

Nomad Jukebox

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We Test Drive the Creative Nomad Jukebox

By Richard Menta- 11/21/00

The Creative Nomad Jukebox establishes several mini milestones in the MP3 arena and confirms immediate market credibility to one major milestone. That milestone was the concept of the jukebox digital music portable itself.

Invented by another manufacturer - Remote Solution's Personal Jukebox - the concept jumped memory storage several gigabytes over the then standard 32MB/64MB configurations by using a laptop drive. Creative was the second company to employ this concept in a player and the result was an unqualified success. They took this portable and ran with all the way to being the number one selling digital music portable on Amazon, an impressive feat for an item that originally listed for \$500.



Creative's NOMAD Jukebox can be ordered from Amazon. Available in [Blue](#) and [Silver](#).

Both the performances of the Nomad Jukebox and Creative's marketing savvy earned this success.

The Hardware

The Nomad Jukebox resembles a CD portable in size and shape making it larger than most of the MP3 portables on the market. We actually compared it with a portable CD player and found the Nomad Jukebox to be heavier. Size and weight is the major tradeoff for jukebox players, but the advantages of capacity and cost per MB of storage weigh very strongly in their favor.

The average person can hold close to their entire CD collection on these players. Relatively speaking, you can't get much more portable than that. We decided to live with our player on the go, regularly taking it with us during our commute to the office in NY City.

The Nomad Jukebox comes with a 6GB hard drive, good for 140 to 150 CD's. There is an ample 8MB memory buffer which eliminates the chance that the music will skip. Despite our attempts to make it skip, the music never wavered.

The Nomad Jukebox plays both MP3 and Wav files out of the box and can be upgraded to read future formats like ATRAC3 or WMA. Songs are uploaded to the unit via a USB connection. Best of all, both Mac and PC users can load to the player with two exceptions.

Right now, Windows NT and Windows 95 users cannot run PlayCenter 2.0, the player's download software. This is a trend that is running in all of the new players coming out. Windows NT 4.0 and 95 don't offer the best support for USB and many of the manufacturers are choosing to not support them with Windows 2000 (really NT 5.0) now out.

The problem is most corporations have not made the migration to Windows 2000 from NT, nor will they make the move soon. Older Pentium machines, in particular, will require a hard drive upgrade to handle the extra 600MB of space Windows 2000 requires, which means they may never see the upgrade. Considering how many people use NT at the office to download via T1 rather than their modem at home, we are disappointed by this trend even though we understand the reasoning for it.

Power and Connections

The Nomad Jukebox runs on four rechargeable nickel metal hydride (NiMH) batteries. While they provide ample power - about four hours of continuous use - the lithium batteries found in the Remote Solution's Personal Jukebox are

<http://www.mp3newswire.net/stories/2000/nomadreview.html>[5/29/2016 11:23:55 AM]

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better.

We tried the player with Duracel Ultras to see how regular batteries worked in the player. The unit crushed them in only 45 minutes of use.

One of the best features this player introduces is a line in connection that allows you to record a song directly from cassette or vinyl album and save it in the WAV format. WAV files are slightly superior to MP3 files, but they take up to 10 times more memory. Still, with 6GB's that should not be much of an issue and it allows users to tap into their music collection beyond CD's. Overall, a great option.

More Options

Another terrific feature is the search option. With the ability to store thousands of songs, this feature saves a lot of time scrolling up and down lists. To search, first hit the Library button and select whether you want albums or artists. When you hit the search button you can type in the name letter by letter. As each letter is entered, the name of the nearest album or artist is displayed allowing you to find the song you want without having to type the name in its entirety.

Creative did a very good job of allowing the user to enter this information without a keyboard, a design move that deserves notice.

Creative's most unique option is its EAX sound capabilities. Think of it as an equalizer on steroids that can perform a number of interesting audio effects. We will go into more detail on it later.

The Nomad Jukebox has an infrared sensor for future options like a remote control and possibly for more robust features like file transfer. The sensor is dormant now, but look for future software upgrades on Creative's web site to signal its awakening.

Travel

As we said before, we took this unit into the city with us every day to get a feel for what it's like traveling with this thing. As the fall months crept up on us, we found a good coat with big pockets is the best way to travel with the Nomad Jukebox as it carries the weight and breadth of the unit quite well. In warmer weather we found the player to be big and cumbersome despite the aid of some nice ergonomics in the way the player's body was shaped. A soft leather briefcase is a convenient way to carry the player in the late spring and summer months for those who use one. A laptop bag is another good option, especially on plane travel.

For the rest of us, the Nomad Jukebox will serve quite well attached to the stereo system until its time to drive. The player is easily carried into the car. We highly recommend that owners pick up an auto kit (not included) for about twenty dollars allowing you to tap into the cigarette lighter adapter for the units power needs.

Joggers need to look elsewhere for a portable player. The unit comes with a carrying case, but if you like to be on the run you will want something lighter. A 64MB player increased to 96 or 128MB's via additional flash memory will serve much better, though the added cards can easily add another \$100 to the price of the unit. That can bring fine players as the Diamonds Rio 500 and the Sensory Sciences Rave MP2200 close to the price of the Nomad Jukebox.

Getting Started - A

Loading the software and hooking up the USB connection was uneventful due in part to an excellent flash tutorial that comes on the CD. This tutorial is another terrific feature of the Nomad Jukebox, especially for those who are not the most technically adept. It walked us through all the features and controls of the player with clear graphics and a guiding voice track. It would greatly serve the makers of the i2Go - whose very good eGo player had poor instructions and convoluted key press sets - to copy this feature.

The Nomad's Play Center 2 software is one of the best ones we have come across, with an easy, intuitive interface and a built in MP3 player. Like the Personal Jukebox, the Nomad Jukebox can rip CD's directly into player, one of our

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favorite features.

Controls - A

The buttons were big and well separated to avoid accidentally hitting the wrong key. The player lets you navigate easily through your library of songs. The tracks are sorted by playlist, albums, artist and genre.

To improve the keystroke process, Creative added three keys called 'soft buttons' which are located just under the display screen. The buttons are soft because their functions change dependent on which menu screen is displayed. The functions are labeled on the screen itself just above each button. We found the soft button process to be simple to use and another innovative feature of the Nomad Jukebox.

One feature curiously missing was a scan feature within a song. This seems like too glaring an oversight to be missed by the design team, hinting at a technical issue inherent in laptop drive players that prevented its inclusion. Still, with 8MB of buffer memory, enough to hold two entire song tracks, what technical reason is there to omit such a handy feature in a feature laden device?

Because of the power demands of the drive, there was a significant lag in button action whenever the drive was in action. Scrolling through tracks, in particular, could be quite choppy during this time. This delay may drive type A personalities absolutely crazy, but then they are first ones to complain about the short memory in other portables so it's a wash.

To save battery power, the player automatically shuts down if it has been inactive for several minutes.

Display - A

Aided by a backlight, the display on the Nomad Jukebox is large and clear and took full advantage of the extra real estate the large size of the unit offered it. We can't ask for much more.

Sound - A

The sound, like with all of the players we have tested, was fine with one definite advantage. As we said before, Creative's EAX system is an equalizer on steroids. Below are the settings available through EAX:

- **Playback Speed:** The user can change the speed of the track without changing the pitch (which causes that chipmunk sound on the voice). With a range from 0.5x to 1.4x, this is an ideal option for DJ's who could use two Nomad Jukebox units with this option active to match the beats. That DJ's can bring their entire catalog without lugging all their CD's should make this the new tool of that trade.
- **Environments:** Less satisfying were the Environments, which emulate listening to the music in such venues as a cave, a high school auditorium, or an arena. While this may sound interesting, there was a significant volume drop that tended to muddle the music more than enhance it. Some of the effects were more distracting than entertaining. The most gimmicky of the settings.
- **Spatialization:** When listening through earphones, the spatialization feature emulates speaker placement to enhance the listening experience. The Narrow setting emulates two speakers directly in front of the user. The Wide setting emulates a speaker 90 degrees to the left and right of each ear. This effect, which is also called a 3D effect, is explained in technical detail in an article we ran last year called [MP3 and 3D Audio, Perfect Together](#).
- **Parametric Equalizer:** A three-channel equalizer, which we found quite handy. The user can also set the middle frequency from 200 to 4500 hertz giving the user plenty of control.

Conclusion

The Nomad Jukebox is not a milestone player because it is the first to hold more than a gigabyte of space, that honor goes to Remote Solution's Personal Jukebox.

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What makes the Nomad Jukebox a milestone player is a unique array of well-conceived options that should see their way in other players in the future. This includes the ability to convert music from album and cassette directly into the player, a well-designed search tool, an excellent flash tutorial, the introduction of 'soft buttons', and a robust sound equalizer system.

Like the Personal Jukebox, the Nomad Jukebox is not a perfect player. It's heavy and relatively power hungry. Lithium batteries would have been a better choice for it, and the button lag is quite noticeable at times.

But compromises are the norm for MP3 portables in this early stage of their commercial development and the pluses of the Nomad Jukebox far outweigh the minor inconveniences. Overall, jukebox players give the best bang per MB for the dollar despite their healthy price tag. The best news is the Nomad Jukebox not only out points the Personal Jukebox, but it costs less.

If you have a top-notch home stereo system the Nomad Jukebox makes a fine component, especially since you can record directly to the player without a computer. An auto kit will do the same for your car stereo system. In the end, the Nomad Jukebox joins the Sensory Science Rave MP2300 as the best players we ever tested and set a new benchmark for all evolving digital music portables.

Final Score: A+ (A Milestone Player)

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[We Test Drive the Rave Klik! Drive MP3 Portable \(Rave MP2300\)](#)

[Test Driving the Sensory Science Rave MP2200](#)

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