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## Time for the Internet Boom Box

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When you're listening to music at the beach with friends, odds are you're using the same device your parents and their friends did when they were young: a battery-powered radio. Maybe it's time for something new: the Internet boom box.

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Ever since transistors first made battery-powered portable radios possible, people have taken to toting their music along with them. FM soon overtook AM in popularity; meanwhile radio was augmented by cassette tape and later by CD (both of which are sensitive to blowing sand). People have carried around headphones and stereo tape players since the advent of the Sony Walkman 25 years ago; they've toted portable CD players for nearly 20 years and portable MP3 players for the past 5.

Over the next year, expect to see the Internet boom box arrive as a product category for mid- to high-end music fans. A handful are already out, including products from Linksys and Philips.

At the heart of an Internet boom box is a wireless or wired Ethernet connection, so you can tune in

to thousands of Internet radio stations, as well as music-for-hire services such as AOL Radio or Rhapsody. This is great for streaming music in the backyard, but not so good on, say, the beaches of Cape Cod (unless you can place a wireless access point atop the Truro lighthouse).

Maybe your apartment complex could lure new residents with wireless access points for poolside laptop users and music enthusiasts. I'm not saying it's right (in the involved-parent sense) to use your laptop by the pool, but sometimes it's necessary, as when the kids are dying to go swimming but you'll get in trouble at work if you don't keep up with your overflowing e-mail in-box.

There will be times when you can't connect to the Internet for music. The ideal device, therefore, will also have at least an AM/FM radio tuner. (Weather band is nice too; the weather is a lot more important at the beach or on the patio than in the office.) It ought to have a line-in jack to play music from an external MP3 player. It could have a player for MP3/WMA discs as well; such mechanisms don't cost much.

And the device should have decent speakers. The biggest speakers aren't always the best-sounding.

The first Internet boom box actually appeared prior to the high-tech meltdown of 2001. Remember the Kerbango Internet Radio? That was a 4-pound, battery-powered, \$300 AM/FM/Internet radio boom box created by former Apple and Power Computing execs, then sold to 3Com; Kerbango folded without ever making any market impact. It was ahead of its time—before the widespread adoption of broadband Internet access, before wireless Ethernet—and giving up your phone line for dial-up Web access (Kerbango's fallback option) just wasn't realistic.

Currently there are a few Internet boom boxes but not a flood, and they require a wall outlet for power (no batteries except in the remotes). The most complete is the Philips MCi250 Wireless Broadband Internet Micro HiFi System (\$280 street). **It streams Internet radio through the Live365 service**, streams music off your PC's hard drive, and plays AM/FM radio, CDs, and MP3 CDs. This is another amazing product from one of the world's most technically savvy (if not U.S. market-savvy) companies.

Then there's the Linksys Wireless-B Music System WMLS11B (\$150 street), which plays Internet radio, offers the optional Rhapsody music service, and streams music off your hard drive. But the jumble of wires in back means this is more a unit for occasionally moving from room to room inside the house.

You might look into satellite radio boom boxes, which aren't constrained by proximity to access points. For Sirius, consider the Audiovox SIRBB1 (\$100); for XM, try the Delphi SKYFi Audio System (\$100) or CD Audio System (\$200). The pricier Delphi SKYFi tunes AM/FM and plays MP3 CDs. All work off batteries, and each needs a plug-in satellite tuner module (\$100, plus \$10 to \$13 a month).

If you want to play digital music right outside your home, you should install a second wireless access point near the backyard or patio to improve the signal. Most houses benefit from two access points.

For a traditional radio/CD boom box, choose one that plays MP3 CDs (possibly WMAs too) and has line-in jacks for portable MP3 players. You have enough choices to be picky. Also see whether your MP3 player offers a dedicated speaker dock. There are several for the Apple iPod, and the Cambridge SoundWorks PlayDock PD200 (\$200) is available for the Creative Nomad Jukebox and Jukebox Zen players.

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