Macworld

MP3 Jukeboxes

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Back in the early 1980s, the advent of the portable cassette player made it possible to listen to music just about anywhere. Technology has come a long way since then, especially in regards to portable MP3 players. Whereas storage was once measured in megabytes and play time limited to minutes, today's MP3 jukeboxes can store gigabytes and play time can stretch for hours. *Macworld* took an in-depth look at two MP3 jukeboxes: Archos's Jukebox 6000 and Creative Technology's Nomad Jukebox.

Put Another Gig on the Jukebox, Baby

Both of these jukeboxes are stylish and compact, but the Jukebox 6000 is the smaller of the two. Its metallic and blue rectangular body will fit comfortably in most users' hands. The Nomad Jukebox, available in blue or silver, is about the same size and shape as a portable CD player but slightly heavier. Both jukeboxes come with protective padded carrying cases. The headphones included with each are dinky and potentially painful when the tiny speakers stick into your ears -- investing in a better pair is recommended. The Archos Jukebox 6000 and the Nomad Jukebox are both powered by four AA rechargeable batteries.

Although small by necessity, the interface on the Nomad Jukebox is straightforward and friendly, with a Novice setting for new users. You can view multiple songs, albums, and artists on the backlit LCD screen. In addition, the Nomad has a locking switch to prevent you from accidentally turning it on or off or inadvertently changing settings. The Jukebox 6000's backlit LCD shows only one file name at a time. It doesn't let you view multiple songs, artists, or albums and lacks a locking switch.

Setup takes just minutes. Both jukeboxes come with software to install on your Mac -- MusicMatch for the Archos and SoundJam for the Nomad. Plus, iTunes comes equipped with Nomad drivers. The Nomad's installation disc includes a virtual tour to teach new users how to navigate the device. Both the Nomad and the Jukebox 6000 have an internal 6GB hard drive and built-in software for playing music files. Each minute of CD-quality music in MP3 format requires about 1MB of available disk space. With 6GB, these jukeboxes will hold more than 100 hours' worth of music encoded at 128Kbps.

Listen Up

Sound quality on each of these jukeboxes depends on the bit rate at which MP3s are ripped. MP3s ripped at high rates sound great; those ripped at under 128Kbps sound tinny. In addition to MP3s, the Nomad Jukebox reads and records WMA and WAV files. It comes preprogrammed with several equalizer settings and lets you customize settings, and its mini jack audio-in port can record directly from audio sources. The Jukebox 6000 reads only MP3 files, but since it doubles as an external hard drive it can store any type of file -- from WAVs to PDFs. While both jukeboxes have the ability to repeat and shuffle tracks, use of these features frequently caused the Archos Jukebox 6000 to hang, stall out at the end of songs, or inexplicably shut off during testing.

A Matter of Organization

Once connected via USB to a Mac, the Archos appears on the desktop as an external drive. To transfer a library of MP3 files to the Jukebox 6000, just click on and drag your music folder to the Archos drive folder. Files transfer seamlessly, albeit slowly, while maintaining any hierarchical structure set up on your Mac. But the order in which MP3 files are transferred from your desktop to the Jukebox 6000 is the order in which they will remain on the device, until a file is deleted. There is no search feature, and if you import 1,000 or more songs into the same folder, only the first 999 will show up. Annoyingly, the Archos also imports hidden files the Mac OS uses to organize and sort file hierarchies during transfer: you'll find "resource.frk" and others among your MP3s. The Archos's lack of organization is nothing short of maddening.

The Nomad's organization system is great -- MP3 files can be organized and searched by artist, album, genre, song title, and playlist. It's easy to create new playlists and delete unwanted songs. For transferring files selectively, or based on playlists, the Nomad is tops. Just drag and drop specific genres, albums, artists, and/or playlists into the Nomad from either the iTunes or SoundJam window. Within iTunes this is especially simple: the Nomad shows up as a connected device rather than in a separate window. Since the Nomad relies on MP3 software -- either iTunes or SoundJam -- to transfer files, the MP3 program must run for the length of the transfer. While this may not be a big deal on a new G4 with 128MB of RAM, it's potentially problematic on a RevA iMac with 64MB of RAM.

Both jukeboxes connect to the Mac via an included USB cable; therefore, the transfer rate is low. If you plan to transfer thousands of MP3 files from your hard drive to your jukebox, as I did, be prepared for the process to take several hours. Although the Nomad imports files slightly faster than the Archos, it does not do so at an appreciably higher rate: in either case, transfer speed via USB is between 6MBps and 8MBps. Luckily, during transfer you can use other applications on your Mac. The Nomad Jukebox and Archos Jukebox 6000 would certainly benefit from a FireWire connection.

AT A GLANCE

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