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By Dave Mathews, YOUNG MONEY Technology Editor

In the late 1990s, the first software package to automate ripping music tracks from a CD to your computer was Music Match Jukebox. Sharing that music with friends was difficult as the file sizes were too large for emailing and most Internet access was through dial-up modems. Ripping went mainstream in 2001 when Apple released iTunes for the Mac and ultimately for the PC in 2002. By this time, the race was on to share tracks with friends without dragging your hard drive or computer over to their houses.

Internet file sharing took off though the search and file transfer program Napster. This software, written by Shawn Fanning while a student at Northeastern University in Boston, employed a new technique called peer-to-peer, meaning shared files are stored on the computers of other users of the software and network, not centralized sites. This free Windows program quickly caused a stir in the industry as it allowed you to search for and share any file, but ripped and pirated music was the typical target.

With nearly 15 million users during a peak in February 2001, the network was shut down by several lawsuits in July 2001. Since then, many programs have surfaced with similar sharing and searching features but most have become outlets for infecting your computer with spyware. Some programs have been infiltrated by detectives hired by the Recording Industry Association of America or RIAA who then petition the Internet Service Providers (ISP) to release the names of the customers who are using the file-sharing software.

If your ISP sells you out to the RIAA, you could be fined up to \$3,000. While Napster tried to "go legit," the music industry would not sign licenses after being burned by the brand. Digital downloads were first legal when Apple began selling 99-cent tracks through the iTunes Music store in 2003 for PCs and their

immensely popular iPod portable media players. These tracks originally had Digital Rights Management, or DRM to keep them locked to one of five computers or any number of iPods.

Setting the Music Free

In 2007, Steve Jobs, Apple's CEO, started a trend with an open letter to the record labels saying it would sell unlocked music. But these tracks are embedded with data linking them back to your iTunes account, so know that sharing them will reveal your identity. Selling music without DRM is now gaining momentum with other labels. This is important as buying tracks which do not have a proprietary form of protection or the ability to download them in the MP3 format means that you can play them back on many different portable audio players, home devices like the Xbox360 or PS3 and even mobile phones.

But old habits are hard to break, especially file sharing, so what is a student to do? Enter Ruckus Network (www.ruckus.com). The online music download service reaches students at more than 1,000 higher learning institutions, and nearly 200 of those campuses have installed their servers for faster downloads of unlimited tracks from popular artists. Ruckus is able to offer this service through ad-supported music. But it is not the only one to do so.

New entry RCRD LBL (www.RCRDLBL.com), created by Engadget's and Gizmodo's founding editor Peter Rojas, is an ad-supported blog with links to download tracks from its featured artists. But unlike the Windows DRM tracks on Ruckus, who has more than 3.2 million popular tracks, RCRD LBL typically carries unsigned or new artists but offers high-quality unlocked music in MP3 and iPod AAC format, which adds features such as album art. While anyone can download these new tracks Ruckus requires you to login with an .edu email address to verify that you are indeed a current student. When logged in, the ads get a bit "in your face" so keep an eye out for the skip button and do not fill out a form that you didn't intend to!

You can play the Ruckus music on your PC or any "Plays For Sure" (now called "Certified for Windows Vista" to make things confusing) branded MP3 player, including models from iRiver, SanDisk Sansa, and the like. No iPod or Zune portable playback is supported, unfortunately. They are getting into the video market as well, offering independent films, cult classics and even a few Hollywood blockbusters.

Stereo Speakers

With all of these tracks, you will want better sound than what comes from the speakers included with your PC. Enter audioengine (www.audioengineusa.com) with its amplified speakers that can be plugged into your computer or portable music player directly and will not only be much louder, but offer better bass and treble than typical speakers. Featuring slick black or optional white ported cabinets with exposed carbon fiber Kevlar woofers, the low end bass sounds great. For the highs, silk tweeters carry these frequencies which seem to sparkle in your ears.

The base Audioengine 2 comes in a beautiful glossy small package that is good for desktops while the matted finish Audioengine 5 includes a subwoofer output, two audio inputs and a USB charging port for your iPod or other USB-powered device. It even has a standard AC plug on the back so you can use a wireless audio receiver such as Apple's Airport Express to send music from iTunes directly into the speaker.

Both models get loud, but the bass response on the 5 is amazing. Best of all, the Audioengine speakers have

a three-year warranty for peace of mind that you will be rockin' for years to come. For the environmentally sound types among us who are into power saving instead of burning, these speakers automatically go into sleep mode after a period of time.

So what are you waiting for? Head to Ruckus and RCRD LBL to download some new tunes then see if your speakers need a new Audioengine!

"Gadget Guy" Dave Mathews loves music and has used every MP3 player from the first Rio to the current wireless satellite radio receivers. More gadget reviews and video can be found at www.davemathews.com.

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