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**NEWS**

## Downloading Music Legally Using XM's PCR

By David Strom



Here is an easy way to build a digital music library. It will cost you about \$500, and a subscription fee of about \$10 a month. It is completely legal, doesn't require a broadband Internet connection, and can be accomplished by anyone without any specialized PC skills. Does it sound too good to be true? It almost is.

The first thing you'll need is a decent pair of speakers and a subwoofer for your Windows PC. (The setup that I will describe unfortunately won't work on Macintoshes.) You can buy these at a number of places, so I won't give you any specific recommendations. But plan on spending roughly \$200 for the most basic of setups if you don't have this already. The subwoofer is essential if you are going to power your speakers directly from your PC. More discerning audiophiles will probably prefer to connect the PC directly to a stereo system.

Then you'll need two other items, one that is hardware, one that is software. The hardware is the XM PCR radio receiver, and the software is called TimeTrax. You'll need both.

My friend Bill got me started with this particular solution. Bill is a long-time user of XM radio, the satellite digital radio service that broadcasts more than 100 continuous specialty channels of music, talk, news, and sports around the country. Being a digital system, XM broadcasts are very high quality. One of the various radio receivers that XM used to sell (more on that later) is called the PCR, which is a device that connects to your PC via a USB and audio cables. The device comes with its own antenna, which it uses to pull the signals from the sky, rather than some Internet-radio based solution that ties up all of your bandwidth with downloading huge audio files.

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Note that you will need to place the XM antenna in a window with a southern exposure in order to receive the satellite signal. If you live in a large city you might be able to still receive the XM signal, since it is also broadcast over ground stations and they don't need line-of-sight to their satellites.

The heart of this system is the [TimeTrax software](#). If you want to try it out free, you can download a version that will work for 15 minutes. Once you have everything working, you'll need to pony up \$30 to buy it.

TimeTrax allows you to record any XM broadcast channel to your PC's hard disk. You can, of course, listen and record at the same time. But what makes it a winner is that every song is recorded to your disk as a separate MP3 file. The software pulls the ID tags off the XM service and labels the song file with the artist's name and song title, and can be organized into folders on your hard disk by genre or artist. You literally connect up the PCR, load the software, register the radio with XM central, and within a week you can fill up your hard disk with thousands of songs. In practice, I had to fiddle around with some of the audio settings to get the recordings to work properly, but it didn't take more than a few minutes to make the adjustments and they were well documented on the company's Web site. Within a few hours, we had more than a hundred songs recorded. You can only record a single XM channel at a time, but you can set up a schedule to pull down different channels at different times if you know there is something that you want to record.

Of course, what you do with your song files once you have the MP3 copies is your business. Bill claims that he has already purchased many CDs of music, and he doesn't want to be bothered ripping them into MP3s on his hard disk. Of course, the amount of time that he will be spending sorting out the various songs that have been recorded might be equally oppressive. He disagrees, and tells me that because the songs are already sorted by artist, sorting is a "breeze." He tells me that by next week he'll have a complete Sinatra library, and is also enamored with a special "no Streisand" button that eliminates that artist from being recorded to his hard disk.

You'll notice that I said "used to sell" earlier. The PCR is still listed as a supported product on XM's Web site, along with four online stores that supposedly sell it for approximately \$50. The trouble is you can't buy it from any of these stores. You can buy it on eBay for about \$300 from dozens of sources, with the inflated price caused by the scarcity of the units on the open market, and the fear that eventually XM central will pull the plug on the units because of the way that people are using them to harvest their own MP3 libraries. Bill tells me that it is more likely they will introduce a revised version of the PCR with some sort of digital rights management included. But by then he'll have an entire song library on his hard drive, "so who cares?"

Bill is now planning his next music-related purchase, of course, an iPod. And as we speak his PC is busy recording off the XM airwaves lots of music. It is a great solution, too bad that XM won't sell you a unit anymore.



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David Strom began writing the [Web Informant](#) series in 1995. This series of almost-weekly essays discusses current trends, technologies, and events of interest about Internet applications.

Strom is also online editor for the CMP Electronics Group and a long-time technology journalist and author of two networking books and thousands of articles. He was the founding editor-in-chief of Network Computing magazine and consulted for many hi-tech vendors when he ran his own business for ten years between a previous tenure and his current role at CMP Media. He lives in Port Washington, N.Y. and can be reached at [dstrom@cmp.com](mailto:dstrom@cmp.com)

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