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Shuffle my world, baby - Music For the Masses.

<http://www.tekka.net/09/?shuffle>

Imagine Nick Hornby had written High Fidelity ten years later. To be sure, Rob Flemming, lovelorn record store-owner and unfailing creator of top ten lists and mix tapes would own an iPod. Hornby himself does, but then, he admits in an interview with German weekly DIE ZEIT, he's not much of a vinyl fetishist. For Flemming the connoisseur, the iPod's unique sales proposition would probably be size: at 60 GB, this pocketable slab of metal and plastic could make the bare essentials of his record collection available to him 24/7 and vengeful exes would lose their threat. But the killer-apps would be functions like the Party Jukebox or the On The Go Playlist.

In 1995, when High Fidelity was published, strips of ferrite in plastic cases that held 60 or 90 minutes of music had all but survived themselves. Hornby sang the praise of a cultural technique that was soon to be displaced by ubiquitous CD writers, and, eventually, the MP3 codec that allowed musical evangelists to put hundreds of songs on a single data carrier. Why take the pains to carefully choose those 60 minutes of David Sylvian that are exactly right for you when I can quickly burn you my entire collection? Yet, the concept of the mix tape has not ceased to inspire - yet more mix tapes as well as exhibitions (Museum of Communication in several German cities, e.g. Nürnberg) or online marketing tools (Mercedes-Benz Mixed Tape). In fact, the playlists created on hard- and software MP3 players are nothing but virtual mix tapes. And it is Apple's iPod, with tools like the Party Jukebox and the On The Go Playlist, that has become the generic term for "MP3 player" in general.

A couple of years into the iPod age, it now appears that ripping, tagging and rating large record collections is a goal to itself, that the perfect playlist is something to aspire to on the way to amore enjoyable commute - if not to a better understanding of music. But most of us are no Rob Flemmings. Nor the kind of semi-professional record-buyers Ed Ward describes in his two-part TEKKA-article. Most people probably buy a record or two every now and then but usually stick with a slowly rotating set of five or so favorites that they listen to again and again. People like me, who shuffle mode seems to have been invented for. The shuffle mode that pitches one hidden gems from the depths of one's song collection lets one break from the well-worn groove and explore sounds of one's past or the hitherto unlistened-to tunes that friends tend to press upon one. While I'm writing this, my iPod holds 2.346 songs - according to iTunes, music for 6.8 days. There so much I'd never even notice, that I'd speed past with the scroll-wheel, if it wasn't for shuffle-mode.

But 2.346 songs also translate into 2.345 temptations to push the skip-button and shuffle on to something more familiar. Pretty soon, one's back with a few dozen favorites and a lot of uncharted terrain on a gigabyte harddrive. Enter the iPod Shuffle, a USB stick with MP3 player that comes with 0.5 or 1 GB of memory and headphones. Where the bigger iPods are music archives, the Shuffle is a satchel. It holds whatever one puts into (or onto) it for the day, without too many sidepockets or fancy features. Load it, listen to it and reload it. Meticulous tagging might increase the chance that one synchs favorites more frequently than less-well liked songs, but even without tagging, the Shuffle promises an engaging musical experience. Key is the random synch function - let the Shuffle decide to soundtrack for the day. The limitation of the selection makes it more probable that one will actually listen to most of it instead of zapping through it. Very, very nice, concept-wise. But what else?

The Shuffle is not an instant design-winner. If you've ever lifted an adult Mac from its cardboard shrine, getting your first Shuffle will not really rock you. The cheerful apple green of the tight-fitting box already points the way: this is not a business machine with an aesthetic (and ergonomic) attitude, this is a piece of budget-priced consumer hardware. Of course, the Shuffle is already famous for having taken the necessary evil (small size, limited range of features owed to pricing deliberations) and elevated it to a design statement. But hands-on, this light, plasticky and sharp-edged stick far too obviously lacks the smooth heft of its larger siblings to be really sexy. Unlike the iPod, the Shuffle is a gadget one can take on (and take out on) the underground without incurring the risk of getting mugged by a fellow passenger. The question is: would one want to be seen with it in public, in the first place?

Look again. From the square green box emerges a tray of moulded plastic, sitting flush on a piece of cardboard, folded expertly to contain the software CD, some advertising, some stickers, the manual and warranty sheets and a credit card sized slip that explains the Shuffle's functions with the help of easy to understand graphics. The wrapper is exactly as high as its contents and the plastic is exactly so high that its sides cover the wrapper below it. There are three moulds in the plastic, holding the earphones, a custom lanyard with integrated Shuffle-cap and, of course, the player itself. There are no loose items in the box. The clear plastic tray is covered by a sheet of clear plastic which ends in a little tab for easy peeling. The Shuffle itself, finally, is protected by one of those see-through stickers familiar from mobile phone or iPod displays. On it are printed the words "Install software before connecting iPod". No big deal, but someone has done some thinking to make life easier for me.

From the very first, the Shuffle exudes an air of discrete quality, where other small players try to make up for small size and cheap materials by flaunting their features. The physical subtlety of the Shuffle, on the other hand, much as it may disappoint on the first encounter, will soon turn out to be no end of a pleasure. Just try to slip it into an already too full backpack or a pocket or put it in your gym-shorts. Or, even, allow it to slide from your gym-shorts on the leg press - it will sail, almost, to the ground without breaking. The lack of buttons, too, is a blessing. Most tiny USB-stick/MP3 player units go for featureitis and chrome, futuristic looks with lots of buttons, grooves, swellings and edges. Try finding the right buttons on one that's sunk in a trouser pocket. The oblong Shuffle is extremely well directed, there's no need to turn it to find "up" and "front" and its few functions like play, skip and volume are positioned quite intuitively on the click-wheel.

Of course, there are glitches. The Shuffle doesn't like it when there's no library in hearing range when it's connected to a computer with iTunes installed. It crashes when the library

gets pulled from under it while it synchs. And, woe of woes, Apple have designed it just so wide that it won't fit in the other USB slot of a Powerbook, when the first slot is occupied - e.g. by the external harddrive that often holds the type of music collections that'd occupy too much space on a business tool. But for this, there are always USB connectors. [Or the art deco Shuffle-port that Mark said he'd get sent to me but that hasn't reached me so far.] Nothing one could not handle, obviously.

The only real disadvantage I can think of is that the Shuffle is still too large and, therefore, too expensive, to be used as a mix-tape Ersatz. Like the sonnet or the bonsai, the mix-tape is a genre of self-restraint. 60 minutes are quite enough. If you cannot say it on 90 minutes, you will not be able to get it across on half a GIG. The next big thing will be the Shuffle mini - 60 or maybe 90 MEGs, no controls (you can get those on your earphones), a commercial button cell. And so cheap you can actually give them away. But Apple better move fast on the Mix-Shuffle. Düsseldorf, Germany based Mogoon company together with publishers X-Cell are already using MMC and SD cards to distribute records. Card readers are ubiquitous, even car stereoes and hifi sets have them. 128 MBs on MMC sell at EUR 14,90. Picture 60 MBs in a five-pack and the mix-MMC starts to sound affordable. Affordable, but what else ...

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