

The invasion of the iPod people

By Chuck Green

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The hills might be alive with the sound of music, but Scott Terpstra can hear his favorites simply by climbing into his car—and without a bunch of compact discs in tow.

That's because an MP3 player is riding shotgun on his car and many more. "I love it," said Terpstra, 26, a salesman and Naperville-area resident. "I have MP3 capabilities everywhere: my car, my house, even in my iPod walking from my car to my house. It's made my life easier and made listening to music more affordable because I can store so much more than I could on my CD. Instead of carrying a CD book and carrying 100 CDs around, I just carry an iPod."

Sean Young, owner of Sound Decision, a car stereo outfit in Montgomery, attributes that to the technology, which compresses music to a fraction of its bandwidth. A CD "normally takes up about 11 megs of memory to record one song," Young said. "With MP3, it just takes a percentage of that. With MP3, around eight to 10 albums can be crushed and burned onto a new CD" for more than 100 songs on one.

"A lot of the factory CD players in cars right now are doing MP3 format because it's so popular," Young said. "The regular, traditional CD players are going by the wayside."

There is no count of the number of models with MP3 capability, though General Motors, for one, has it on 20 models for 2007. The J.D. Power and Associates' 2006 U.S. Automotive Emerging Technologies Study says 55 percent of consumers are interested in having an audio system that can play additional formats such as MP3. That's up from about 12 percent in 2005.

Some 39 percent say they'd buy, for about \$100, an MP3 interface on their next vehicles, which would allow them to play their own tunes.

Interfaces, which will allow the motorist to play all of the various media they can bring into the car, are likely to supplant the auxiliary jacks for MP3 players that have been growing in popularity. "Additionally, we just introduced our new Personal Audio Link iPod," said Pete Barkey, a spokesman for GM's engineering department. "This dealer-installed accessory will be made available first on the HHR in October and will become available on all GM models by the end of the 2007 calendar year." Jim Breitling, 37, a Chicago area resident who listens to plenty of music while on freelance photography assignments, welcomes the chance to carry the music prefers but not a lot of CDs. "I drive from Chicago to places like Michigan or Iowa and end up in middle of nowhere. It's nice to have the music when I travel. No matter what mood I'm in, I can listen to whatever music I want. I have that kind of control."

It will be a while before CD players are no longer offered in cars, though some vehicle segments, based on buyer demographics, may



MP3 capability, including this iPod docking station in the Jeep Compass, is the next big thing in auto audio.

move away from them sooner, said GM's Barkey.

As for satellite radio, which was supposed to be the next big thing in automotive sound, both have their strong points, Barkey added. "GM is committed to XM Radio, and at the same time we are working to launch the 'infotainment' features that customers are asking for," he said.

And that's the benefit of MP3, says Stephen Witt, vice president of marketing for Alpine Electronics of America, an automotive consumer electronics supplier. "Consumers get to listen to their personalized music, organized the way they want, in great quantity with no real hassles. This creates a much better music experience and is driving a trend toward a renewed interest in music."

Breitling believes the MP3 experience is shared among those who are a little more savvy than satellite radio users. "They don't need the control or want to deal with loading their own songs. They just want to hear something that's going to sound clear everywhere. I don't know many people who have both MP3 and satellite."

And that's even with the somewhat diminished sound quality of MP3. "MP3 doesn't sound quite as good as a regular recording," Young said. "When it compresses it, it compresses it digitally so you lose a little sonic accuracy and the dynamics of a song."

Marty Deane, owner of Soundz Plus, a car stereo store in Warrenville, said it's no big deal. "The majority of people don't care because it's easier to manage. The average consumer probably would be hard pressed to find 10 people who would hear the difference between a CD and an MP3 version of a song."