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Linksys Wireless-B Music System  
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**Model:** WMLS11B  
**Price:** \$179.99 Street

We're not quite to the point of having a real Wi-Fi enabled boombox, one that will stream your stored music and play Internet-based radio -- but the [Wireless-B Music System](#) from [Linksys](#) (a division of Cisco Systems ([Quote](#), [Chart](#))) comes about as close as the industry gets.

The unit even looks like a boombox at first glance, albeit a very thin one. The core is a centralized receiver called the Wireless-B Media Link (model WML11B). Two detachable, powered speakers can be mounted on either side. The speakers are nothing to write home about, and after listening to a few tunes on them vs. your speakers with sub-woofer combo, you'll know why. However, they don't have to be used, since the Media Link will connect to your stereo system using RCA connectors for 2-channel output, or using a built in digital output. You can also use other speakers, as long as they're powered.

The Media Link has a simple, five-line, blue LCD screen built in for viewing menus of content and to see what's playing. You can control it with simple buttons on the front or with the more complex infrared remote control; it's similar to a DVD remote in its layout. And hey, it's always nice to add another remote to your arsenal, isn't it?

Setup was a lot easier than the quick installation guide would have you believe (the full user guide is on a PDF file on the accompanying CD-ROM, or can be downloaded from the Web). The quick guide says to use an Ethernet patch cable to connect the Media Link to your PC and then run the setup CD. However, I just powered up the unit and let it find my home wireless network using DHCP, which is turned on by default. Using the hardware's onscreen interface, you can do a quick site survey to find your router or AP and associate quickly with the network (assuming you don't have to enter security codes; the Media Link only supports WEP, not WPA).

Getting online is all well and good, but the Music System is useless without a server running on your home network feeding the box some tunes. Unlike most wireless media players, Linksys is using a recognized name for its server software: MusicMatch JukeBox (basic edition). It's no iTunes, but the software is pretty easy to master: set up some playlists of your favorite songs in your MP3, WMA, and even WAV-based music files library, and the entries become instantly available for playback on the Media Link. MusicMatch will also rip your CDs to your hard drive, and has an interface for creating personalized Internet radio stations based on favorite artists and genres (though you'll have to pay for that). When you restart your PC, MusicMatch Server is running in the background, so you'll always have the music available to the WML11B.

Playing Internet radio -- that is, Web-based broadcast via MP3 streaming -- is a key component of this product. The Media Link comes preconfigured with several sites ready to play, everything from music to talk to scanners following police and fire in major metro areas. It uses the vTuner.com service to find these broadcasts. Unfortunately, I found a few of them didn't work when I tried them. They'll just return a "playlist error." Through the interface, you can access "Update Radio List Menu" to set the updates to be automatic, or to do a manual update -- but I did that and nothing changed: there were still stations listed that got "playlist error."

Linksys does provide a link to vTuner.com from the software setup wizard, but it doesn't appear that the advanced version can be integrated with the Media Link, and there's nothing in the Linksys online knowledge base to say different (a search on "vtuner" in

the knowledge base came up empty). Downloading the vTuner software didn't help. When running on a PC, it doesn't show up as a new server to the Media Link. To play vTuner stations back on the PC required RealPlayer. By the time I got to that hassle, I gave up.

Linksys provides three months of RealNetwork's Rhapsody Radio Plus, found at Listen.com, which costs \$4.95 per month afterwards (so you save \$14.85). Signup for the trial period is easy, with a coupon code provided on a flyer packaged with the hardware. Once you create a username and password, you just download and install the software. You'll have to log into it again with the new username, and tell your software firewall to allow the software access to the Internet and the ability to be a server (you'll then see two servers on the Media Link-- one from MusicMatch saying MM and another from Rhapsody saying RMS). Then you're ready.

The main interface for the Real service is the Rhapsody store where you'd buy music, but you can't do much with the basic account. Click the Radio button near the top instead, and you can create your own Internet radio station. Input your five favorite artists and Rhapsody will stream their music along with that of several other artists considered "similar."

The Rhapsody online radio feature, when played back through the Linksys, naturally loses the ability to fast forward or rewind in a song, though you can use the skip button to jump to the next track. The song title, artist name and album name will scroll in the LCD screen to show you what's playing. And because Rhapsody includes Digital Content Management info in its streams, it can't be played if you hook up the Media Link to a stereo with the digital output port.

Any of the Internet radio stations you do like -- that work -- can be set into a Favorites list for easy access later, and you can edit the list in the Web interface for the Media Link (just surf to the IP address for the unit from any PC on the network).

Sadly, it appears you can't personally configure any Internet Radio stations of your choice for playback, like those from a site like Live365 or Shoutcast. Trying to trick the system by manually placing them in the Favorites list didn't work either. Maybe there's a trick to it, but since they don't spell it out, it would probably be beyond the layman hooking this unit up on a lark. Too bad.

Playback is actually great on this product -- smooth, no skips, and no buffering issues as long as your PC running the server software doesn't get bogged down. The Media Link only has a single dipole antenna, but had no problem staying connected to my router at any point in the house where a laptop could get a connection, including two floors away on the opposite side of the house.

The problem is, the WML11B and its speakers do not qualify as a boombox, no matter how much you might want to treat it like one. First, there's no handle. Second, it's only powered by plugging in, so you've got to cart the power cord with you wherever you go -- and it's got a fist-sized power brick on the cord to make that more difficult. Of course, you couldn't make such a device run on regular batteries like a normal boombox, since the Wi-Fi would chew through the batteries like a piranha through a leg of lamb. And there's the sound issue, especially the lack of bass -- though you can mitigate that a bit with the built-in equalizer, or by using your own speaker system.

Like so many of the wireless media players out there, this is a mixed bag, but one that provides a lot more for its money than most. The unit is available online at press time for as low as \$142.



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