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By Laila Alvarez
Sharing music you've written or podcasts you've recorded with millions of people all over the world is simply a matter of a few clicks of your computer mouse. There are so many free websites offering to host your images, videos and, of course, music that sharing content has never been easier. Simply by finding the hosting site that works best for you and uploading your MP3, your file will be a link on the Web in no time. Locate the MP3 song file on your computer. You may have a folder titled "My Music" in your "My Documents" folder, for example, that contains your MP3s. Find the MP3 file and remember the name of that file for easy uploading later on. Visit one of the many MP3 hosting sites. Check www.audiohostings.com for a list of different mp3 hosting sites. Some, such as Kiwi6, host only mp3s. Others, though, can host MP4s, WAV or other types of music files. Look through the sites to find the one that you trust the most. Kiwi6 and Filexoom are easy to understand and work well. Once you've found the MP3 hosting site you'd like to use, locate the "Upload Now" or "Browse" button on the website. Find the MP3 file on your computer to upload to the MP3 hosting website. Click "Upload" and wait for the file to upload onto the computer. You should see a progress bar to watch the upload in progress on most hosting sites. Get the link provided by the hosting site that will go directly to the song download page or a link that will automatically download the song. This link should be provided immediately upon upload completion on the hosting site. You are now free to post that link in message boards or on a personal website to share with others. Remember to follow any copyright guidelines the song may have attached to it. I plunk a recently purchased CD into my computer's CD tray. After I rip the songs into MP3 files, I put the CD in the closet, where it will likely spend the rest of its days.Sometime last year I realized that I was buying CDs mostly so that I could rip them into MP3s to play on my computer and my iPod. I connect my laptop or iPod to my stereo at home; I listen to MP3s in the office; I even use an FM transmitter attached to my iPod to broadcast the tracks through my car stereo.With the explosion of digital music download stores like iTunes Music Store and MSN Music, I wondered: Have CDs become useless intermediaries between me and my music? I decided to try a completely digital life to see if I missed the shiny plastic discs.Digital Download SitesThere's no shortage of places to buy digital music these days: It seems like a new one sprouts up everyday. Even Wal-Mart—a bastion of shopping—has joined the digital download fray. I tried out the top names to see if they could meet my needs.iTunes Music Store: Apple's digital music store provided the mold for the recent entries into the market. iTunes Music Store looks great and is a snap to use. Recent updates have added videos and community features like iMix, a way to publish your favorite playlists. Read more about iTunes Music Store in PC Magazine's review.MSN Music: Microsoft was a late entry into the digital music game, launching its site in the fall of 2004. From the start, the Redmond giant fixed its gaze on Apple. MSN Music is the only site to compete with iTunes Music Store's number of tracks: both have about a million available. MSN Music does have more jazz and classical music than iTunes Music Store, but in other areas it falls short – especially when it comes to creating a fun vibe like Apple has. You can find more details in PC Magazine's review of MSN Music.Real Music Store: Real offers a good alternative to the big guys. It has a clean interface that's easy to browse. It even shows you an entire artist's discography, even if you can't buy the album through the service. Its greatest advantage comes in sound quality – with tracks ripped at 192 kbps AAC format, its songs sound much better than Apple's or Microsoft's. Read PC Magazine's take on Real Music Store.Napster: Napster takes a different approach to digital music: You pay a monthly fee for unlimited streams and downloads that you can play as long as you keep your \$9.99 subscription paid. In the past you could only play those tracks on your PC, or pay 99 cents to buy them and you could burn them to CD. With its latest upgrade, you can transfer songs to a compatible portable player – meaning you could instantly build up a thousand song catalog (or more – why stop there?) for a \$14.95 monthly subscription. The possibilities are enticing. Read more about Napster in PC Magazine's review.Fight for Your RightsWith all those stores I had little problem finding the music I wanted to buy. But what I could do with the files I bought was much more limited. When you own a CD, you can make copies of it for your own use; rip it to digital format at any sound quality and burn it to a CD-R as many times as you want. With digital files, digital rights added to the file by the copyright owner determine what you can do with it.For example, with a track purchase from iTunes Music Store, you can play the file on five computers at the same time and burn a single playlist seven times. While I've yet to run into the burn limit, just knowing that I can't make as many copies as I want is annoying. And you can only listen to the files on Apple's iPod line of portable players. Most digital rights work in similar ways – restricting what portable you can download a file to, how many times you can burn a track and how many computers you can share it with.Microsoft recently released its Janus digital rights technology, which gives copyright holders some additional options to offer you. Among other things, the technology allows you to transfer songs to a portable player from subscription services like Napster even though you're only "renting" the rights to the tracks. Of course, you need a compatible portable player.The Ears Have ItIf you don't have a problem with digital rights, you have only one more hurdle to clear to leading a CD-free lifestyle: sound quality. The digital files offered by the big download stores, including AAC from Apple and WMA from MSN Music, use lossy compression.An uncompressed song from a CD would require about 10 MB of space per minute, making files unwieldy to download over the Internet. By using lossy compression, the files are shrunk to more manageable sizes by tossing out frequencies that most people have a harder time hearing. Learn more about lossy compression in ExtremeTech's Digital Audio Primer.Because the files you buy use lossy compression, they will never sound as good to discerning ears as the source CD does. But you might not care. And some stores like Real Music Store are offering higher bit-rate tracks to make it easier to eschew CDs.Smaller sites like DiscLogic now offer tracks encoded in lossless compression schemes like Free Lossless Audio Codec (FLAC). Formats like FLAC sound very close to the original CD – but the files sizes are large. And you won't yet find tracks find major-label artists in lossless formats. That's the tradeoff.Not Ready YetWhile I enjoy the portability and flexibility of digital music files, I'm not ready to swear off CDs yet. I miss the high fidelity of CD audio, especially when listening to jazz and classical through a top-notch stereo. Of the current contenders, iTunes Music Store has the edge because of selection and its compatibility with iPod portable players. But Real Music Store is worth a look – especially because of the better sound quality it offers. Until Apple offers all tracks on iTunes Music Store in a lossless format and releases a 100 GB iPod for me to store them on, I'll still have CDs collecting dust — except for when I need to remind myself how good they sound.Michael Gowan writes for various publications about music and technology, and often about both at the same time. latest ugandan gospel songs mp3 download

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