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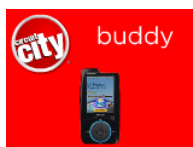

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*Ever wonder about the best way to get that all the digital music into your car? Wonder no more. Guest Editor Lionel Felix takes an in-depth look at some of the car audio options out there, from plug-and-play iPod adapters to built-in automobile hard drives.*

LIONEL FELIX -- With automakers asleep at the wheel, the aftermarket is taking an inside line. Car manufacturers are not yet caught up to "Internet Time", leaving digital music technology out of design plans. XM radio and DVD bundles are good baby steps but cars are a platform that has always demanded aftermarket exploitation. Aftermarket manufacturers are racing to sell some great and some not-so-great products to fill the void left by automakers, who are still having great difficulty getting out of their own way, unable to respond to the demands of customers.

BMW and Audi are the only manufacturers responding to the clamor from the washed masses. The unwashed, myself included, are still dying to get all of that (legally, wink wink) downloaded music and movies into our g-rides. Still, its not quite enough. We have a taste for WiFi, Bluetooth, navigation, DivX, GPRS systems that won't stink up the parking lot with stale technology in 2 years. Cars will need to be upgradeable and standards established in order to provide customers with new technologies for their cars' 100-200K mile lifecycle. As much as automakers long for days when AM/FM/Cassette was enough, times are changing, the market is changing and consumers are demanding more. As cool as it is to walk around the Villages with an iPod, looking hip and making sure not to get mugged, a large number of people drive to work, drive as a job and otherwise spend a crapload of time in cars. Cars without the benefit of the entire Ween discography in the trunk.

Until car manufacturers offer up an OS (Please let it not be Windows [*Don't get your hopes up - ed.*]) and a Firewire integrated automotive system, the aftermarket will continue to hack the wiring harness. The good news is, it's been blown pretty wide open, so get that Captain and Tennille record dubbed to MP3 and Private Benjamin compressed to DivX, because your car is ready.



A few automakers are offering **Phatnoise**, a hard drive-based music jukebox that mounts in your trunk, connecting to your stereo via wiring harness or FM antenna interconnect. Audi is first to market with that, although others are soon to follow. If you aren't bumping an Audi, though, it's time to get out the tools and tear into that dash.

Phatnoise and **Kenwood** offer up kits for most makes and models. Some can pipe ID3 tags and file names to the head units in some but not most cars. They offer tethered accessory displays which, through the magic of Velcro, secure to the dash.



The Phatnoise Music Keg, obviously named to appeal to those who prefer to purchase everything by the barrel, come in three configurations. A 10GB (tall boy), 20GB (pony keg), and a 60GB (frat size) seem to be offered (although different sites have contrary details). The unit is about the size of a CD changer and has a nifty USB 2.0 connector port that is used to connect the keg to a

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charger and has a tiny USB-EIS connector port that is used to connect the key to a computer. Using the Phatnoise software (PC only), music is downloaded to the box and can be used to play at your desk in a spiffy dock.



For the weekend dashboard thrasher, [PIE](#) and [PAC Audio](#) make adapters that add auxillary inputs to a large number of factory head units. The AUX inputs provides 2 RCA Line-In channels of audio from sources like an iPod, portable DVD player or console mounted record player. In addition, PAC Audio makes an adapter called an AUX POD which hooks an iPod directly to most stock wiring harnesses. The in-dash fondling is worth the effort as it only connects to the harness clip, switched 12V+ and ground. Difficulty lies in making sure you get the right adapter as there are many different head units for each make. Get the right one - for some crazy "electricity" reason, it matters.

Other harnesses include the much-hyped [ipodmybmwwithacrappyexpensiveadapter.com](#). BMW, bless their little hearts, offer up a multi-million dollar ad campaign to sell an iPod connector that lets you put your iPod in the glove box and shows your music as Track 1, Track 2, etc. Thank you very little.



Which is silly, because as it stands, the iPod, in all of its white and pastel mini glory is still the king of portable music. Belkin has gone hog wild making lots of white gadgets that let you take it everywhere and hook it to just about everything. The Belkin Auto Kit, a nice little jobbie, plugs right into the cigarette lighter, where from the 12v socket connects directly to the iPod dock connector and gives you a handy 1/8-inch output. They also offer FM and Cassette adapters but after dropping multiple Bens on the iPod, you might as well take it uptown and install a PIE or PAC-AUDIO AUX input. Cassette adapters are the orthodontic headgear of car audio (don't get me started on automakers *still* putting cassette players in cars).



For direct connection to the harness, ICELINK from Dension and AUX POD [pictured] from Pac Audio offer iPod dock connector direct to wiring harness connectors. I've not tried these guys out but if your car matches their listed applications, they offer a quick and easy way to get the job done. [Alpine](#) shows much love for the 'pod with their KCA-420i. The hookup goes from iPod to AI-NET and can be controlled just like a CD-changer but - get this - it shows the ID3 tags, unlike a certain Bavarian aftermarket solution. Crazy, right? I know! This is a very elegant solution for people who have Alpine head units or are considering an aftermarket stereo.

Bypassing the iPod directly, the folks at Alpine also offer up the relatively anemic HAD-5460 16GB 1DIN in-dash MP3 player with removable drive. The concept is good but execution misses the mark. 16GB is just too small for the \$850 price tag. Alpine makes outstanding car audio electronics, though, so we're expecting a massive 200+GB big brother lurking around the corner, although assuming the same price-to-GB ratio, it should cost about \$10,625.

Sure, the shiny shiny of a new Alpine or Phatnoise unit is nice but there are a small number of head units and trunk mounted drives that are kicking big-name butt. Some of these relative unknowns are more geared for the slashdot crowd who like dragging the oscilloscope out to the Corolla but for the non IEEE of us, there is a palatable solution. [Dension](#) offers up no less than 4 products with oodles of spinning disk space. They slice and dice the options enough to make even the most fickle of us happy. The trunk mounted remote-drive option even lets you stuff a 300+GB hard drive in it. With line levels out, built in 12V power supply, remote LCD display and upgradability, this could be the best way to get a massive collection into your car. It has optional FireWire and USB connections as well. At \$899 US the bang/buck ratio works out to be rather favorable.

Depending on the depth of your wallet and needs, getting MP3s into your car en-masse can go from a few hundred dollars to thousands. If you don't know what you want, start with a foundation you can build on by installing a basic AUX interface or a decent head

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unit that takes multiple inputs. From there adding an iPod or a computer is a matter of adding rather than replacing equipment.

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