

do the mini-disc

Is it time to trade in your taping gear for a minidisc setup?

By Aeve Baldwin and Tyson Schuetz

WHEREFORE ART THOU, MINIDISC?

Take a walk through any electronics store in, say, Tokyo and you can't go a meter without seeing some type of MiniDisc gizmo: recorders, players, headphones, CD/MD/cassette stereos... Japan has wholeheartedly embraced the MiniDisc revolution. Its advantage over the CD, with which it shares similar (some say superior) sound quality, is its size (about 1/4 that of the CD) and its shock-resistant memory, making it the perfect choice for joggers and others on the move. Beam yourself to any similarly situated electronics store in, say, New York, and the MD options start to dry up—or bewilder. The US has not quite yet embraced the MD and the best resources today are to be found, not surprisingly, on the web (see Web Resources).

TO MD, OR NOT TO MD...

Part of this is marketing—MDs were originally pushed by Sony (its originator, circa 1992) as a replacement for CDs. The utter failure of this approach (and the savvy to know that it was still onto something) wised Sony up quickly, and it repositioned MDs as complements to CDs and cassette tapes. Compared to tapes there's no, well, comparison: the sound quality of an MD is infinitely better; there's less peripheral noise and, being digital, users can not only interface their MD systems with different components, recordings can also be easily edited. Don't want a track? Delete. Want to get rid of the dead space at the beginning of your live show recording? Delete again. Move a track? No problem.

When compared with DATs, the picture becomes a little fuzzier. MD quality is not as high, though the price tag (you can get started for around \$200 as opposed to the \$600-\$700 average cost of DAT startup) is much smaller and with DAT being a tape-based medium, there's still the inconvenience of fast forward, rewind and, eventually, tapes wear out.

An early criticism of MDs—that the discs only have 80 minutes of recording time—is no longer relevant as newer models have four different recording modes: mono, regular and two different MDLP settings that, like VCRs, allow users to record up to 160 minutes (LP2) or 320 minutes (LP4) with an 80-minute disk, in essence letting recorders "stretch" an 80-minute disk (with slight deterioration in sound quality rising with the higher settings).

A final MD attribute is its durability. While it's improbable that anyone has adequately tested Sony's assertion that a MiniDisc may be recorded "a million times," Bob

Crawford, a musician and MiniDisc user as well as an employee of Minidisco.com, an online MD resource, reports that they "have never experienced, or had a customer with the experience, of wearing out a disc."



Sony MZR700DPC

MODEL BEHAVIOR

Let's say you've decided to take the MiniDisc plunge. Your next dilemma is which model to purchase and what additional equipment will you need?

Sony is the unquestionable market leader, but Sharp, Kenwood, Aiwa and Panasonic also make MiniDiscs. In an admittedly less-than-scientific-sound demo, our team of testers used only Sony models, though Jim Crawford, also of Minidisco.com, says they "encourage people who do live recordings to get a Sharp over a Sony model as Sharp is better designed to manually adjust recording levels during live recording."

We experimented with a recent Japanese model, the MZ-N1; the top-of-the-line US model, the MZR900DPC; and the one US model featuring a radio, the MZG750DPC.

We discovered that the models have only slight differences and the quality of live recordings are most affected by the type of microphone you use. The quality of your

enjoyment of your MD will be most affected by its ease of use; look for a model that's "friendliest." Will you be using it predominantly to record live shows, or to replay recorded music? Factor in your needs.

If you want an MD with a radio then the MZG750DPC is the only one with this option. The MZR900DPC offers the advantage of digital text dubbing, a backlit remote for viewing adjustments while recording live shows, a slimmer size, and an additional external battery pack. The Japanese model MZ-N1

is by far the most sophisticated, allowing users to download songs from a PC at 32 times real speed and adjust recording levels on the fly. It has countless other options but be forewarned: this model takes a little work and is not immediately user-friendly; you have to read the instructions, which are in English as well as Japanese. Sharp's latest model (not tested), the MDMT877, also allows manual recording level adjustments on the fly.

TALK THIS WAY

All of the above models come complete with most of the items you need to get going, including the very necessary PC bundle to digitally download songs, headphones and a remote. They are also

these are not advised for night-time use unless you use prescription glasses or are Corey Haim.

PERMANENT RECORD

What does the future hold for MiniDiscs? Will they suffer the same ignominious fate as their predecessors, the 8-track? Will its sole use be to keep your door propped open two years from now? Highly unlikely, because the MiniDisc's biggest weakness is also its greatest strength: as a stroll through your local record store will make readily apparent, there is a very limited selection of prerecorded MiniDisc music. The MD does not require that you discard your CD collection, but complements it with a high quality and easily manipulative format able



Sony MZR900DPC

designed to be constantly adaptable. The one crucial extra that does not come standard is a microphone.

There are many options but one of the most standard is the Sony T-Mic, a single-point stereo microphone that plugs directly into the MD player, so there are no cords to deal with. If you need to record under more stealth circumstances, the Sound Professionals (SPTFB2) offer a binaural microphone that has two pieces that fit into your ears. The actual mics are unnoticeable, although people may question why you have wires dangling from your lobes. Another James Bond-like product from Sound Professionals is the modular eyeglass microphone (SPEMC1), which fits nicely on the outside of a pair of sunglasses, although

to record any type of sound, analog or digital, be it live shows, CDs or mp3s. Bob Crawford reports from his recent attendance at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show that new MD products were much in evidence, meaning that the industry itself is "in it for the long haul" and MDs won't soon become obsolete.

Its versatility has already shown that it could make the first leap—keeping pace with mp3 players—and there is no reason to assume that it will not still be here in the future—perhaps to record the triumphant return of the 8-track. ■



WEB RESOURCES

For now, your best MiniDisc resources are online. Not only is the range of equipment much greater, but so is service; many employees in the large electronic stores are simply not yet equipped with the expertise, or motivation, to provide much help when it comes to MDs. We found the following three helpful:

- www.minidisco.com
- www.minidisc.org
(Mini Disc Community Portal)
- www.minidisc.com
(Mini Disc T-Station)

NEXT ISSUE: The tapers strike back! What technology do tapers swear by in the 21st century?

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