

Mac the RIPPER

Outsourcing your CD-ripping pays off in time and near-perfect metadata.

Count us among the many who were skeptical about CD-ripping services when we first heard of them. The idea of paying a company to do something that iTunes already does for free seemed like an extravagant luxury, something best left for people with more money than common sense. The basic concept is this: Pack up your music CDs, ship them off, and a few days later, your CDs come back, along with professionally ripped, iTunes-ready digital versions—complete with album art, track



MUSICSHIFTER

www.musicshifter.com

Price: Starts at 69 cents per CD

MusicShifter offers the most flexible options in terms of price. Depending on your particular needs, in both format and shipping speed, MusicShifter can rip your discs for as little as \$.69 each. The Popular package includes single-format rips in MP3, AAC, or WMA formats at bit rates up to 320kbps. Lossless rips—Apple Lossless, WMA Lossless, or FLAC—are available in the Archive package, also starting at \$.69. If you'd like both a lossless copy—useful for ripping to another format in the future, without having to manually load discs—and a smaller file for your iPod, the Deluxe package (starting at \$.99/disc) gives you a lossless file in addition to a smaller “lossy” version. Rips were clean, with great metadata, although albums containing several different artists were not tagged with Album Artist to ensure proper iTunes sorting. MusicShifter offers a free 10-disc trial, so you can take the service for a spin before dropping the dough.



RIPSHARK

www.ripshark.com

Price: Starts at 99 cents per CD

Ripshark offers CD rips in MP3 or AAC format, in bit rates all the way up to 320kbps. Basic service is \$.99 per disc. Add on a lossless rip in FLAC or Apple Lossless for an additional \$.69. The resulting files—we chose 224kbps AAC files and Apple Lossless—were error-free, and Ripshark even ripped a few burned CDs we threw in as a test (RIAA lawyers, don't bother us, we own the originals). They did miss a few discs, however, including Brian Wilson's *Pet Sounds Live*—hardly obscure and released in 2002. Ripshark's shipping materials—a flimsy CD spindle inside a box with no padding, beyond a custom-sized cardboard insert—didn't inspire confidence. In fact, the spindle broke on its return trip to us, and we received a box with CDs rattling around loose inside the lid of the spindle, along with shards of plastic from the broken spindle itself. Ouch!

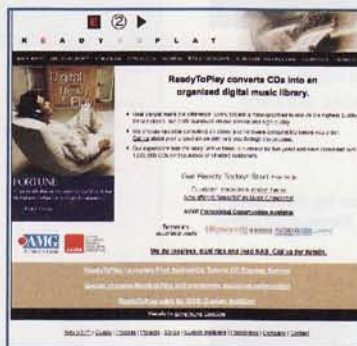


names, release dates, and in some cases composer, artist, and complete track-number data. If you're like we once were, you're asking yourself why would anyone in their right mind pay for something you can easily do yourself?

The answer is simple: convenience. We have a moderate collection—by music geek standards—of a few hundred CDs we've amassed over the last few decades of scouring the Bay Area's finest record stores and street-corner blanket sales. And yet, despite our best intentions, we only had about 20 percent of our CD collection ripped. The rest sat for years, unheard and buried in boxes under the bed—most of our listening has transitioned from records and CDs to digital files played via computers and iPods. We've been subsisting on a diet of digital downloads (see p54 for our take on three alternatives to the iTunes store) and the few discs

we managed to rip at home in small batches. As much as we would have loved to have our entire collection available in a click, endlessly feeding CDs into our Mac was simply too time-consuming—not to mention mind-numbing. And checking and correcting iTunes' notoriously janky album, artist, and track data is another project onto itself.

As a test, we sent out batches of discs out to four different companies specializing in digitizing CD collections. On the whole, we found the services to be convenient, quick, and simple. And despite some key differences between the levels of service offered, all of the resulting files have excellent sound quality. On convenience alone, we're sold. The ability to access any and all of your music with a few mouse clicks is an irresistible concept for all those who've ever wished they could finally fill out their iTunes library.—Ray Aquilera



READYTOPLAY

www.readytoplay.com

Price: Starts at \$1.30 per disc; contact for quote
ReadyToPlay was our hands-down favorite among the services we tested. The resulting files sounded great, but what gave ReadyToPlay the edge was their thorough metadata. The company checks album data across four different databases, and includes Album Artist and complete track number data ("Track 3 of 12" instead of simply "Track 3") for accurate sorting in iTunes. The thorough data is any obsessive collector's dream. Single-format rips start at \$1.30 each, but volume discounts are available, and a second format is available for an additional fee. Unlike the other services, which give exact pricing on their sites, RTP quotes prices upon request and is used to dealing with special requests from users with high-end audio systems. ReadyToPlay was the most expensive service we tried, but the incredibly detailed metadata and hands-on customer service were unmatched. Ultimately, you get what you pay for.

RIPTOPIA

www.riptopia.com

Price: Starts at 99 cents per CD
Like the other services we tested, Riptopia's metadata was great, and even included Album Artist info for proper sorting of multi-artist albums. 192kbps MP3s are \$.99 a pop, and the Premium service adds in a second 320kbps MP3, WMA Lossless, or FLAC version for \$1.69. One glaring problem marred our Riptopia experience. The Terms Of Service included watermarking the resulting files with "customer information." Worse, this detail wasn't revealed prior to placing an order—only after ordering and receiving (and pouring over) a page of fine-print were we aware that our files would be watermarked. A single, passing reference to the watermarking disappeared from the company's website during the time we were dealing with them. Repeated email and telephone requests to clarify exactly what information is included, and how a consumer might verify the information for themselves, went unanswered. The possibility of that mysterious "customer information" info falling into the wrong hands if our iPod is ever lost or stolen is a more than a little but nerve-wracking. A look at our files with a text editor revealed a copyright notice in the file headers, but we can't be sure that there isn't also some embedded private information in each that we didn't notice—and the company isn't talking.