

## **Personalized Radio**

### **You're in the Driver's Seat**

If you want to influence what gets played on traditional radio you have the option of calling in a song request to the disc jockey (DJ). Or, if the station is more technically savvy, you can send requests by fax, e-mail, or instant messenger. This, of course, presumes that the show is live and the DJ is available to review your request—which is often not the case. Most Internet radio stations are similar in this regard: your ability to influence the playlist is limited, and your main choice is whether to listen or not. The Internet is a two-way medium, however, and a number of services have emerged to exploit this fact. As a listener you get some control over the broadcast.

At its most basic, this control includes the ability to skip or pause songs that you are listening to. At its most sophisticated, personalized radio allows you to fine tune a broadcast based on your musical preferences. This can range from genre preferences (I like Classical but I don't like Rap) to artist and album preferences (I like David Bowie but not his latest album), and song preferences (I like the original version of *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*).

While personalized radio does not allow you to control the exact composition or sequence of your playlist—for this you need a true on-demand music service—it does help you control the content of your station. In many situations this is all you need—especially if your intent is to discover new music. Personalized radio gives you the means to follow a musical trail—using favored songs or artists as “scent.” At its best, it combines the serendipity of radio—a new discovery potentially around every corner—with the comfort of listening to a jukebox stuffed with your old favorites. Personalized radio can also be thought of as “near on-demand” radio, because listener selections show up in the playlists.

Suppose you hear a great song, from an artist you've never heard of before, and you want to hear more like it. You could go out and buy the album containing the song, but that costs a lot of money. What's more, the song might be an exception. Listening to the album might reveal that, for the most part, you don't like this artist's music. Personalized radio lets you economically find and sample “music like this”, either by that artist or by related artists. Rather than passively receiving what someone else decides is good for you, you are shaping

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the radio program and drawing added satisfaction from any happy discoveries that result.

The most common personalized radio services work by letting you type in the name of artists that interest you. The resulting music stream, or “station,” will deliver music by these and related artists. Other services work by having you rate music, while others rely on an examination of your personal music library or the play logs from your music player software. The more basic services rely on the up-front information that you provide (like a list of artists or a chosen song), while the more sophisticated services continually refine your station based on music rating or playback decisions. While personalized radio requires more effort than simply selecting a station and listening, the payoff is well worth it—especially for people who want more control over what they listen to. The process can be addictive!

### Major Personalized Radio Offerings

- **LAUNCHcast** - <http://radio.yahoo.com>  
LAUNCHcast lets you program your own station by rating songs, albums, artists, and genres of music. The result is a stream of songs which combine rated music (music that you know) with new music (music recommended based on your profile). Though it requires more work to use than other services, it gives the listener the most control and provides what is arguably the richest, most interactive personalized radio service available. A fee-based version of the service lets you create “Moods”—versions of your personal station which only play music from selected genres. LAUNCHcast is covered in more detail in chapter 6.
- **Musicmatch Radio** - <http://www.musicmatch.com>  
Musicmatch Radio lets you listen to stations based on artist, era (year or decade), and genre preferences. You also have the option of entering artist preferences and making your *Musicmatch Jukebox* play logs available to fuel Musicmatch’s “Music Discovery Engine,” which supplies music recommendations. A free, ad-supported version of the service is available, with 200 stations. Two fee-based radio options are also available: Premium Radio (\$2.95 per month, billed annually) and Platinum Radio (\$4.95 per month, billed annually). Both of these options allow full access to all personalization features. The Platinum Radio option lets you play contiguous blocks of music from chosen artists, a “near on-demand” feature that is unique to Musicmatch. Musicmatch’s offerings are profiled in more detail in Chapter 13. For Windows PC users only.

- **Accuradio** - <http://www accuradio.com>  
Accuradio, whose tagline is “Internet radio you can control,” provides access to 20 channels and over 220 sub-channels. Accuradio allows you to review a collection of artists or styles included in a channel, and de-select up to five that you’d like to exclude from the mix. For example, there is a Broadway Music channel that features music from currently running shows. The control panel lists all the shows being played and then allows you to de-select any you’d rather not hear played (e.g., the *Lion King*). This service is primarily for Windows PC users. A limited number of channels (four) are available to Macintosh users as MP3 streams. This service is free and ad-supported. Donations are also accepted.
- **Mercora** - <http://www.mercora.com>  
This rapidly growing peer-to-peer (P2P) music sharing service allows Windows users to legally share the music on their computers via “P2P radio” webcasts. A “similar music” button allows you to browse webcasts from users whose music libraries and preferences are similar to your own. While you listen to webcasts, the Mercora software advertises and streams music from your computer to other users, in effect turning you into a webcaster. A search feature lets you browse for webcasts that are currently playing a given artist. This makes the service good for sampling popular music (lesser known artists are hard to find). As radio, the service works less well, because the streams are less reliable (if someone shuts down their computer, their webcast ceases) and the quality of the playlists varies greatly. However, if you are interested in connecting with other music fans or in trying your hand at webcasting cost-free, this service is worth a look.
- **MyMoontaxi** - <http://my.moontaxi.ca>  
Targeted at jazz and classical music aficionados, MyMoontaxi lets you create up to three personal channels or playlists. Each playlist can be populated with songs identified using a search tool or by browsing playlists created by Moontaxi editors and other subscribers. Songs can be added from featured albums and best-of lists (e.g., Gramophone Top 100) posted by the editors. These playlists can be edited, ordered and shuffled. Individual songs can be played on-demand which is a notable feature. Pre-programmed stations from the Moontaxi radio service (covered in Chapter 4) are also available. Available to both Windows PC and Macintosh users, this service costs \$5.95 per month or \$49.95 per year. Free trials are available.

### It's About the Playlist

Whether we are playing an album, listening to the radio, or creating our own music mix, it's the playlist that shapes our experience: a group of songs in sequence. Traditionally, other people created the playlists we listened to—album creators, radio disc jockeys (DJs), and the occasional music geek who made mix tapes. Now, more of us are building our own—thanks to jukebox software that makes it easy. In the process, we create personal music experiences that transcend the album and the radio broadcast. The only problem: building playlists track-by-track takes time, time that many of us don't have. That's where personalized radio comes in. Here, we rely on software to create playlists according to our instructions. So instead of building the playlist track by track, we tell the service the kinds of music we want in the playlist, and let the software take care of the rest. The instructions can take the form "play music by these artists" or "play music from these genres" or "play music like this," where "this" could be a song, an artist, an album, or even another playlist. The composition of the resulting playlist or "station" reflects our instructions, but the sequence remains unknown, preserving the element of surprise that makes radio so much fun.

Leading jukebox software programs like *iTunes* and *Musicmatch Jukebox* let you build playlists in a similar manner, drawing on the tracks in your personal digital music library. The difference with personalized radio is that the tracks are drawn from a much bigger pool, and are more likely to include new music you haven't heard before. In the case of *Musicmatch Jukebox*, you can now do both things. Provided you have a subscription to Musicmatch On-Demand, you can use *Musicmatch Jukebox's* "AutoDJ" feature to build playlists using tracks from your personal music collection and the music in the Musicmatch On-Demand catalog (*Musicmatch Jukebox* version 10 or greater required).

- **Epitonic Radio** - <http://epitonic.com/radio.jsp>

With this promotional radio service, you configure a playlist by selecting which of 50 different genres of music you'd like to hear from and specifying how many tracks you want played (20, 50, 100, or 500). It's simple and effective. Available for Windows PC and Macintosh users. This service is free. Note: As of this writing, it appeared that the music hadn't been updated for a number of months.

- **Last.FM** - <http://www.lastfm.com>

This personalized radio service works in conjunction with your MP3 player and can be used by Macintosh, Linux and Windows users. A personal profile can be built in the following ways: rating music, adding it to your profile, or uploading your MP3 play logs using a plug-in called Audiocrobbler (available for numerous common MP3 players, but not Musicmatch). Your personal radio station won't work until you have at least 300 ratings. Until then, you will need to listen to other users stations. This is a relatively new service (the Web site still lists as a "Beta" implementation), and is a bit clunky compared to LAUNCHcast. At present, I would recommend this site to non-Windows users who don't have access to LAUNCHcast.

The on-demand services Rhapsody and Napster (discussed in Chapters 9 and 14) also provide personalized radio subscription options, both separately and as part of their higher priced on-demand subscriptions. In each case, these services let subscribers create custom stations based on their artist preferences.

For more information on online music services, go to [Giantpath.com](http://Giantpath.com).