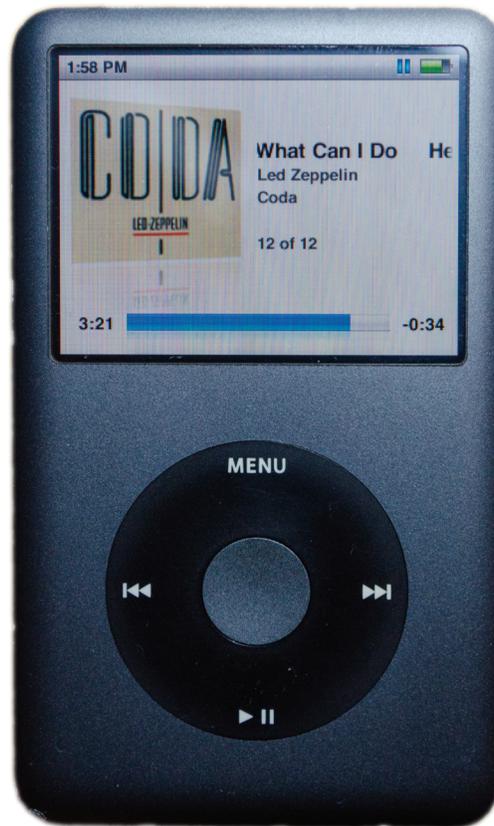


Click Wheel Coda

The Death of a Classic

by Shayne Jacopian



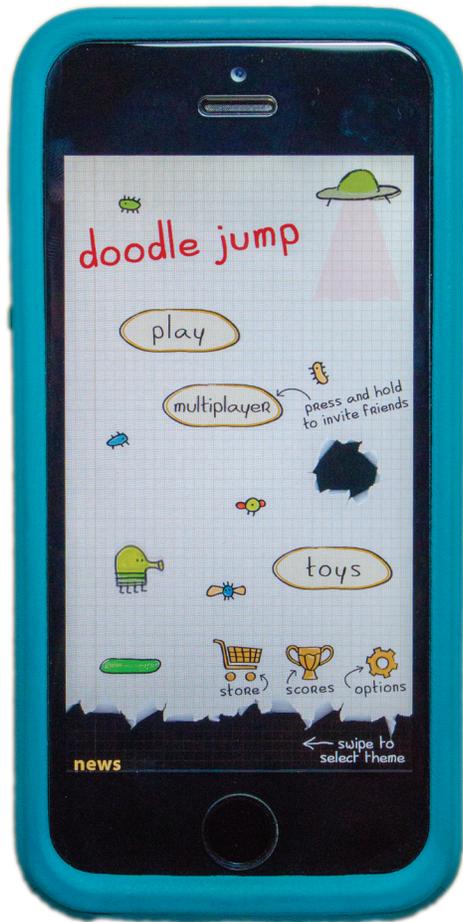
With the September 9th unveiling of the latest iteration of the iPhone—or, as Steve Jobs once called it, the “best iPod we’ve ever made”—Apple unceremoniously pulled the iPod Classic from the iPod lineup. This leaves us music lovers with only three options for dedicated music players: an iPhone that’s not a phone, a *slightly smaller* iPhone that can’t do apps, and a choking hazard with a headphone jack. Each of them is certainly useful in their own respects—but not for me, or for anyone else who will now treat their iPod Classics like gold until they inevitably bite the dust.

Of course, with streaming services like Spotify and Pandora becoming so widely used, and with services like Apple’s iCloud, which affords users the

privilege of paying for their music, *and* using all of their cellular data listening to it—the best of both worlds!—who needs 160 gigabytes of storage? After all, that’s 40,000 songs we’re talking about, here. Who needs that on a device? And can you play games on the iPod Classic? Well, I *guess* you can, but... I won’t even go there.

And I’ll readily admit that, despite my fond feelings for the iPod Classic, I certainly don’t need that much storage space. Sure, I have an 80 gigabyte music library, but I only sync about 30 gigabytes of that to my device at any given time anyway, despite the fact that it can hold twice as much—there’s just so much stuff in my library that I don’t even listen to anymore, and I don’t want to have to scroll through 50 gigabytes

of pop-punk every time I want to space out to Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*. So really, I'm not really all that distressed over the loss of that insane track count.



The iPod Classic isn't as good for gaming and for other tasks as the iPhone, but then again, it doesn't really try to be.

However, I *am* disappointed in Apple for missing out on a chance to change the music industry once again, finally kill off the Compact Disc, and give streaming services a run for their money.

When the first iPod was unveiled in 2001, the company boasted that its 5 gigabyte "ultra portable" hard drive held 1,000 songs—"in your pocket." The latest and last generation of the traditional click wheel iPod had space for forty times that. There aren't a lot of people who need that kind of capacity, but at \$250, it certainly offered a little wiggle room in comparison to the similarly priced 32 gigabyte iPod Touch, and with the largest iPod Touch retailing at nearly \$400 for 64 gigabytes of storage, the Classic made sense to anyone who was willing to sacrifice the features of the iPod Touch in order to gain a capacity large enough to hold their entire music library, and still have room for all the music they'd be likely to accumulate for a long,

long time.

There's a catch to these track counts, though. As far as the original iPod goes, 1,000 songs means 160 kilobytes-per-second MP3 files. As a benchmark, CD quality files are anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 kilobytes per second. The original iPod would only have been able to hold about 6 or 7 albums of CD quality audio.

The last click wheel iPod's 40,000 songs? 128 kilobyte-per-second AAC files—higher quality than comparably-sized MP3 files, but still pretty basic. Now, that's not to say that these devices weren't capable of storing and playing higher quality files. iTunes Plus, the 256 kilobyte-per-second AAC format used in the iTunes store, reduces the iPod's capacity to a still-ridiculous 20,000 songs, and makes a noticeable difference in quality, especially if you're playing back your music through a hi-fi stereo system, as opposed to Apple's stock earbuds. Additionally, there are even higher kbps rates of AAC and MP3 formats, as well as the Apple Lossless format, which reduces the size of CD quality files without any reduction in quality—these files are usually 500 to 1,000 kilobytes per second, and you can *still* fit thousands of them on the last Classic's 160 gigabyte hard drive. Even if one were to put full quality, uncompressed WAV or AIFF CD audio files onto the iPod Classic, the device would hold, at about 700 megabytes per CD, upwards of 200 albums, or over 2,000 songs of *CD quality audio*. *In your pocket!*

For me, that was the coolest thing about the iPod Classic. As soon as I learned about Apple Lossless format, I started ripping most of my CDs to my library using it—especially the "audiophile quality" stuff. If I had less music, I'd have ripped them in full CD quality! And with hard drives getting bigger and bigger, storing high quality audio files is becoming more and more feasible. Most laptops come with at least 500 gigabytes of storage, with 1 terabyte drives quickly becoming the standard, and desktops starting to appear on the market with 2, 3, and 4 terabyte drives.

I don't know about you, but to me, this doesn't seem like a time to retire the iPod Classic; it seems like a perfect time to revamp it—and to bring to the average consumer *better than CD quality audio!* CDs are a relatively old technology. CD audio is *way* better than MP3s, or other forms of compressed audio, but music has been recorded at a much higher quality since the early 2000's. While CDs play back 16 bit, 44.1 kHz audio, this itself is a compressed version of what is actually captured in a recording studio, with digital converters sampling audio signals at 24 bits and up to

192 kHz.

To explain briefly, “kHz” refers to how many “pictures” are taken of an audio signal, and “bits” refers to the size of each picture. Higher bit rates capture a broader range of sound, and a higher sample rate captures more detail. If your eyebrows haven’t already reached your hairline: even by listening to CD audio, you’re missing out on the vast majority of the sound that’s so meticulously crafted by artists and audio engineers in the recording studio.

Of course, most people don’t mind; CD audio is great, and I would agree! On sub-par speakers, listeners probably wouldn’t even be able to tell the difference. Still, there’s certainly a market for better-than-CD quality audio, and Apple has failed to tap into it. For a considerably higher cost than a CD, some albums are sold on Blu-Ray discs, as well. These reproduce sound at the same level of quality at which it was captured. Of course, Blu-Ray music players don’t exist: you have to listen to these through your home theater system. Even if you *do* have a Blu-Ray drive on your computer—a rarity—and you can rip the high-resolution audio to your music library, you unfortunately won’t be able to get these files to play on any Apple device. Of course, none of Apple’s current devices have a large enough storage capacity for high-resolution audio to be practical, anyway. They used to have a device with a large enough capacity. But, you know. They got rid of that.

A startup company, PONO, has created a device and a music store specifically for high-resolution audio. They utilized crowd funding, and still haven’t gotten the operation off the ground yet. I hope they bring us the product that Apple didn’t, but they certainly won’t have the influence that Apple would have had.

Apple CEO Tim Cook said that there wasn’t a high enough demand for the iPod Classic to warrant a redesign, and since they could no longer source the parts, Apple decided it was time to throw in the towel. Maybe high-resolution audio is a gimmick. After all, you need really good speakers to hear any difference. People with untrained ears might not hear it at all. But wasn’t “1,000 songs in your pocket” kind of a gimmick, too? We didn’t really need that, but we got it, we loved it, and now, we depend on it. Apple is good at telling people what they want and creating a demand for something they didn’t know they needed. Isn’t that what the tech industry is all about?

And they can’t source parts? This is the com-

pany that bought an entire factory for manufacturing synthetic sapphire crystals. Why’d they do that? So the glass on the iPhone’s home button and camera lens would be *better* than the glass they’ve been using, and continue to use for the device’s screen. We’re talking less than half of a square inch of *special* glass per device. And they bought an entire manufacturing facility to ensure a steady supply of it. I can understand the company doing what they have to do to make money—that’s why corporations exist, of course—but how do you justify buying a factory for something nobody will notice, but not finding a way to manufacture the parts necessary to keep a small but loyal customer base happy?

I’m not bitter about the discontinuation of the iPod Classic. After all, previous generations have witnessed the death of vinyl, the 8-track, and the cassette. It’s only fair that the next medium in line would meet a similar fate—to be succeeded by something else. Still, I firmly believe that it would have been good business on Apple’s part to capitalize on the iPod Classic’s one advantage over everything else: its storage capacity. They really could have changed the game with a high-resolution device. Maybe it’s not time yet for high-rez audio to be a commodity. Maybe that’ll come later. Until then: “Hey, hey, what can I do?” -SJ

