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A hot topic in the hi-fi industry today is whether or not the Compact Disc medium has much of a future. Hard it may be to believe the fact, but the CD format has actually been around now for nearly 30 years, which is an unquestionably good run by any standards, given technology's rapid rate of progress. Indeed, I started using CD players (albeit rather reluctantly) some years prior to the arrival of my first Mac, and indeed well before mobile telephones became commonplace.

The last 30 years have seen all manner of changes, in both the music software itself and the means of delivering the music. In the UK at least, sales of downloaded digital music files via the internet (to computers, tablets and smartphones) actually overtook that of other means of music distribution during the first three months of 2012.

While I don't think such a trend necessarily applies to, or has much relevance to a hi-fi listening minority, anecdotal evidence does suggest that CD player sales are currently weak. And it's certainly also true that downloaded files no longer have to be a poor MP3-encoded relation of the full uncompressed 16-bit/44.1kHz resolution that is the CD medium.

So is the CD format on the way out? Frankly, I doubt it. I for one like a solid and physical piece of software, rather than something rather nebulous called a file, sitting in a computer or cloud, especially as said computer is constantly updating itself, and will probably need upgrading in a couple of years.

Computer audio in its various forms clearly represents a threat to hi-fi's traditional component approach, partly because of its potential to deliver 'hi-res' digital music files that represent a significant improvement over CD's 16-bit/44.1kHz, but probably more significantly for its extra convenience in rapidly accessing one's music. And as far as the public at large is concerned, I'm quite certain that convenience of music access (and relatively low cost) is of vastly greater importance than the possibility of superior quality.

I can't help recalling the era of the Compact Cassette, which offered 'go anywhere' convenience over the vinyl LP, especially for Walkman and in-car applications. Consumers loved it, but the music business regarded it with deep suspicion, coining and publicising the slogan: 'Home Taping is Killing Music'.

Music survived, thanks much more to the creativity of the musicians themselves than the greed of an increasingly profit-driven and accountant-led music biz. I might well have used a cassette deck to record friends' albums back in my impecunious 1970s student days, but it hasn't stopped me from subsequently accumulating an enormous quantity of paid-for music on vinyl and CD. The music biz has done very well out of me.

However, I must admit I've been struggling to find new material that I've wanted to buy and play in recent years. The music biz blames file-sharing for a 40% drop in world sales by value between 1999 and 2011, but I'm inclined to believe that a lack of creativity, the widespread use of dynamic compression, alongside a general ineptitude when it comes to spotting and fostering new talent, is equally significant.

Paul Messenger
Editor