

Digital may be the death of hi-fi

iPod portability beats out sound quality

BY RON HARRIS

The Associated Press

Music lovers remember a familiar advertising image from the past: a man reclined in a chair, head back, blown away by music from his high-fidelity sound system.

Like the Marlboro Man before him, Maxell's pitchman is now a relic.

With their ability to store vast libraries of music in your pocket, sleek digital music players have replaced bulky home stereo systems as the music gear of choice. But the sound quality of the digital audio files they play is noticeably inferior to that of compact

discs and even vinyl.

Are these the final days of hi-fi sound? Judging by the 2 billion songs downloaded from Apple Inc.'s iTunes service, the ubiquity of white iPod "ear buds," and the hundreds of thousands of folks file-sharing for free, the answer is yes.

"In many ways, good enough (sound quality) is fine," said Paul Connolly, an art installation specialist and longtime audiophile from Sugar Land, Texas, who is digitizing his 2,400-CD collection in Apple's lossless digital audio format.

"The warmth and the nice distortion that the album had was beautiful," he said. "But do I

long for the days of albums? No. Do I long for the days of CDs now that we've gone digital? No. It's a medium."

Justin Schoenmoser, of San Francisco, also traded in his rack system for an iPod. Currently working abroad and toting along his iPod, the convenience of carrying thousands of songs in a gadget smaller than a pack of cigarettes outweighs the sacrifice of quality.

"The last time I had a full-blown home stereo system was in the mid-'90s, and it was a gift from my parents," Schoenmoser said. "As I converted most of my stuff to digital over the last five years, I finally got rid of all my old equipment."

A song ripped from a CD at 128 kilobits per second — the de-

fault setting for most software — retains only a fraction of the audio data contained on the originally mastered disc. Whether you downloaded the track from iTunes or copped it off LimeWire, the song remains the same. The small digital music file is a highly compressed shadow of the originally mastered recording.

And regardless of how advanced your home audio setup is, if you're pumping a low-rate MP3 or iTunes file into it, you're getting a low-rate rendition of the original song. It's listenable, but still lacking the luster of a CD played on the same system.

Some experts say the sound quality lost in the process is undetectable to most untrained ears. But Michael Silver can hear the difference.

Audio High, his high-end stereo shop in Mountain View, Calif., sells things like a \$5,000 needle for your turntable and stereo cable at \$2,700 a meter.

"It doesn't compare," Silver said of the sound quality offered by today's portable digital music players and their compressed audio files. If his high-end gear is like a Ferrari for sound, and run-of-the-mill stereo equipment is a Honda, "a moped is an iPod," Silver said.

That difference in sound quality, perceptible or not, hasn't saved some of the bigger traditional stereo and music sellers.

Tweeter Home Entertainment Group Inc., a Canton, Mass.-based retailer of mid- to high-end audio equipment, is closing 49 of its 153 stores na-

tionwide. Slumping sales at Sacramento, Calif.-based Tower Records led that former industry juggernaut into bankruptcy.

Year-to-date data from a recent Nielsen SoundScan report shows sales of prerecorded CDs in the United States down 20 percent from last year.

"Everybody has a certain amount of money to spend. It's not that they're choosing not to spend it on the old-style audio. It's that something new came along," said James McQuivey, principle analyst for media technology at Forrester Research Inc.

"The MP3 player integrated the collection of the music with the playback of the music," he said. "Now all of it's seamlessly hidden away on a hard drive somewhere."