

# iTunes Alternatives

By Logan Kugler

**M**ost Mac addicts don't look further than the iTunes Music Store when buying music online. But despite how great iTMS is, there are times when it just doesn't offer what you're looking for. And unfortunately, most of the other well-known online music stores are tied to Microsoft's copy-protection scheme and won't work with your Mac. But that doesn't mean you're stuck. Other Mac-compatible online music stores—good ones—are waiting to accept your music dollars.

## AUDIO LUNCHBOX

[www.audiolunchbox.com](http://www.audiolunchbox.com)



**STANDARD PRICE:** \$0.99 per song, \$9.99 per album

**FORMATS:** 192-Kbps VBR MP3, Q6 Ogg Vorbis

**TYPICAL BANDS:** i-94, Nickel Creek, Pennywise

**METHODS OF PAYMENT:** Credit card, PayPal, Audio Lunchbox Lunchcard

With a focus on independent artists, Audio Lunchbox is the iTunes of indie music. All the songs come DRM-free and are offered in your choice of two formats—192-Kbps VBR (Variable Bit Rate) MP3 and Q6 Ogg Vorbis. (Note that iTunes won't play

Ogg Vorbis without a QuickTime plug-in such as the one you can download from [www.illadvised.com/~jordy](http://www.illadvised.com/~jordy); unfortunately, the ones we found didn't work with QuickTime 7). If you're a little low on cash, you can add your favorite songs to a Wishlist that you can then send to your well-heeled relatives and friends.

Navigating AL is effortless: Using drop-down menus, select the first letter of the artist or album you're looking for, or choose the name of a genre to get a list of everything matching your search. One of the coolest features is the Change Your Download Settings option, which lets you control exactly how you want your tracks to be named, from whether the name includes the album title to what characters separate the words. AL recently added the Audio Lunchbox Community, a message board where you can talk with other music buffs.

## BLEEP

[www.bleep.com](http://www.bleep.com)



**STANDARD PRICE:** \$1.35 per song

**FORMAT:** VBR MP3

**TYPICAL BANDS:** Circlesquare, Field Music, Björk

**METHODS OF PAYMENT:** Credit card, PayPal

Bleep specializes in electronic and alternative music and offers a widely diverse catalog from labels such as Rough Trade, Planet Mu, and Chicks on Speed. You can hear a 30-second preview of

any song through a built-in music player that works quite well. As you choose songs, an invoice on the right side of the screen automatically updates to show your total cost, total megabytes in your shopping cart, and estimated download time.

The songs are DRM free, so you can play them on any digital-audio player that accepts MP3 files. The sound quality is superb, though you pay for the quality with large file sizes, averaging 1.5MB to 2MB per minute of song. While the per-song cost is high, the shopping interface is user-friendly and straightforward.

## EMUSIC

[www.emusic.com](http://www.emusic.com)



**STANDARD PRICE:** \$9.99 to \$19.99 per month

**FORMAT:** VBR MP3

**TYPICAL BANDS:** Coldplay, Harry

Nilsson, Frank Sinatra, The Decemberists, The Pixies

**METHODS OF PAYMENT:** Credit card, gift subscription

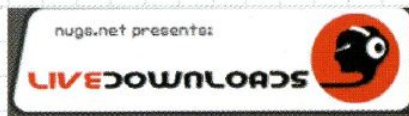
Taking an approach much different from that of other music stores, eMusic uses a monthly subscription model—but one that lets you keep the songs you download. The Basic plan (\$9.99) gets you up to 40 downloads per month; the Plus plan (\$14.99) lets you have 65; and the Premium option (\$19.99) gives you up to 90.

This store feels more like a community of music enthusiasts than simply a place to buy music because of features such as Neighbors, which gives you a list of fellow eMusic members with musical tastes similar to yours. You can chat with your Neighbors and find out what other types of music they're into. You can also post your own reviews and ratings of any artist or album for others to see.

Other ways eMusic helps you find good music include PowerCharts showing the day's, week's, and month's top downloads; Editor's Picks; and a list of tunes with the highest member ratings. There's even a collection of live recorded music, unavailable elsewhere, called eMusic Live. With a catalog of more than 600,000 tracks, and more added each week, eMusic is enough to make the subscription model suddenly look like a great idea.

## LIVEDOWNLOADS

www.livedownloads.com



**STANDARD PRICE:** \$7.95 to \$12.95 per album or show  
**FORMATS:** 128-Kbps MP3, FLAC

**TYPICAL BANDS:** Armored Saint, Fates Warning, The String Cheese Incident

**METHOD OF PAYMENT:** Credit card

LiveDownloads' selection is feeble by comparison to the other stores, but it carries stuff you won't find anywhere else. More than half of the site's catalog consists of live shows, often

available for download within 48 hours of the actual concert. Want last week's Widespread Panic show? How about a 1997 Doc Watson and David Grisman collaboration? LiveDownloads is the place to go.

Shows and albums are available as MP3s or, for a couple bucks more, in the high-quality, lossless FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) format—to listen to these, though, you'll need to download a FLAC decoder such as FLACer or xACT—both are free and available at [www.versiontracker.com](http://www.versiontracker.com). You can also buy some of the live shows on a physical CD for \$23 or so; or, if you're planning to burn a CD yourself, you can download a predesigned CD label, booklet, and tray insert to print at home.

## MP3 TUNES

www.mp3tunes.com



**STANDARD PRICE:** \$0.88 per song, \$8.88 per album  
**FORMAT:** 192-Kbps VBR MP3  
**TYPICAL BANDS:** The Tokens, Amir

**METHOD OF PAYMENT:** Credit card

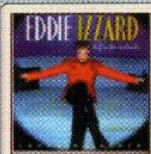
The MP3 Tunes home page represents the store well—straightforward and unpretentious—and with Top Songs and Top Albums on the right and Genres on the left, it's easy to navigate. Founded by the former CEO of MP3.com, MP3 Tunes focuses on

emerging artists and boasts nearly 400,000 songs by more than 50,000 performers. The songs come in unprotected (DRM-free) form, so you can play them on virtually any digital-audio player.

The staff members put out a weekly newsletter highlighting their favorite music, which can help you find something you'll like among the (probably) mostly unfamiliar offerings. One of MP3 Tunes' nicest features is My Locker, which keeps track of every song you purchase from the store and lets you download the songs again at no charge. Artists should check out the site's Artist Café, which offers promotional opportunities, stats and earnings on posted songs, and other performer-oriented features.

## WORDS, NOT MUSIC

From comedy to documentaries, **audioVille** ([www.audioville.co.uk](http://www.audioville.co.uk)) is a great resource for nonmusical audio. The site's British-oriented catalog of MP3s offers all sorts of aural pleasures, from *Blackadder* episodes to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to readings of *The Jungle Book*. With prices like £0.49



**Definite Article**  
Author: Eddie Izzard  
Publisher: Laughing Stock Productions  
Eddie Izzard is the UK's most successful stand-up comic of the last decade, and he is also currently taking the American market by storm. Few British stand-up comics have made this significant breakthrough, which says a lot for Eddie's groundbreaking but universally accessible comedy.

Looking for a little Eddie Izzard? Head to **audioVille**.

(about 60 cents at press time) for a 15-minute relaxation track, how can you go wrong?

## MP3S, COMRADE?


If you go surfing for music-store alternatives, it won't be long before you run into the Russia-based sites [www.allofmp3.com](http://www.allofmp3.com), [www.mp3search.ru](http://www.mp3search.ru), and [www.mp3spy.ru](http://www.mp3spy.ru). With prices running around 10 cents a song and \$2 an album, these sites are wonderfully—yet suspiciously—cheap. They also offer songs by artists who haven't licensed their libraries for online distribution in the West. The stores claim to be legally operating under the terms of Russian copyright law, but even if that's true, it's by no means clear whether it's legal for those of us in other countries to "import" songs from these sites. Similar stores in Spain were recently closed due to legal action—so until the situation is clarified, these stores come with a big virtual warning sticker.

## NEED SUGGESTIONS?

The vast selection available from online music stores is great, but sometimes finding music you like can be daunting. Luckily there are several free iTunes plug-ins that can make recommendations by comparing your music library to that of other plug-in users: **Mobster** ([www.musicmobs.com](http://www.musicmobs.com)), **Audioscrobber** ([www.last.fm](http://www.last.fm)), and **Goombah** ([www.goombah.com](http://www.goombah.com)). The usefulness of these plug-ins depends on how many people are sharing their libraries this way, but you might stumble upon some new artists you might have otherwise overlooked.



Scrobbling mobster goombahs can help you find music you might like.

 Logan Kugler lives in Tampa, Florida, and is currently in a love affair with downloading music by the barrel.