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Palo Alto entrepreneur makes bundle ripping CDs for Barry Bonds, Elton John, wealthy Silicon Valley CEOs

By Richard Scheinin
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If you had tons of extra cash amid this crazy, tumbling economy, one of the things you'd certainly do with it is get your CDs, all 12,000 of them, ripped to your computer hard drive and cataloged so you would no longer have to mess with the plastic. Not a bad idea, right?

Turns out, Jeff Tedesco, an ex-computer sales executive, is merrily ripping away at his offices in a converted cannery off El Camino Real in Palo Alto. Tedesco, who calls his business ReadyToPlay, has become one of the top people in the ripping trade because of the deluxe way in which he rips the discs — and then "grooms" and organizes the information from thousands of CDs for picky collectors.

"I've done Barry Bonds, Dave Matthews, Elton John," he says. "Now am I going to tell you what's in their collections? Probably not. It's kind of like looking in their underwear drawer, to tell you the truth."

Some very familiar names of valley CEOs grace large cardboard boxes, filled with CDs — as well as movies on DVD, a growing part of the business — in Tedesco's offices. But lots of regular working stiffs are paying him to rip their collections, too, even at this moment of imperiled 401(k)s. Business has "bounced back" since it took a tumble when the market dropped last fall.

"I can't believe it — for a luxury service," Tedesco says. "My wife's theory is that people are out of work and they need projects. Music remains important "... and they're willing to spend money on it."

Since founding his business six years ago, Tedesco has ripped more than 1.5 million CDs. "Easily." He charges \$1.15 per CD, putting him in the upper echelon of rippers, price-wise. At that rate, ripping 1,000 discs costs about \$1,150 — and what does it get you? Quite a lot. Nationally, Tedesco has only a handful of competitors who groom collections as he does.

But before the specifics, some background.

Almost all of Tedesco's clients are over 35, children of LPs and CDs, lovers of album covers, memorizers of track sequences on favorite discs. Tedesco is in his element: He is a music fanatic serving other music fanatics.

One client owned 80-plus Clapton discs. Another had 200 by the band Yes (lots of bootlegs): "He used to play in a Yes cover band in the '80s," Tedesco explains.

"And I will tell you the No. 1 CD we rip: 'Abba Gold.' By a mile," he says.

When Tedesco founded ReadyToPlay in 2003, iPods were on the rise, and portability was the key concept for music downloaders. Listen in your car. Listen on the treadmill.

The wave that Tedesco has since ridden has taken downloadable music to what he and others call the "whole house." These days, people ask, "How do I take this music I want to rip and play beyond my iPod?"

The market is flooded with consumer devices —

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Sonos, Apple TV, Squeezebox and others — that replace CD players and receivers with units that play and read digital music, wirelessly displaying the titles and artist names in a given collection on a controller with a click-wheel. The listener chooses the music he or she wants to hear, often streaming separate listening "channels" to the back yard, the kitchen, the bathroom.

For 80 to 85 percent of his clients, Tedesco rips a collection onto a NAS (Network Attached Storage drive), which in turn delivers the digital music to the network via Sonos or some other device.

Often, Tedesco rips the collection twice — once in the non-compressed "Lossless" format, which preserves all the digital information and promises highest listening quality; then again using a compressed format for less pristine MP3 listening.

Frequently, he downloads the ripped collection onto multiple storage drives for a client's multiple houses. Or boats: "Look at this," Tedesco says, seated before a computer in his office. He has just Googled the name of a billionaire client and his 213-foot yacht: "That's the yacht that I put the music on!"

In many instances, Tedesco is brought into a job by a contracting firm specializing in the design and installation of home electronics systems. "Our clients are hypersensitive, very picky about the quality of their experience," says Rich Green, whose Palo Alto-based custom design firm, Rich Green, Ink, often works with Tedesco.

"And if they see errors in the metadata that comes from the ripping process, well, they're not going to like that. So what Jeff does is he grooms the data to the degree that our clients expect. They want to hear clear sound. They want to see pictures" — Tedesco also tracks down album art — "and they want to see

accurate data. Expectations are high. These are people whose houses are in the neighborhood of 10 million or more bucks."

The "metadata" is the mountain of organizing data related to a set of recordings: titles, artists, genres, subgenres, track names and numbers, art work and much more. If you download recordings from iTunes, you know that this information is not necessarily consistent when you spin through your catalog.

"Is the Grateful Dead a 'jam band' or a 'psychedelic rock' band?" Tedesco asks, pointing out the organization problem. "Is it 'Sheryl Crow' or 'Sheryl Crowe' with an 'e'? Is it 'J.S. Bach' or 'Bach' or 'Bach, J. S.'? Classical gets very hard.

"Getting this information right is important to everyone, to all my clients," Tedesco says, "whether I'm doing this for a guy who's got a yacht or for a guy who's just got his iPod. I just had a guy walk in who asked me to rip 20 CDs."

Tedesco reaches out to multiple databases — including AllMusicGuide — that are rich with information. He compares results for each recording, makes them uniform (no "e" on Sheryl Crow) and aims for a readable, well-organized digital catalog for each client's collection. The catalog is "multimodal," he says, allowing clients to search it in any number of ways.

He couldn't achieve that level of versatility without his robots, four of them, each about two feet high, each ripping through a stack of 800 discs as Tedesco looks on. The robots are made by Mediatechnics, a firm in Placerville, and Tedesco has written customized ripping software to mine all that online data — which he then grooms to "make it nice and clean."

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In another room, he calls up the catalog for the recently downloaded collection of a famous valley CEO who shall go nameless.

"This person has 1,075 albums," Tedesco says. "Lots of classical music: 609 discs. OK, look at how we break it down: chamber music, choral music, concertos, keyboard music. OK, now let's try rap. No, let's go further, 'hardcore rap.' Look at that: 21 of 'em."

Jay-Z, N.W.A., 50 Cent.

"Classical music and hardcore rap. Would you have thought? You've got a thousand CDs, and now you can slice 'em and dice 'em, see what you've got and grab it. Do you know how happy it makes people? Let me tell you."

Contact Richard Scheinin at rscheinin@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5069.

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