How to use iTunes, iPod, & MP3Tech for organizing and managing your entire music library, customizing show tracks and taking wireless control of your show music.

Soundtrack Wizardry

by Kerry Kistler

MY SOUNDTRACKS: A BRIEF HISTORY

This one topic could fill a book. But, since these notes are intended for the beginning chalk artist I will keep this overview short. When I started out in chalk art, my sound tracks were pretty humble. I used the recording equipment which I had at home: a dual cassette-deck boom box. This approach worked fine back then, but technology has made the process of recording sound tracks simple and affordable while producing very high quality sound.

Using cassettes got me started, but I found some poor sound quality creeping in such as audible "pops" between musical cuts, faint background hiss and volume changes from one song to the next. Those kinds of quality issues really bothered me, so in the late 1990's I finally bought a small, used 6 channel stereo mixer and began to phase out my music cassettes. I eventually replaced most of the best stuff with CD versions - which is all I buy now (plus some songs via internet down-loads).

Some chalk artists prefer to produce their tracks onto a CD master. This will certainly solve most of the sound quality issues. But, the format that I selected about ten years ago was the Sony Mini Disc. For the last decade it has worked very well for my needs because of its immense flexibility. This format offers some great features like easy track editing, instant track cue, track rearrangement, and auto pause between tracks. It also offers a medley feature which allows you to hook together multiple cuts of music. In our programs, we may have 15 or 20 different prerecorded cuts: puppet tracks, volunteer intro/exit music, magic background music, sound effects and, of course, chalk tracks.

The Mini Disc player has been perfect for this scenario because it stops after each cut and sits in a play/pause mode waiting for the next cut to be played. All my sound man (my son) needs to do is wait for a cue and push the PLAY button for each successive track - simple. Plus, I have had great freedom to rearrange, erase, and add tracks as needed. A CD or cassette player does not have that kind of flexibility.

ENTER the iPOD & iTUNES

However, technology changes and so have I. Lured by some great features which the Mini Disc can't offer, I recently transitioned to using the iPod/iTunes system for compiling

my program sound tracks. It is true that there are many mp3 players on the market (some of them cheaper than iPod) but I prefer the iPod for a variety of reasons.

First, depending on the model, an iPod can hold **thousands of songs**. Your entire chalk-art-sound-track library can be loaded onto a device that fits into the palm of your hand - with room to spare. For more information on the iPod or iTunes, a link of simple tutorials & short movies explaining it all can be found at: **www.apple.com/support/ipod/tutorial/index.html**. Another site with some advanced ideas is: **www.smart-ipod-ideas.com**

Second, it is true that some mp3 players do not require the use of a computer or special software. But, even though the iPod does require a computer* and iTunes (a free download at **www.apple.com/itunes**), this software makes copying your CD library onto your computer's hard drive fast (a couple of minutes per CD) and easy. PLUS, it gives you an incredibly powerful way of organizing every song on every CD in your library (plus every song you choose to download from the internet). When copying each song, I use the optional comment field to notate

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(*There are devices like the iRecord [**www.irecord.com**] that permit you to record all manner of media [cassettes, vinyl records, etc.] DIRECTLY to the iPod, bypassing the need for a computer or iTunes. I am not certain how a music library is managed or playlists formed using these devices.)

specific themes, thoughts, ideas, holidays, etc. iTunes has a built-in search engine; type any word in the search box and the program looks at title, artist, album, length, genre, comments, etc., and viola! An instant list based on the search word(s).

Third, the songs compiled in this list, perhaps from ten different CDs, are instantly available for listening and comparison. Just point and click. It beats digging through stacks of CDs!

Fourth, an entire chalk track can now be assembled in a matter of minutes using the iTunes Playlist feature. A Playlist is like a folder into which you drag and drop whatever songs you desire. These can then be rearranged easily. If you decide to add, delete, or replace a song later, no problem. The iPod connects to your computer's USB port via a special cable, and any

Playlist you have assembled can be copied onto your iPod. The iPod is then ready to be connected to any sound system via a standard RCA cable for playback in a program.

There are also many portable speaker systems which can dock with your iPod and provide a playback option for smaller venues. Here are a few of the best, current options with very good sound:
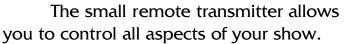
On the left is the Altec

inMotion im7 sytem. It retails for around $250. It has a remote and an aux input for possible mic use. On the

right is the Bose SoundDock. It retails for around $300 and also comes with a remote but lacks any other inputs (however, a special cable is available from **www.cablejive.com** that will allow you to connect to the iPod docking port effectively turning it into an aux input).

MP3Tech - THE THIRD PART OF a COMPLETE SYSTEM

Many people use their iPods for an actual playback device during programs. However, some performers need more control over playing back their show tracks than an iPod can handle. For instance, most of our programs have over a dozen different pieces of music - besides a fully mixed chalk art sound track. There is a nifty piece of hardware currently on the market called the MP3Tech. This device is engineered to play mp3 files

from an SD card and is the finest remote control mp3 player available and is completely self contained. Designed and built specifically for professional entertainers, the MP3Tech includes a built-in output transmitter that can be used to control devices besides music such as lights, special effects, servos, reels, etc. on your music cues.

The small remote transmitter allows you to control all aspects of your show.

Play, Pause, Cue forward, Cue back, Volume up, Volume down, and Auto-fade. You may also choose how the auto-fade will function with each track... Fade & Cue ... Fade, Cue and Play ... or Cue & Play.

Here is the web site for the MP3Tech: **www.theceswebsite.com/products/ audio/mp3tech**

Note that this device plays ONLY mp3 files. Files ripped into your iTunes library will not work but must be converted into mp3 files first. I use a free program called Switch Sound File Converter from www.download.com. This extra step is a pain but I need the flexibility that the mp3Tech provides.

MIXING TRACKS

Neither the iPod, iTunes or the MP3Tech can mix multiple tracks - they are

meant to play a string of songs in the order you select. However, because I formerly worked in radio and TV, most of my chalk tracks are not quite that simple. I tend to assemble my tracks using cross-fades and multiple layers. I often mix multiple tracks - perhaps a music background with narration and sound effects. This is also done on my computer, using Sony's ACID Music Studio software. I then import these multi-track creations back into iTunes and place them within a Playlist for program use. Of course, multi-track mixing is not necessary and for creating quick, last minute, no-frills soundtracks, nothing beats the iPod/iTunes system for ease of use and speed.

MUSIC SELECTION

Everyone has their own style and taste in music, so this part is tough to address. However, here is the basic process I use:

1. Decide on a theme.
(i.e. Prayer, Heaven, Creation, etc.)

2. Research your music library.
This is where iTunes has revolutionized the assembly of my chalk art tracks. In the past, thoughtfully searching my music library for the perfect songs meant leafing through page after page of music data sheets. I spent hours filling out these sheets - one for each CD or tape I owned. Then I would dig out the relevant CDs and slog through the process of reviewing potential cuts.

With iTunes, I simply search on a word or theme - such as Prodigal Son - and viola, every song I have in my library dealing with the Prodigal Son is instantly listed. Then, by clicking on each song title, I can listen to each song with incredible convenience. Granted, there is a sizeable investment of time, initially, when copying (ripping) your CDs to a hard drive. But, it's still quicker than filling out data sheets or using any other database software. Of course, as I buy new CDs, they immediately go onto my computer and into the iTunes library.

3. Expand your search on-line.
When trying to find and purchase just the right music, the internet is a great resource. For instance, when asked to perform at a commencement ceremony for GED graduates, I did a quick search using Google for "graduation music." I found a Christian site which had a "Top 10" list of graduation songs, and listened to on-line audio clips. Then, I took my short list to a local Christian bookstore and purchased a couple of CDs, adding three new songs to those I already had at home in my collection. Today, I would probably purchase the relevant song tracks differently

because of changes within the music industry. This approach to purchasing music is now considered "old school." More and more songs are now available individually via downloads.

As I develop new programs, I always expand my search for appropriate music to the internet. iTunes has a store where you can search an ever-expanding library of music - literally hundreds of thousands of songs. After searching by title, artist, album, genre, etc. you can listen to 30-second clips and purchase the ones you like at $.99 each for instant download into your iTunes library. It is no longer necessary to buy a whole CD to get that one song you really want.

Many other "buy-by-the-song" sites are available with more popping up every day. Talk about an instant, infinite, and flexible way to build custom chalk art tracks. It's never been easier.

For an extensive list of links to free music online, see my article **"A Niche Worth Scratching: 25 Tips for Digging Up Free Music Online"** which can be found at www.ChalkedAndAmazed.com Here is a brief introduction to that article:

"The amount of free music available on the internet for download is astounding. The problem is that some of it comes with nasty strings attached: pirated files (meaning free to you but often stolen from the copyright holder), embedded Trojan viruses or spyware, and much more. Getting through this

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minefield can paralyze even the most stouthearted into inaction.

But I have spent a lot of time digging through that online minefield and discovered some great gems buried out there: public domain music, vintage archive collections, sample production music, royalty free goodies, old vinyl, and freebies from musicians who post their works just because they want to share it. As you know, links come and links go. Hopefully most of these will still be active when you get around to looking. I have cut & pasted them directly from my bowser to ensure accuracy.

Before you dig in, be prepared to get a larger hard-drive. Seriously. My iTunes library of production music and sound effects is nearing 21GB. And I have only scratched the surface."

4. **Select only what you can understand.** Be careful of selecting songs that have murky lyrics - even if you like the songs. My rule of ear is, "If you can't understand the words - what's the point?" Each song should build upon and reinforce the overall message and theme of your program. If people have to work hard at catching the lyrics of a song, they will soon quit listening. At that point, you have undercut your ministry potential and become merely entertainment.

5. **Start with a bang.** The first piece of music on your track should be a high energy, dynamic selection. This will help grab the group's attention and hook them right out of the chute.

6. **Mix to the group.** My audience at the graduation program was mostly inner-city African-American and Hispanic, so I was careful to pick music that would "connect" with their tastes. In other words, and not to sound too obvious, you might present the same **drawing** for both a preschool group AND a nursing home, but your **sound track** should probably be different.

7. **Observe music copyrights.** As Christians, we should be concerned about observing all copyright laws. Purchasing a "music use" license is worth exploring. At the very least, seek permission from the musical artist to use their music. But NEVER duplicate/sell your sound tracks for people who request a copy following your programs. That's just asking for trouble.