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ELECTRONIC JUNGLE

Making Your Digital Music Files Really Sing

Kevin Hunt

The Electronic Jungle

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The Music Streamer, a digital-to-analog converter that could fit in a butter dish, might be the most convincing argument yet to use a computer's music library for something other than an iPod's sugar daddy.

This \$89 device accesses digital music files via USB, bypassing the computer's flimsy sound card, then quickly transforms them into analog signals sent out the other end to an awaiting sound system.

It takes an external converter like the Music Streamer, or the \$99 Trends Audio UD-10.1 Lite from Hong Kong reviewed here last fall, to show how easy it is for a computer's sound card to turn Chris Martin into William Hung.

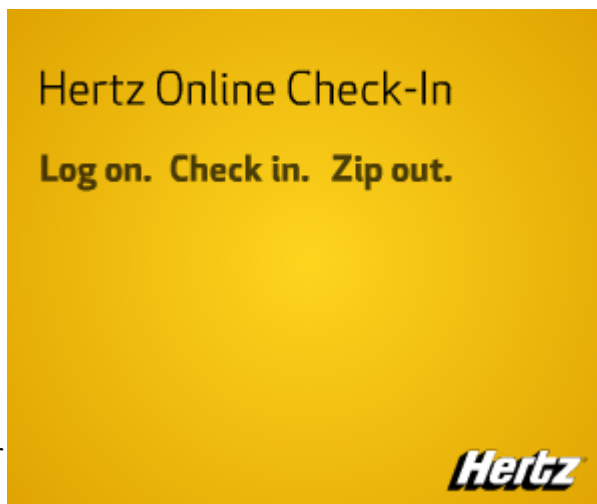
The Music Streamer is an unlikely collaboration of boutique audio manufacturers united as High Resolution Technologies in Los Angeles. Kevin Halverson, more accustomed to designing equipment like the \$7,300 Erato II DVD player or the \$4,500 Model Two Hundred amplifier for Muse Electronics (www.museelectronics.com), is the Music Streamer's creator.

"It is my hope," says Halverson, "that these products will sell to those who have an interest in music first and may or may not be interested in conventional high-end hi-fi products."

Halverson's partner, Michael Hobson of Classic Records (www.classicrecs.com), makes highly polished reissue LPs like Norah Jones' "Little Willies" or Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman" on 200-gram vinyl slabs.

The Music Streamer only hints at that type of sound, yet still invigorates music downloads and even Internet radio when played through a sound system. It's recognized immediately by a PC (it's Mac-compatible, too), and requires only a USB cable at one end and a pair of standard RCA interconnects at the other.

The Music Streamer has been compared to \$2,000-plus high-end converters, but it shaves off too



much in the highest frequencies to qualify. It's good, but not that good.

That trait, however, doesn't matter when the Music Streamer matches up with iTunes downloads and Internet radio. These digital files and digital streams don't have anything up top to shave off. If anything, the Music Streamer romanticizes the tunes. The lush, non-fatiguing results are extremely easy on the ears.

The Music Streamer's limits are more noticeable with CD-quality music files. For the purist, Halverson produced the \$250 Music Streamer+, a bulkier device that uses a better converter chip for more extended highs.

Information: www.highresolutiontechnologies.com.

Playing Loose With HDMI

The HDMI cable, like the excitable gamer, sometimes can't sit still. Of all the cables thrust into audio, video and computing equipment, the HDMI has the least staying power. Too much wriggling and eventually the HDMI connector or your gaming console's HDMI port will go bad.

If your PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 or even your DVD player gets jostled routinely, it might be time to clamp down with a PPC HDMI Locking Cable (\$39 for a 3-footer). PPC says its push-button latch exerts a hold three times stronger than a standard HDMI cable.

The cable did, in fact, hold stronger in a trial session, but it still broke free from its connection with modest force. This will help the rowdy gamer or movie fan, but the long-term answer might be an industry that designs a better HDMI port.

Information: www.connect2ppc.com.

Woodstock Turns Blu

If the extraordinary "Neil Young: Archives, Vol. 1 (1963-1972)" took the Blu-ray format to its technological extreme, the new "Woodstock: 3 Days of Peace and Music Director's Cut" (\$70) shows Blu-ray is only as good as the original material.

The 40-year-old "Woodstock" shows its age with soft, sometimes grainy video, and audio that, unlike Young's high-resolution mix, is CD quality. It's spotty, too: When Jimi Hendrix performs, Jerry Velez pounds away, silently, at the congas.

Even so, this is still the best-yet reproduction, audio and video, of the three-day Woodstock Music and Art Fair, supplemented with almost four hours of material on a second disc.

Digital TV Reception

For digital-transition antenna users: Where a weak analog signal produced a snowy, yet watchable, picture, a digital signal is all or nothing. After an interruption in the data stream, a digital picture

might become pixelated, then disappear.

Tip: Start with a basic rabbit-ears antenna, but make sure it includes a UHF dipole antenna — a "bow tie" or loop. Most digital programming resides in UHF territory, channels 14 through 51.

For best reception, consult antennaweb.org. You'll find the distance from local stations' transmitters and what type of antenna you'll need.

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