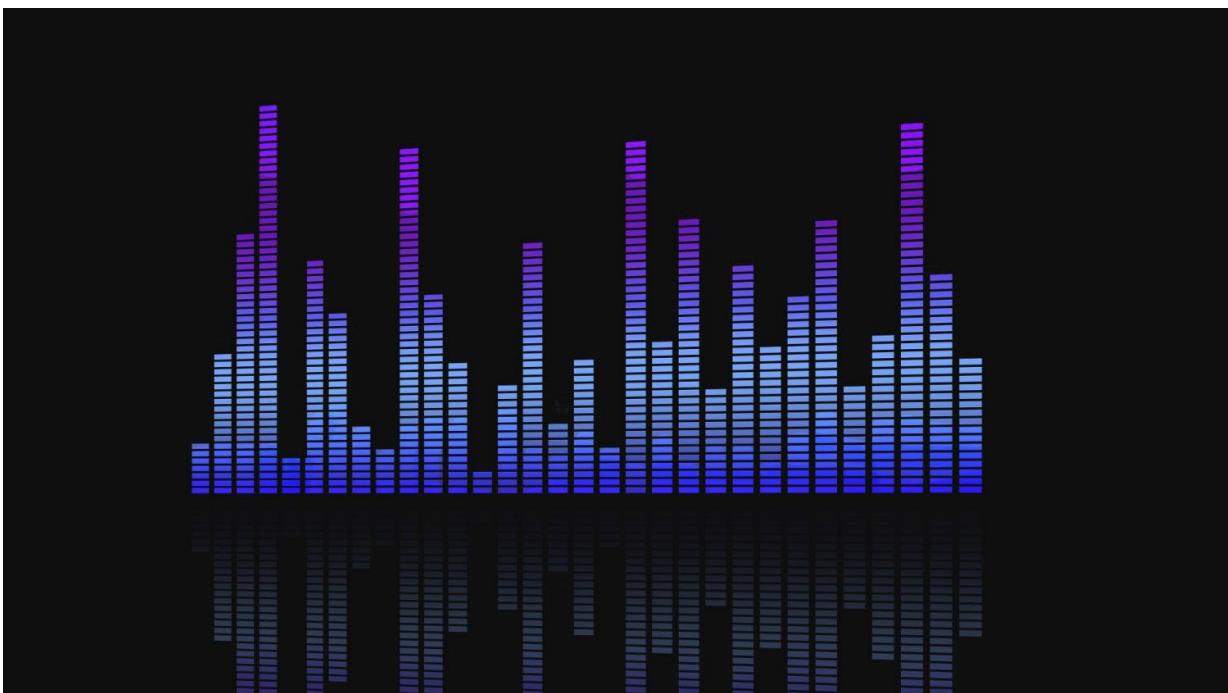


Spotify vs. Apple Music vs. YouTube Music: Which is best for your hard-earned cash?

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There are millions of songs available on demand for \$10 a month or so from Spotify, Apple Music and rivals, and they're all competing aggressively for your ears and dollars.

Which of the monthly streaming music services makes the best recommendations, is easiest to use and has the best prices?

After the newest kid on the block, YouTube Music Premium, debuted in a soft launch this week, we set to find out, comparing YouTube to the Big 3: No. 1 Spotify (75 million subscribers,) Apple Music (50 million) and Amazon, which won't be more specific other than to say it has "tens of millions" of users.

For several days, we have been searching for our favorites, looking for clues to discover stuff we didn't know about, creating playlists, looking for song recommendations and playing the music on the computer, phone and through Echo, Google Home, Apple HomePod and Sonos speakers.

Here's our bottom line:

Spotify

(Free, ad-supported version, or \$9.99 monthly. Students can get Spotify for \$4.99 a month, plus a free subscription to Hulu.)

Spotify is the No. 1 service for a reason. It has the best, cleanest interface, it's drop-dead simple to use, and it's friendlier than others in that it works with most everything—iPhones and Android phones, the Amazon Echo and Google Home speakers. It's the simplest of the services to create playlists, with just one, simple click.

Pro: Ease of use.

Con: The radio stations and auto-generated playlists are too generic and bland for my tastes.

Apple Music

(90-day free trial, then \$9.99 monthly.)

Apple Music is born from the iTunes Music library that always had an

excellent editorial team pushing new music downloads and artist collections. The same attention to editorial curation pays off in spades for Apple Music, which has the best recommendation tools of any of the services.

Instead of the old, if you like Lionel Richie, then you like his band the Commodores, which recorded for Motown, thus, you like Michael Jackson and Diana Ross. In the school of computerized music matching, Apple does it better.

It follows your playing history, which they all do, with recommendations. Today, it knows I like jazz guitar, so I was offered up songs by Pat Metheny and George Benson, two of my favorites. A bonus: Extra editorial, such as a section of "influences" by classic rocker Steve Winwood, brought a playlist that included Ray Charles and Mose Allison that had me entranced.

Pro: Best recommendations.

Con: Designed to work best with Apple devices, for the most part, meaning you can't check out Music on the Echo or Google Home speakers. Sonos speakers do work with Music, but not with Siri voice commands, like on Apple's HomePod.

Amazon Music

(Amazon Prime Music offers 2 million songs for on-demand listening as part of the \$119 yearly membership of the Prime service, for expedited shipping and online entertainment. The Unlimited offering adds "tens of millions" of songs for \$7.99 monthly or \$79 yearly, in addition to your Prime fee. If you prefer to just listen on Echo speakers, the cost is \$3.99 monthly.)

Amazon's music offers the best pricing deals of any of the services—if

you're already a Prime member. Plus, it works seamlessly with Echo speakers and the Sonos One speaker for on-command listening with Alexa. It has basically the same songs as Spotify and Apple Music, thus, anything you want to listen to is probably here.

Pro: Lowest pricing, and the interaction with the Echo speakers can't be discounted. It plays everything from a song you like to a song you want to hear, but can't remember the name astoundingly well.

Con: Amazon's recommendation engine is not very effective, which is surprising since Amazon is so good at offering you ideas to buy products. I picked a few songs to play by Frank Sinatra, and with that, Amazon decided that I only wanted to listen to primarily big band music of the 1940s. I like my big band, but other genres too!

YouTube Music + Premium

(Free, ad-supported version, or ad-free for \$9.99 monthly. Perks: with Premium you get to listen to songs in the background on your smartphone—while reading email and the like—but if you want to listen to clips from the main YouTube app in the background, too, that's an extra \$2 monthly.)

The world's largest and most popular video site also happens to have the best selection of music, hands down. Beyond the latest hits and complete albums of every artist you can imagine, YouTube also has TV dates (everything from Elvis Presley's first appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show to the latest pop star on the Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon) live performances, international cuts and artist-uploaded tracks. The selling point for the new YouTube Music is that it will make better recommendations because it has been following your YouTube viewing history and Google searches.

Pro: The music selection can't be beat.

Con: The extra charge for background listening is unfair to YouTube fans, and the recommendations aren't smarter than the others—not yet. The auto-generated mixtape with "endless" music on the home page offers a computerized playlist of what an algorithm thinks you want to hear. Some are right, many are not. (Pro tip: try searching instead for a specific song and letting YouTube autoplay from there, where it's more attuned to your likes.) The service just launched this week—hopefully the algorithm will improve as we use YouTube Music more.

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