

Making Marvelous MP3 Music In My Miata

by Sara J McBride

When I purchased my “new to me” Miata, it had the stock AM-FM Cassette player in the dash. I hadn’t had a vehicle with a cassette player in years, so I searched the house and brought out tapes that had been hidden. I listened to music that had been taped off of albums (some off of 45’s!) and CD’s, but soon the lure of listening to newer music won me over and I started investigating a replacement.

My first requirements were basic, I wanted an AM-FM-CD player. Then I started thinking about a deck that would also play MP3’s. Why MP3’s? A smaller file format means more music. Starting my research, I found that the MP3 player market ranges from indash units that play CD’s with MP3 files to 20Gig hard drive units that mount in your trunk and price ranges from \$350 to thousands of dollars.

I started looking at outboard units that mount in the trunk and connect to your indash unit. The outboard unit is basically a hard drive and one loads the data (music!) onto the drive from your home computer onto the drive of the player. A 10Gig drive can hold approximately 2500 four minute songs (encoded at 128kbs¹) or about 170 hours worth of music. How many times could you drive coast to coast without hearing the same song twice? But having this type of unit also means you need a head unit that had inputs to accept signals from an outboard MP3 deck to accept the signal. Since I was taking the factory unit out, additional money would have to be spent. Time to consider the second option, an indash MP3 unit.

I then considered a removable indash MP3 player with AM/FM. I could connect it to my home computer to download the MP3 files by using either USB, serial, or ethernet connections. But what about all the CD’s I all ready own? I would have to “rip” them (convert the data to the MP3 format) and then burn them onto a recordable CD², and as I looked at my CD collection, I saw hours spent doing that task. Another problem was the unit I was considering had no onboard amplifier, so I would have to spend more money on an amplifier.

The third option was a AM/FM/CD/MP3 deck. A deck like this would be capable of playing both regular CD’s and CD’s with MP3 files. Several manufacturers (Alpine, JVC, Sony, etc.) offer this type of unit, I purchased a Kenwood KDC-MP8017. It fits nicely in the dash, has internal amplification, you can hook up an external amplifier (for the day when I put in those headrest speakers) and a removable face plate to foil those pesky thieves.

Features include preset sound settings for different types of music (jazz, folk, rock etc.), an attenuator (drops the volume up or down quickly-great when

you pull up to the parking booth to pay), a loudness control (boosts the highs and lows when listening at low volume), 18 FM and 6 AM presets (and you can program the station name), a dimmer display, choice of color for illumination (red or green), a clock and lots more. One cool feature when listening to MP3’s is having the artist name and song title read out on the display as the song is playing!

I’ve had my unit for about five months and have enjoyed it immensely. Using my computer and CD burner, I have burned my own “Greatest Hits” CD’s. I recently drove from Kansas to Indy and as I left Kansas City, I slipped in a CD I had burned with MP3 files. Six and a half hours later, I pulled into my driveway and was still listening to the same CD, but hadn’t heard the same song twice. Gotta like that!

1. The standard encoding rate is 128 kilobits per second, or 128 Kbps. Here, the bitrate refers to the average number of bits that one second of sound data will require. For higher quality sound (and bigger files) you can encode songs at 192 Kbps, or even 256 Kbps (which is true CD quality). If you want a lot of songs on your CD, you can go with 96 Kbps, but the sound quality can be pretty lame at that setting.

2. Some players will only play CDR’s (R=record). CDRW (RW=ReWriteable) discs look the same as CDR’s, but have different physical properties, three bottom layers, where a CDR has one. The middle layer is heated to change its structure, after which it can be written again. Pressed CDs offer the greatest reflection, followed by the CDR. The CDRW is the least reflective. The more reflective a CD, the easier it can be read by a wide range of decks, players, etc.



Newlyweds Make A Getaway In (What else?) A Miata.

Chris and Steph Bennet had the perfect vehicle after exchanging their wedding vows in September. Congratulations!