

Sound a fanfare, free Net music

HOW I laughed this week when I heard about the successful outcome of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) lawsuit against Napster, a music file-sharing service on the Internet. All around the world, music company executives poured the champagne and scoffed the canapés as they celebrated a victory over piracy and copyright theft.

But just as Manchester United dropping a couple of points last week won't affect the outcome of the premiership so music fans will still be able to listen free of charge.

No one need buy music again.

For those of you not familiar with this Internet phenomenon let me explain. In May 1999 a guy called Sean Fanning created a piece of software that allows users to share files across the Internet quickly and easily. Why? Because he'd just paid \$15 for the latest LL Cool J album and realised it stank. He was so incensed that he created the means for people all over the world to swap music files online. "Napster" was born and it has changed for ever the way the Internet generation accesses its music. It has also assured LL Cool J an unlikely place in history.

How much have you spent on CDs in the past two years alone? And how many of them do you listen to now? I expect your answers will be respectively, a lot and very few. So now you can begin to imagine how big a development this bit of software is.

Curiosity about Eminem finally got the better of me last week, but I didn't have to buy his album to find out. I went to www.napster.com, searched for the title, and someone, somewhere, had a copy and was happy to share. Within minutes, Eminem's "music" was playing on my PC and available for other Napster users to download from me. I've since copied the file onto a CD to play on traditional music systems.

It's not that I support the concept of copyright theft — quite the opposite. However, technology has moved beyond the music industry's current legal boundaries and there is nothing anyone can do to stop it. Just six months after the service was launched, Napster had 22 million users. Today, it has 63 million throughout the world. Kids no longer buy their favourite artists, they download them.

Those we should spare a thought for are the majority of us who still don't use the Internet for much more than

DAN WAGNER



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e-mail. We will keep paying the earth for music and that's why I'm bending any willing ear about Napster. As I said in my debut column last week, I intend to help readers get as much from the Internet as it has given me.

So what of this victory last week then? Haven't they plugged the hole?

Yes, one hole. Napster will probably have to close down (or at least prevent users from swapping copyrighted material), but it doesn't matter. Whilst they were so busy stifling Napster, at least 20 others have emerged to take its place. I could try www.scour.com, www.napigator.com, www.PowerNap.com, www.OpenNap.com or any other nap.com that carries on where the others have left off.

Napster-type technology will significantly impact other areas of our lives. It already allows us to communicate with other PCs without having to go to websites (perfect therefore for surf phobes). This one-to-one Internet activity, or "peer-to-peer" to give it its proper name, is set to change the entire way we use and benefit from the Internet.

Stay tuned — this is just a beginning. The Internet has literally caught the music industry and some of us have the good sense to haul it in. And if you hook something you don't like, you can always throw it back — after all, it hasn't cost you a penny!

So all praise to LL Cool J. However bad his music is reported to be!

● Dan Wagner is CEO of Bright Station