

Compact discs turn 25

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It was Aug. 17, 1982, and row upon row of palm-sized plates with a rainbow sheen began rolling off an assembly line near Hanover, Germany.

An engineering marvel at the time, today they are instantly recognizable as compact discs, a product that turns 25 years old today - and whose future is increasingly in doubt in an age of iPods and digital downloads.

Those first CDs contained Richard Strauss' Alpine Symphony and would sound equally sharp if played today, said Holland's Royal Philips Electronics, which jointly developed the CD with Sony of Japan.

The recording industry thrived in the 1990s as music fans replaced their aging cassettes and vinyl LPs with compact discs, eventually making CDs the most popular album format.

The CD still accounts for the majority of the music industry's recording revenues, but its sales have been in a free-fall since peaking early this decade, in part because of the rise of online file-sharing, but also as consumers spend more of their leisure dollars on other entertainment purchases, such as DVDs and video games.

As the music labels slash wholesale prices and experiment with extras to revive the now-aging format, it's hard to imagine there was ever a day without CDs.

Philips developed the bulk of the disc and laser technology, while Sony contributed the digital encoding that allowed for smooth, error-free playback.

The CD's design drew inspiration from vinyl records: Like the grooves on a record, CDs are engraved with a spiral of tiny pits that are scanned by a laser - the equivalent of a record player's needle. The reflected light is encoded into millions of 0s and 1s: a digital file.

Because the pits are covered with plastic and the laser's light doesn't wear them down, the CD never loses sound quality.

Legends abound about how the size of the CD was chosen: Some said it matched a Dutch beer coaster; others believe a famous conductor or Sony executive wanted it just long enough for Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

Pieter Kramer, head of the optical research group at Philips' labs in the Netherlands

in the 1970s, said the decision evolved from "long conversations around the table" about which play length made the most sense.

The jump into mass production in Germany was a milestone for the CD, and by 1982, the companies announced their product was ready for market. Both began selling players that fall, though the machines only hit U.S. markets the following spring.

Sony sold the first player in Japan on Oct. 1, 1982, with the CBS label supplying Billy Joel's "52nd Street" as its first album.

The CD was a massive hit. By 1986, CD players were outselling record players, and by 1988, CDs outsold records.

"It was a massive turnaround for the whole market," said Philips' current marketing chief for consumer electronics, Lucas Covers.

Now, the CD may be seeing the end of its days.

CD sales have fallen sharply to 553 million sold in the United States last year, a 22 percent drop from its 2001 peak of 712 million, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

Napster and later Kazaa and BitTorrent allowed music fans to easily share songs over the Internet, often illegally. Then, Apple and other companies began selling legal music downloads, turning the MP3 and other digital audio formats into the medium of choice for many owners of Apple's iPods and other digital players.

"The MP3 and all the little things that the boys and girls have in their pockets . . . can replace it, absolutely," Kramer said.

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