
Chapter 1

Playing Digital Music



Windows XP has always had a rich digital music playback experience, thanks to the inclusion of Media Player for Windows XP (also called Windows Media Player 8, or WMP8) in the initial release of the operating system. Since then, Microsoft has shipped two major (and free) upgrades to WMP, Windows Media Player 9 Series (WMP9) and, most recently Windows Media Player 10 (WMP10), which I focus on exclusively in this book. If you don't yet have WMP10 for some reason, grab it now: It's a huge improvement over previous WMP versions. And did I mention it is free?

On the Web

WMP10 is available for download from Windows update (www.windowsupdate.com). **You can also download this release directly from the Microsoft Web site at** www.microsoft.com/windowsmedia.

Available exclusively to Windows XP users, WMP10 is what's known as an all-in-one media player because it works with a variety of media types all from a single interface. The all-in-one design means that WMP10 is conceivably (but not literally) the only program you'll need for listening to music and other audio, watching movies, recording music and video, managing locally stored media, listening to Internet radio stations, moving music to portable digital audio devices, creating audio CDs, playing DVD movies, and more. In the past, much of this functionality was broken out into separate products from a variety of vendors, and Microsoft's decision to create a single program that does it all has triggered the development of a variety of similar products from its competitors. Today, WMP10 builds on the basic design of its predecessors, while incorporating changes based on extensive usability studies and customer requests. In short WMP10 is more full-featured, and yet simpler to use than previous versions.

OK, that's all well and good from a marketing perspective. To you, the user, it's now possible to use WMP10 as an *end-to-end* product that is suitable for just about any audio or video media task you might have. So in this way, WMP10 really does deliver. As always, however, there are small gaps in functionality that will require you to turn to other solutions in some situations. In this chapter, you first look at the player and see how it interacts with the Internet, CD audio, and locally stored music files. If you've harbored any sort of anti-Microsoft feelings regarding their endless integration strategies, WMP10 might just turn you around. It's that good. But I'll also highlight a few competing solutions that might be of interest.

Discovering Windows Media Player 10

WMP10 is literally the centerpiece of the Windows XP digital media experience. With this player, you can:

- Listen to audio files stored on music CDs, your system, and the Internet.
- Purchase digital music files, or subscribe to digital music collections, from a variety of online music services.
- Rent and purchase digital videos from a variety of online video services.
- Rip (or copy) music from audio CDs to your system in a variety of formats.
- Organize audio and video media that is stored on your system.
- View DVD movies (requires a DVD drive and appropriate *decoder* software).
- Listen to Internet radio stations.
- Discover new music and video content on the Internet.
- Copy audio and video media from your system to a portable device, such as a Pocket PC, Portable Media Center, or portable digital audio player.
- Create personalized mix audio or data CDs (requires a CD-R or CD-RW drive).
- Personalize your digital media experience with the player's customizable user interface, visualizations, add-ons, and skins.
- View TV shows that were recorded on a Media Center PC.

To make this all possible, WMP10 presents an updated interface that's based on the Energy Blue user interface used by Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005 (MCE 2005), though it looks fine in other XP versions as well. Indeed, WMP10 is highly customizable, with various UI elements, such as the menu bar, that can be hidden, and a fully resizable Full Mode window that does away with the boxy outline of most Windows applications to take on a rounded, more organic look. And, as shown in Figure 1-1, you can resize the full-sized WMP window as you see fit, without having to switch to skin mode, as required in previous versions.

However, like previous WMP versions, you can still use the more limited Skin Mode if you'd like. A typical skin is shown in Figure 1-2.

More useful than Skin Mode, however, is a new taskbar-based toolbar mode that can optionally display WMP10 in the Windows taskbar when you minimize the application, as shown in Figure 1-3. To enable this mode, right-click an empty area of the XP taskbar and select Toolbars → Windows Media Player. From then on, when you minimize WMP10, you'll get the toolbar mode instead of a normally minimized application.

You take a closer look at the ways in which you can customize WMP10 in Chapter 2. There's a lot more you can do.



Figure 1-1: Three views of WMP10 in Full Mode, where all of its features are available and the window is almost fully resizable.



Figure 1-2: A sample skin, which generally provides the most commonly used functionality in a smaller package.



Figure 1-3: The new taskbar-based toolbar mode gets WMP10 out of your face, but still lets you access your music and videos.

Starting Windows Media Player 10

Are you having problems finding the player? Well, fear not: Windows Media Player 10 can be started in a variety of ways. First, it should be located in the most recently accessed portion of your Start Menu (that leftmost portion of the Start Menu), as shown in Figure 1-4. If you don't see a Windows Media Player icon in your Start Menu, open the All Programs item in the Start Menu to display the Programs menu. You will see a Windows Media Player shortcut there as well.



Figure 1-4: A shortcut for Windows Media Player will always appear in the All Programs menu, but you might have one in the Start Menu as well.

What you see here will vary depending on your system, of course. I have my Start Menu configured to display small icons, for example, but you may have kept yours on the default large icon mode. Also, the most recently accessed section will vary depending on which application you use. Apparently, I spend a lot of time in Word, Notepad, and Microsoft Paint.

You might want to place shortcuts to WMP10 on your desktop or Quick Launch bar as well. This is fairly easy to do and will give you ways to start WMP from a variety of locations that won't change, as the Start Menu can.

STARTING WINDOWS MEDIA PLAYER 10 FOR THE FIRST TIME

The very first time you run WMP10, you'll see a series of introductory screens that will walk you through some set-up tasks. For example, you will determine some privacy settings and which media formats you will manage with WMP10.

After you click Next in the first introductory screen, you'll be presented with the screen shown in Figure 1-5. Here you can determine whether the player transmits any semi-personal information about you to Microsoft servers in order to provide you with better services. I say *semi-private* because, frankly, I don't see any huge harm in the type of information the player sends—it basically amounts to a unique ID number for each player—and only the truly paranoid need to worry about that kind of thing.

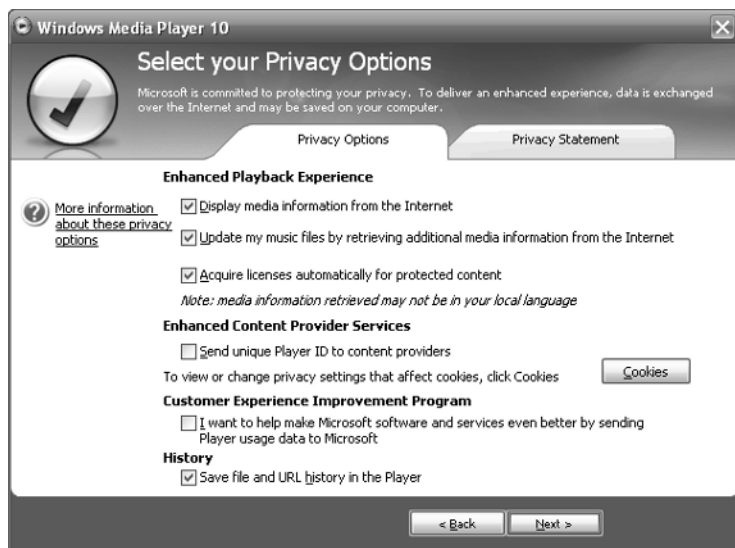


Figure 1-5: Microsoft is a bit sensitive about your private information because of complaints it's received in the past.

Click Next again and you're presented with a screen (Figure 1-6) that enables you to determine which file types WMP10 will be configured to handle. Unless you really know what you're doing and have a very strict desire to use other media player programs for the default types, my advice is to let WMP10 handle all of the media types it supports.

After you've completed the introductory setup, WMP10 will launch for the first time and display a screen similar to Figure 1-7. Here WMP10 provides you with links to Web content that describes the product's features. The next time you launch WMP10, you will be directed to the Media Guide, as described later in this chapter. How WMP10 behaves after that will depend on how it's configured.



Figure 1-6: Optionally, you can configure WMP10 to handle all or some of the common media file types you're going to run into.



Figure 1-7: Take a good look, because you won't be able to display this screen again after you've started using WMP10.

LAUNCHING WINDOWS MEDIA PLAYER FROM YOUR DESKTOP

To create a shortcut on your desktop, open the Start Menu and expand the All Programs item to display the Programs menu. Right-click Windows Media Player and drag it to an empty area of the desktop. When the pop-up menu appears, choose Copy Here.

LAUNCHING WINDOWS MEDIA PLAYER FROM THE QUICK LAUNCH BAR

To create a shortcut in your Quick Launch bar, the process is quite similar. First, make sure the taskbar is unlocked by right-clicking in a blank area of the taskbar and viewing the Lock the Taskbar option: If it has a checkmark next to it, select it to clear that option. Then, if the Quick Launch bar isn't visible (which it won't be, by default, in the Home Edition of Windows XP), right-click in a blank area of the taskbar and choose Toolbars → Quick Launch. Expand the toolbar so that there's room to drag a new icon by dragging the divider between the Quick Launch bar and the taskbar to the right. Now, open the Start Menu as before and drag the Windows Media Player icon down into the Quick Launch bar.

Exiting Windows Media Player

When you're done using WMP, you can close the application and recover any resources that it's taking up. You do so as you would for any Windows application: You can click the Close button in the player's title bar (it resembles an X), or choose Exit from the File menu (which is still available even though you can't see the WMP10 menu by default; simply press Alt+F to display it temporarily, and then choose Exit).

Another special situation is when the player is in skin mode. Each skin should supply a Close button, which will also resemble an X character. But the size, exact shape, and location of the Close button depends on the skin, so you might have to look hard to find it.

Power users can close WMP two other ways, both of which work in both Full and Skin Modes:

- You can right-click the Windows Media Player button in the taskbar and choose File → Exit from the pop-menu that appears.
- You can also make sure that WMP is the currently selected application, and then press Alt-F4 to close the window.

Using the Windows Media Player Media Guide

We live in a connected world, and Windows Media Player reflects that with its Media Guide, which aggregates digital media content from a variety of Web sites into a central place that's easy to navigate and use. Best of all, it changes every day, providing you with a constantly updated look at the latest music, movie trailers, radio stations, and other similar content, as shown in Figure 1-8.



Figure 1-8: The Media Guide provides Web-based music, movie, and radio content updated daily.

Basically a Web site that's piped into WMP10, the Media Guide is obviously accessible only if you're connected to the Internet. Microsoft has it set up to display by default when the player starts, but if you turn off that functionality or want to view it manually, select the Guide taskbar button and you'll be there in no time.

Unsurprising, you can navigate the Media Guide like a Web site: You can click hyperlinks to view new pages, and the page scrolls if there's more information than can be seen inside the window.

Navigating the Media Guide

Like a Web browser, the Media Guide includes standard navigational buttons like Back, Forward, Stop, Refresh, and Home, but you can also use keyboard equivalents if you'd like (Alt+left arrow or Backspace for Back, Alt+right arrow for Forward, Esc for Stop, and F5 for Refresh). This makes it convenient to use the Media Guide while in WMP10 and not need to open a separate browser window. If you attempt to use one of these keyboard commands and it doesn't work, select an empty portion of the Media Guide with the mouse and try again. Sometimes you might find that the focus has changed from the window, so the keyboard commands won't work.

Also note that the Media Guide is available only in Full Mode: You cannot access it while in Skin Mode.

Discovering New Music with Windows Media Player

Since the early days of Windows XP, the purpose of the Media Guide has changed somewhat. That's because Microsoft has a wide range of media-oriented services now, and the company is positioning its Media Guide as a front-end to those services. Here are some of the ways you can discover new music — and other content — in the WMP10 Media Guide.

- **Streaming audio and video** — Microsoft positions links to promotional streaming audio and video content right on the Media Guide home page. You look at this type of content later in the chapter.
- **Digital music purchasing** — The Microsoft MSN Music online music store, and other competing online music (and video) services are available directly from within WMP10. You look at these exciting options in Chapter 6.
- **Internet radio** — Microsoft offers free and subscription-based Internet radio services, which you examine later in this chapter.
- **Discover fun ways to customize WMP10** — Additionally, Microsoft offers links to skins and other WMP10 customizations from directly within the Media Guide.

Listening to Music

OK, you can start and stop WMP10, navigate around the Web-based Media Guide, and are at least aware that you can discover new music and video content using various online media services. As you may have guessed, this is only the tip of the iceberg, so don't start patting yourself on the back quite yet. One of the more common tasks you might want to accomplish is to play some music or other audio with the player. Let's take a look at the ways in which you might do so.

Note

Regardless of which media type you're playing, the standard Play/Pause, Stop, Previous, Next, Mute, and Volume transport controls found at the bottom of the player will be used to control playback. These controls work just like their counterparts on a CD or DVD player, and they're always visible in WMP10.

Playing Audio CDs

Many people have pretty extensive audio CD collections, which began replacing cassette tapes in the late 1980s. Audio CDs offer high-clarity, digital sound, and come in a pretty convenient form factor (music industry speak for *they're flat*). A decade after they first became popular, CDs are now everywhere, in portable players, cars, homes, and yes, computers. So it's no surprise that people often sit down at a computer, throw in an audio CD, and get to work.

If you do that in Windows XP, an auto-play dialog box will pop up and recommend that you play the CD with WMP10, as shown in Figure 1-9 (it actually defaults to Media Center, not to WMP10, if you are using Windows XP Media Center Edition).



Figure 1-9: When you insert an audio CD, an auto-play dialog box appears.

Working with High Definition CDs

In addition to playing the standard audio CDs, WMP can also play High Definition CDs (HDCDs), which offers improved fidelity over their more widely available cousins. HDCDs are still pretty rare, but as of this writing there are over 5000 titles available, many of which are of interest only to audiophiles. But hundreds of these titles are mainstream, pop and rock music CDs, so you never know. And like regular audio CDs, the price will come down over time so you might soon see them available in a retail store near you. Whatever happens, WMP10 will be ready.

If you're interested in this technology, here's a quick overview. HDCD is a patented process that improves on the fidelity of normal audio CDs while preserving musical information normally lost during the analog-to-digital recording process. According to Microsoft, HDCD provides more dynamic range, a more focused 3-D sound stage, and natural musical and vocal timbre for the full body, depth, and emotion of the original performance. HDCD-encoded CDs can be played on standard CD players — including the one in your PC — but the best experience is achieved only through the use of HDCD-equipped CD players.

For more information, head on over to the HDCD Web site (www.hdcdd.com), which also provides a way to purchase these discs online.

If you select Play audio CD using Windows Media Player, WMP10 will start up (or come to the front if it's already running) and begin playing the CD, as shown in Figure 1-10. Note that WMP10 will not move from the current mode when it does so. In other words, if you're looking at the Media Guide when you insert a CD, WMP10 will still display the Media Guide as it plays the CD.



Figure 1-10: It's subtle, but WMP10 is, in fact, playing an audio CD, even though it hasn't moved from the Media Guide.

Of course, for a variety of reasons, you might not see any of this. You might be running WMP10 in Skin Mode, for example. This isn't a problem: WMP10 can play audio CDs in Skin Mode as well.

Note

Sadly, Windows Media Player 10 cannot play (or record) DVD Audio.

Playing Digital Audio Files

In addition to audio CDs, many users like to play digital audio files stored locally on their computers. These files can take many forms, such as older WAV (“wave”) and MIDI format files, and newer MPEG Layer 3 (MP3), Advanced Audio Coding (AAC), and Windows Media Audio (WMA) format files. Digital audio files contain music or other audio content that you can listen to in the same way that you might listen to music on audio CDs. The only difference — as far as playback is concerned — is that the music is typically stored on your hard drive rather than on an audio CD.

In fact, for convenience, many users will want to copy all or part of their audio CD library to their hard drive. But it’s likely that you have a number of appropriate digital audio files on your system already. Let’s find out.

Cross-Reference

The procedure for copying your audio CD library to your hard drive is covered in Chapter 4.

FINDING MUSIC ON YOUR SYSTEM

While it’s possible to navigate around your system in My Computer and find audio files, WMP includes a search feature that will scan your system automatically for media.

To access this feature, choose Search for Media Files from the Tools menu (you can also launch this function by pressing F3 at any time while using WMP10). This brings up the cunningly titled Add to Library by Searching Computer dialog shown in Figure 1-11, which contains a variety of user interface elements that should be obvious to most users. Notable are the Advanced Options button, which reveals advanced search options for skipping certain kinds of digital media files, and the Browse button, which enables you to forgo an entire system search and navigate to a specific location. This can be useful if you have already created a number of files yourself and stored them some place and don’t want the Search to waste time on the rest of the hard drive.



Figure 1-11: The Add to Library by Searching Computer dialog box will find any digital media files on your system.

However you tinker with the options, eventually, you're going to click Search and go for it. This brings up another dialog box—confusingly, also titled Add to Library by Searching Computer—that displays a progress bar while it searches. If you don't touch any of the search options, and haven't created any audio files yourself (again, see Chapter 4 for how to do this), the search should end relatively quickly and find only a handful of files. So where are they? First you have to close the dialog box by pressing the Close button.

WHAT DID SEARCH FIND?

Well, unless you already have some decent digital audio on your system—most likely WMA or MP3 files—you're probably not going to find much. The player should find some sample files that are associated with Windows Movie Maker or the Pinball game, for example, and of course Windows comes with a few sample songs. To see these, switch to the Media Library by clicking the Library option on the WMP10 taskbar. You look at the Media Library more in Chapter 4, but for now, you should see something similar to Figure 1-12.

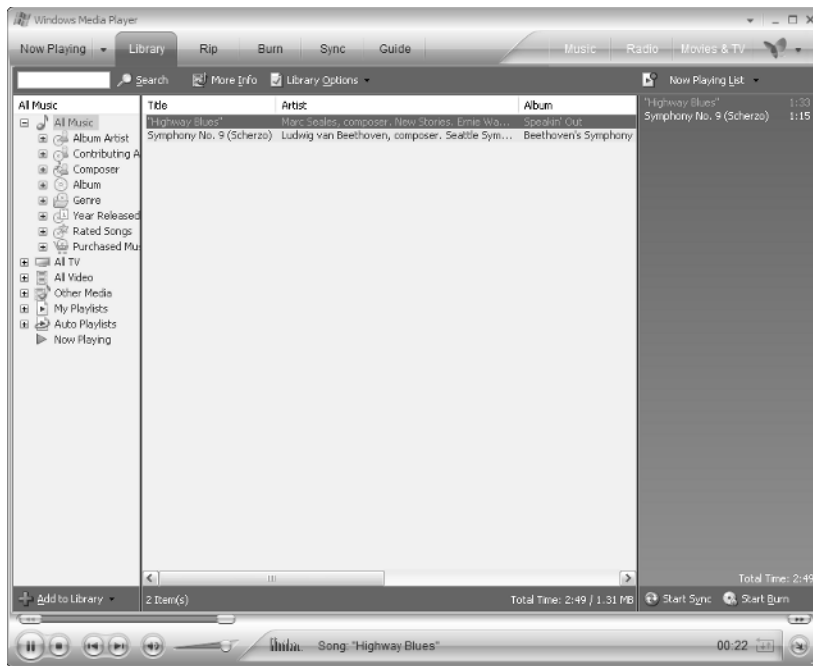


Figure 1-12: The Media Library displays all of the media files you have registered with WMP.

PLAYING DIGITAL MUSIC FILES

You can double-click media files in the Media Library to play them individually, but you can also tell the Media Library to play groups of songs in specific groups, such as All Music, songs from particular albums, songs by particular artists, or songs in a particular genre. Again, you look more at this functionality when you learn how to copy music from an audio CD. Only then will this feature really start to make sense. It all comes together in Chapter 4.

Listening to Internet Radio Stations

In addition to audio CDs and digital audio files, WMP can be used to play back music on Internet radio stations. Obviously, you'll need an Internet connection for this feature — the faster the connection, the better: A broadband Internet connection, such as that provided by a cable modem, will work better than a dial-up account for this feature.

In any case, an Internet radio station is exactly what it sounds like, a radio station that broadcasts over the Internet rather than over the airwaves. Actually, that's not strictly true: Many Internet radio stations are simply Internet versions of existing radio stations. And that's cool, because it lets you listen to your favorite Boston radio station, for example, from the jungles of Sri Lanka, if you want. Assuming you can get online.

The way you access Internet radio stations has changed a bit since the early XP days. Now, instead of a dedicated Radio Tuner button in its taskbar, WMP10 provides access to various Internet radio services through its integration with various Internet-based online media services. You look at these services in detail in Chapter 6, but since the Microsoft MSN Music service offers free Internet radio stations, you'll examine that option here.

First, you need to make sure that MSN Music is selected within WMP10. This is actually the default, so if you see a colorful MSN butterfly in the upper-right corner of WMP10, you're all set. If not, press the Online Store button (the small arrow to the right of the butterfly), as shown in Figure 1-13, and then select MSN Music from the list.

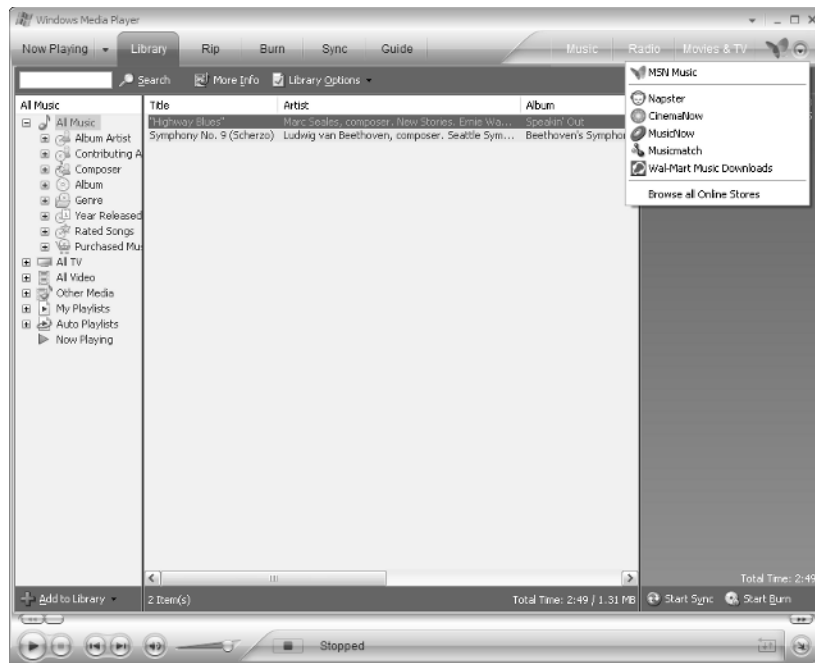


Figure 1-13: You can select one of a number of online services for use within WMP10.

Now, select the Radio button on the WMP10 taskbar. This launches the MSN Radio service within WMP10, as shown in Figure 1-14.

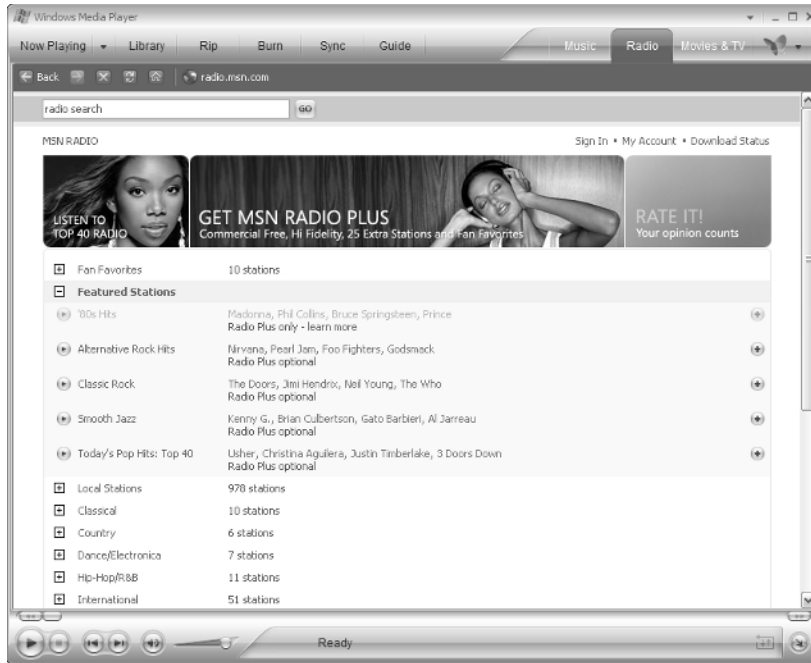


Figure 1-14: MSN Radio is hosted directly within WMP10.

Using Radio Presets

If you just want to test the Internet radio station feature, you can choose from a list of featured presets, which are listed as Fan Favorites and Featured Stations. Simply select a station under Featured Stations from the MSN Radio home page, or expand a category like local stations, Country, or Pop, and find a station you like. The local stations option is interesting. When you expand this choice, you're given the option to specify a state and city. Then, MSN Radio will display the stations in your area, as shown in Figure 1-15.

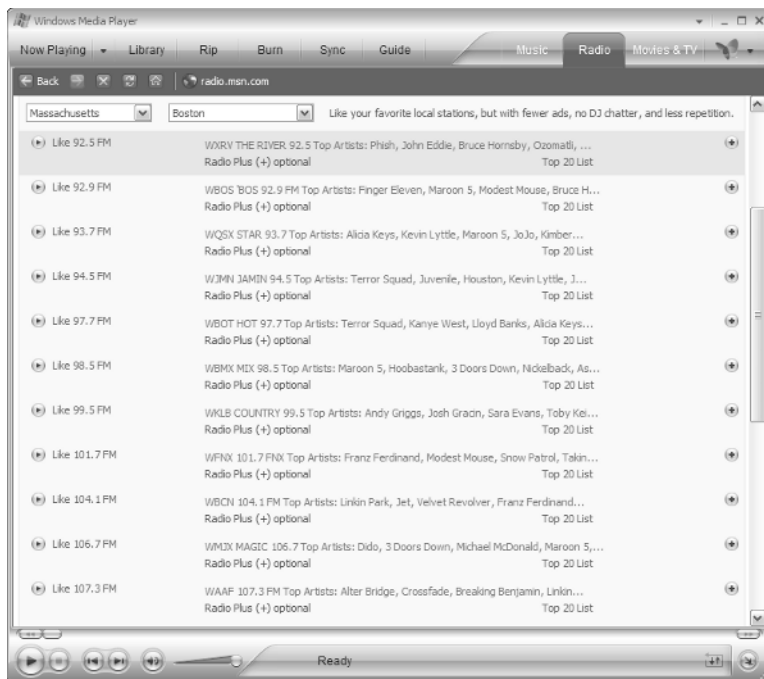


Figure 1-15: Like local radio stations? How about local radio stations with no DJ chatter? Now we're talking.

To play a radio station, click the small Play button next to its name. If you aren't logged into the service, you'll be prompted to do so. The logon you'll need is a standard Passport account, which you probably created when you opened a Hotmail or MSN account. If you don't have one, MSN Music will walk you through the process of creating one. In any event, once you're logged on, WMP10 will navigate to the Now Playing view and begin playing the radio station you selected (Figure 1-16).

WMP10 will *buffer* the content coming from the station so that it is storing several seconds of audio before it begins playing. This way, the player is always behind a few seconds, but it can compensate for slowness in the connection or a low-quality connection that peaks and spikes.

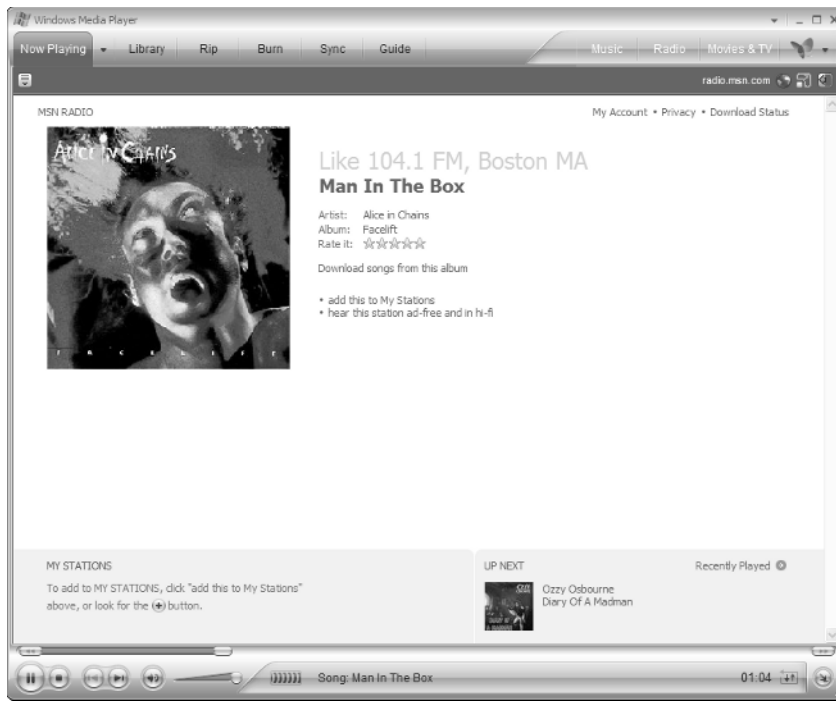


Figure 1-16: MSN Radio is hosted directly within WMP10.

Tip

By default, you can only access the free radio stations that are part of the base MSN Radio service. To access higher-quality radio stations with no ads, you can optionally subscribe to MSN Radio Plus for a low monthly fee. You can find out more about this service at <http://radio.msn.com/>.

Adding a Radio Station to My Stations

Microsoft's list of featured stations is a good start, but it's likely that you're going to want to work with your own list of presets. Fortunately, Microsoft has created a customizable list of station presets it calls My Stations. To add a station to My Stations, simply click the "add this to My Stations" link in Now Playing. WMP10 will then display a note mentioning that the station was added, as shown in Figure 1-17.



Figure 1-17: Adding a new radio station to your My Stations list is as easy as clicking a link.

Alternatively, you can add stations to your My Stations list by navigating to the MSN Radio home page and clicking the “+” button found to the right of each station description. As you add stations to your My Stations list, they appear at the top of the MSN Radio home page, as shown in Figure 1-18. This is one of the reasons Microsoft wants you to log on when you access the service.

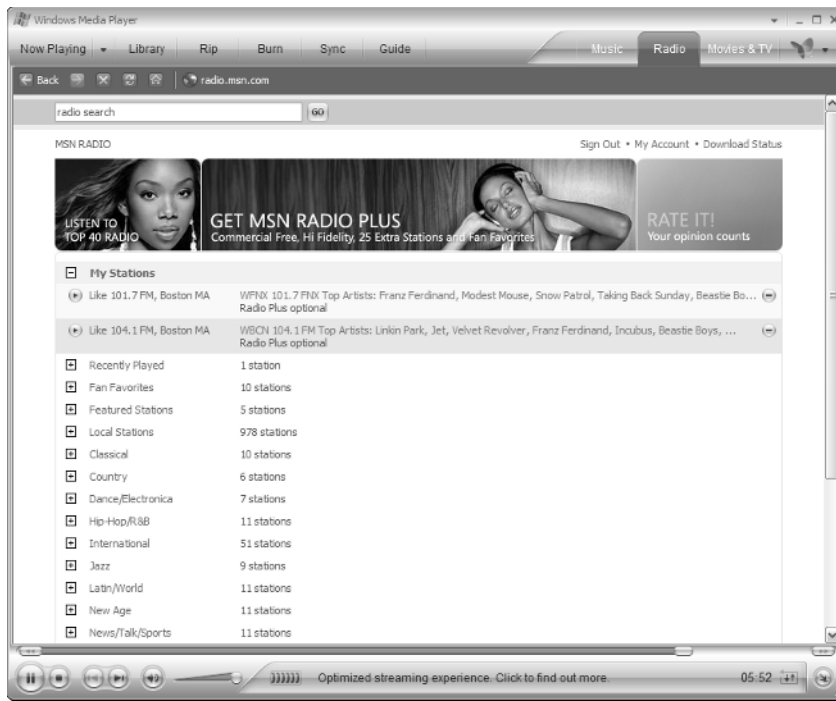


Figure 1-18: As you add radio stations to the My Stations list, MSN Radio displays them right at the top of its home page.

Removing a Station from a Presets List

Conversely, you can remove a station from your My Stations list by navigating to the MSN Radio home page and clicking the “–” button to the right of its description. Be careful when you do this, however: WMP10 does not provide a confirmation dialog box, so once you click the button, the station will be removed immediately.

Playing Streaming Audio Files

There’s one final type of digital audio file you can play with WMP: Streaming files. A file that is *streamed* is delivered across the Internet, and played in real time, without downloading the entire file first. In the old days, this wasn’t possible: A digital media file would have to be completely downloaded before you could begin playing it. But with streaming media, a file can be played as its downloaded. That makes a huge difference on low-bandwidth environments, such as the Internet.

If streaming media sounds a bit like the Internet radio stations you examined before, there's a reason, as the technology is similar. The difference, however, is that streaming media deals with individual files, like a single song, rather than a 24/7 sound source, such as a radio station. And streaming media is more of an *on-demand* technology than Internet radio: You choose the media file to play back, click a link, and it happens.

Streaming media quality is dependent on the quality of your Internet connection. For this reason, many sources of streaming media will offer this media at a variety of quality levels, so that low-bandwidth dial-up users can choose to stream a lower-quality file, while cable modem users might choose a higher-quality file that consumes more bandwidth. And of course, there are streaming video files as well as audio files.

Finding Streaming Media Files

The Microsoft Media Guide, discussed earlier in this chapter, is an obvious place to go for streaming media. You can load the Media Guide and navigate to the Music section (denoted by the Music tab at the top of the Guide page inside of the player, not to be confused with a Music toolbar button you might see at the top of WMP), for example, and select media to stream. Though the structure and user interface of the Media Guide is likely to change over time, you'll see something similar to Figure 1-19. In addition to links to actual audio streams, many of these samples include links to purchase music online or on CD.



Figure 1-19: The Media Guide offers a variety of streaming media clips.

The Media Guide also enables you to find music by category or artist name, while linking to record company Web sites that provide streaming and downloadable music. In Figure 1-20, a link to a streaming media file was launched in WMP10 and is now streaming.

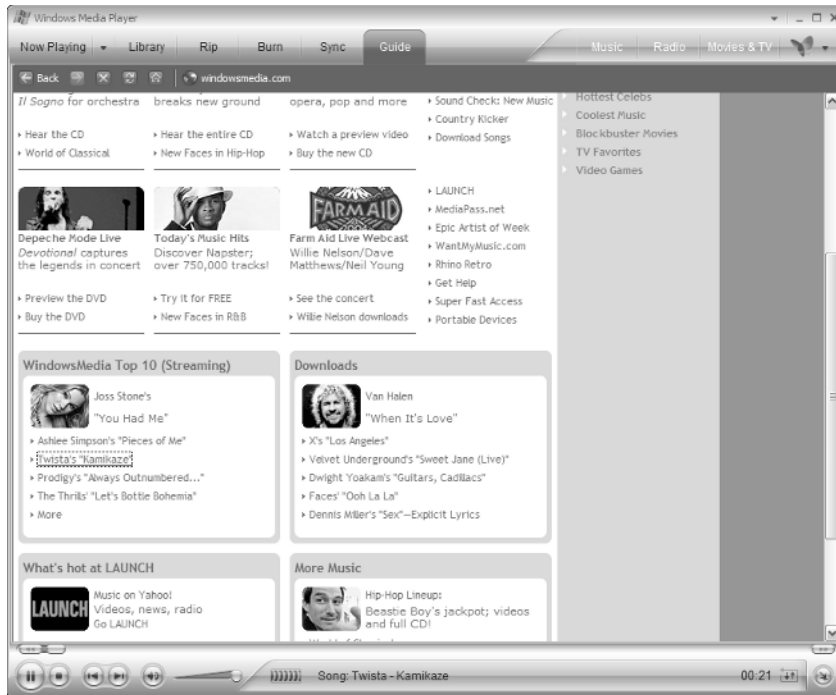


Figure 1-20: A streaming audio file playing in WMP10.

Understanding and Using Other Streaming Media Formats

Interestingly, streaming media is the one area in which Microsoft's end-to-end approach falls short. This is because WMP does not support two of the most popular streaming media formats, those provided by RealNetworks and Apple Computer. Microsoft's streaming audio and video formats, while technically superior, currently trail market leader RealNetworks, with its RealAudio and RealVideo formats, in real world usage. And although use of Microsoft's streaming media formats far outpaces Apple Computer's QuickTime technology, QuickTime is still very popular, especially with movie studios offering trailers on the Web.

For a variety of reasons, Microsoft doesn't offer the ability to play RealNetworks or Apple formats through WMP. So if you want to take advantage of these formats, which are quite prevalent on the Web, you'll need to download the RealNetworks RealPlayer and Apple QuickTime players. There's just no way around it, at least not until Microsoft's formats become more pervasive or WMP incorporates the technology from these other players.

REALNETWORKS REALPLAYER

RealPlayer is available from the RealNetworks Web site (www.real.com) in two versions, a free basic player, and a Plus version for which you must pay about \$20. Like WMP, RealPlayer is an all-in-one media player that offers a host of media playback, recording, and organizational features. RealPlayer 10.5 is shown in Figure 1-21.

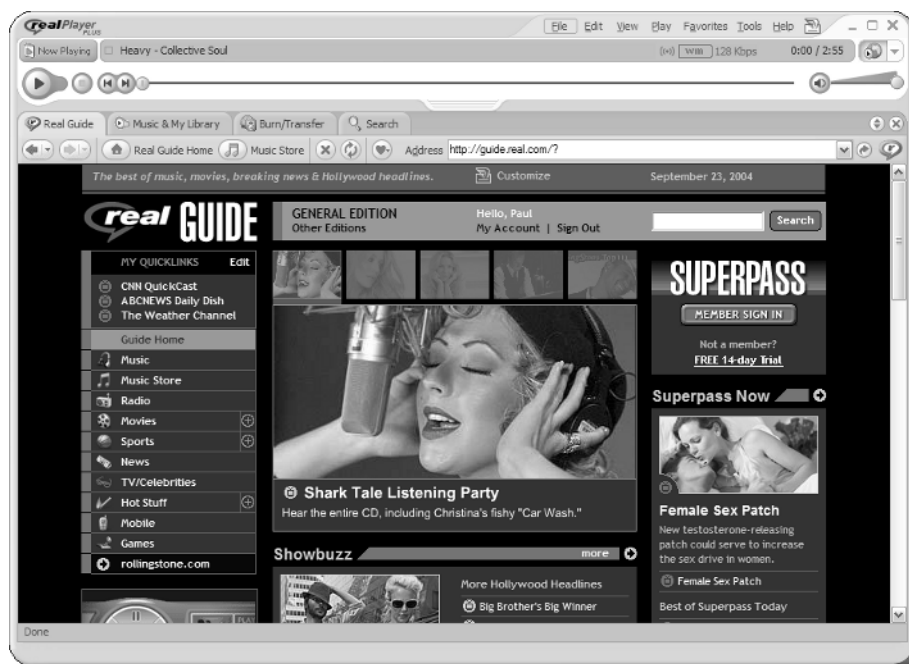


Figure 1-21: RealPlayer is similar to WMP10, but doesn't offer access to the wide range of online services you can find in Microsoft's offering.

APPLE QUICKTIME PLAYER

Apple Computer also offers free and “Pro” versions of its excellent QuickTime player, which doesn’t offer the wide range of features in WMP but does include some interesting streaming channels that Apple calls QuickTime TV.

Figure 1-22 shows both RealPlayer and QuickTime running in Windows XP.



Figure 1-22: Until Microsoft supports the QuickTime format, you’ll need to download Apple Computer’s QuickTime Player.

Playing Music with Media Center

Media Center owners running Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005 have access to a much more visual audio and music playback experience. That’s because XP Media Center supports a remote control-enabled user interface that works great on a TV set and with your home stereo, providing you with a more natural setting from which to enjoy music on locally stored files, CDs, Internet radio, or streaming audio. In this section, you look at how you can enjoy music digitally with XP Media Center Edition.

Note

Unlike Windows XP Home Edition or Professional Edition, you cannot purchase Windows XP Media Center Edition in a retail store. Instead, you can only obtain this version of Windows by buying a new Media Center PC. Companies such as Dell, Gateway, and HP market these PCs, which typically feature a remote control and TV interface card.

Playing Digital Audio Files with Media Center

After you launch the Media Center application (Figure 1-23), choose My Music.

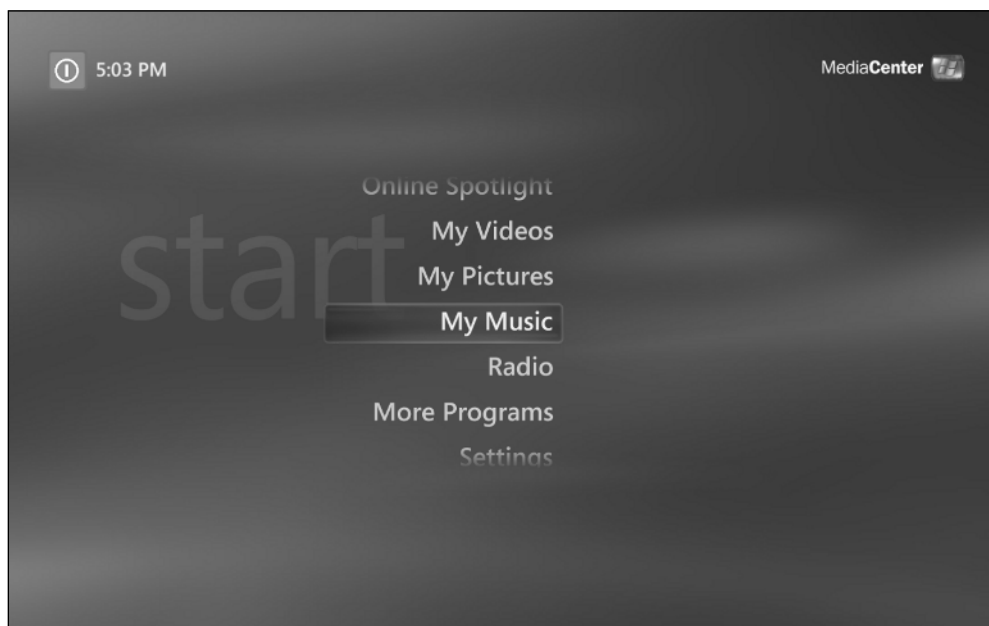


Figure 1-23: What's blue and green all over? It's Media Center.

My Music integrates with WMP and accesses the same Media Library that you have set up in that application. So whatever digital audio files you have in WMP10, you will see in Media Center as well. As you increase your collection of digital music, the Media Center interface gets more attractive and useful. In Figure 1-24, you can see what my family's Media Center PC looks like.

To play an individual song, select an album, or navigate through the Artists, Songs, or Playlists sections. For purposes of this demonstration, I'll select the album *Achtung Baby* by U2, as shown in Figure 1-25.



Figure 1-24: My Music presents different views to your music collection, including Album view, shown here.



Figure 1-25: In Album Details view, you can see all of the songs on the album, and access different music-related tasks.

To play the album, just click the Play button. The Now Playing view is shown in Figure 1-26.



Figure 1-26: By default, Media Center displays the current song's album art when playing.

Playing CD Music with Media Center

If you have a Media Center PC and insert an audio CD, by default the auto-play dialog box will prompt you to play back the CD with Media Center (refer to Figure 1-9). If you choose this option, Media Center launches and navigates directly to the Now Playing view, with the CD displayed. This is shown in Figure 1-27.



Figure 1-27: From Media Center, you can play back—or even *rip* (or copy)—your audio CDs.

Playing Internet Radio with Media Center

From the Media Center start page, choose Radio to visit the Radio page, as shown in Figure 1-28.

What you see here will depend largely on which services and hardware you have installed on your system. Unfortunately, there was no interface to MSN Radio at the time this book was written, though I expect it to be added by the time you read this, so you'd have to be a member of a subscription radio service like Napster to access Internet radio from within Media Center. Napster's service is shown in Figure 1-29.

Also, if your Media Center PC has a hardware radio tuner installed, you will see an interface for FM radio stations.

Note

One cool feature of Media Center is how well it integrates with WMP10. For example, if you're playing music in WMP10 and decide you'd like to enjoy that same music in Media Center instead, you can just launch Media Center and the music keeps playing, without a hitch or pause.

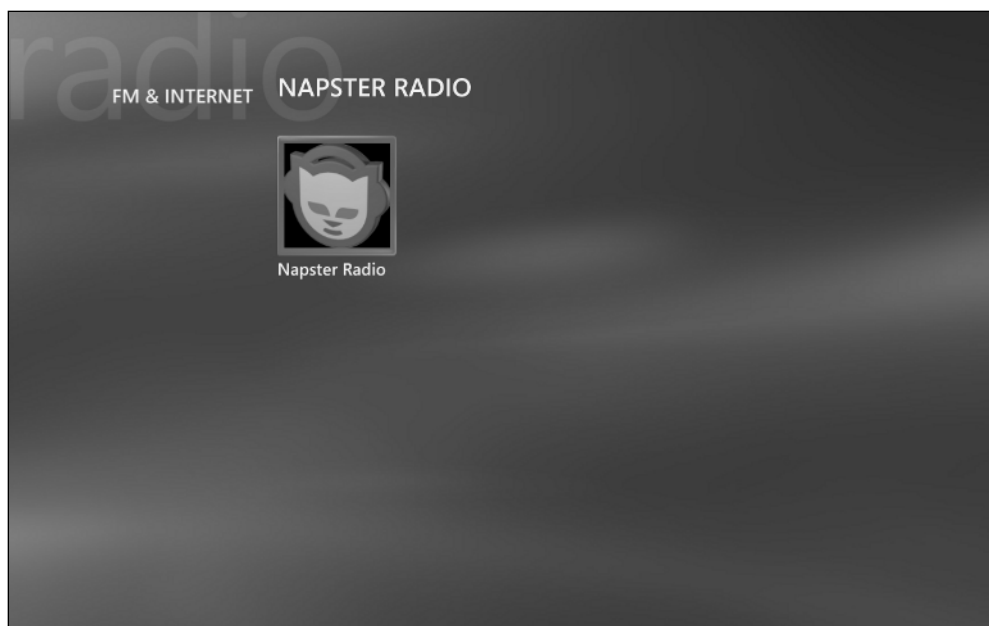


Figure 1-28: The Media Center Radio screen.

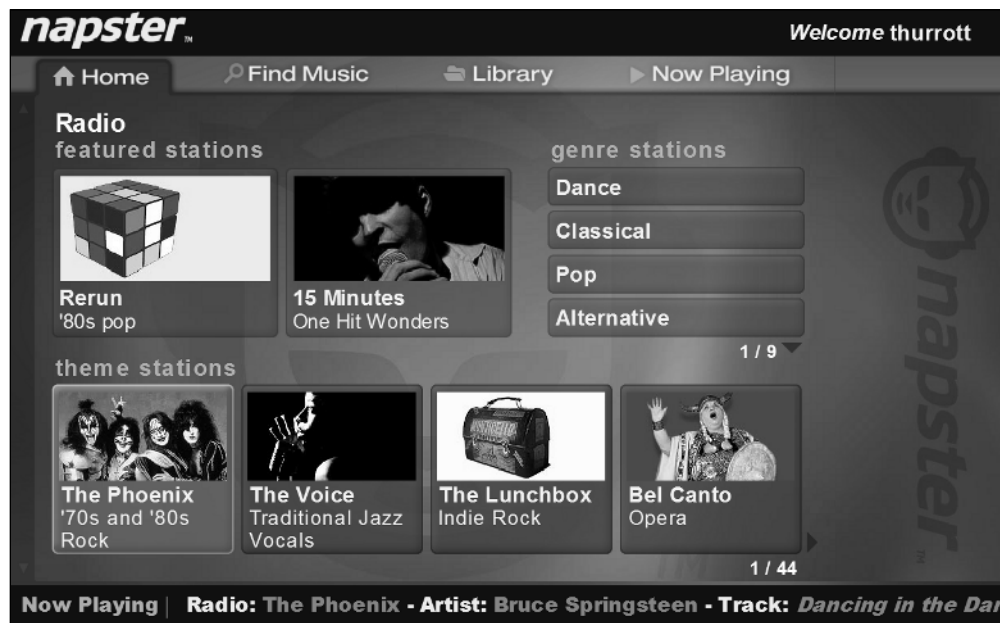


Figure 1-29: Napster is just one of many online services to offer streaming Internet radio services.

Having Fun with Media Playback: A Guide to the Best Windows Media Player Add-ons

In addition to the basic audio playback features discussed throughout this chapter, a number of playback features such as playlists and queues are covered in future chapters. But there are also a number of things you can do to have a bit of fun when playing back digital music, regardless of the source. In this section, you'll examine some of those features.

Using Visualizations to Put a Mesmerizing Face on Your Music

While you're playing back music in WMP10, you can access a number of interesting Now Playing views, most of which are more fully described in Chapter 2. By default, when you play music and switch to Now Playing, you're presented with the Info Center View, shown in Figure 1-30. This view shows the album art for the current song along with other related information.



Figure 1-30: The Info Center view is useful, if utilitarian.

However, you can also display pretty animated visualizations, which dance across the screen in various patterns, colors, and geometric shapes. WMP10 ships with a wide number of visualizations, but unfortunately they're a bit hidden. Here's how you turn them on.

First, start playing back some music. This can be a local file, a streaming file, or even a song from an Internet radio station. Then navigate to Now Playing and click the Now Playing Options button, which can be found to the left of the text that reads *Info Center View*, as shown in Figure 1-31.



Figure 1-31: Select a visualization to spice things up a bit.

To display a visualization, choose Visualizations and then the name of the visualization you want. For example, if you choose Visualizations, then Battery, and then Randomize, WMP10 will resemble Figure 1-32. Experiment with the various visualizations you have and find the one you like the most. Better yet, check out full screen mode, which is particularly nice for visualizations. To enable this mode, either click the View Full Screen button near the top of the WMP10 window or press Alt+Enter. To leave full screen, strike the Esc key.



Figure 1-32: Visualizations are pretty animated graphics.

Tip

Media Center users can display visualizations too and, as you might expect, the visualizations you can access from Media Center are identical to those offered by WMP10.

Geek Out with Plus! Dancer (Windows Dancer in MCE 2005)

If you purchased Microsoft Plus! Digital Media Edition (www.microsoft.com/windows/plus/dme/dmehome.asp) or a Media Center PC running Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005, you have access to a fun new feature called Plus! Dancer (Windows Dancer in Media Center Edition; I'll just call it Dancer from now on). This neat little screen hack presents a funny little character, or characters, that you can place onscreen wherever you'd like. As music plays in WMP10, the character begins dancing as shown in Figure 1-33.

To change Dancer settings, click the Dancer tray icon.



Figure 1-33: The Dancer dances as the music plays.

Have a Party with Plus! Party Mode (Windows Party Mode in MCE 2005)

Another neat feature that's available in both Plus! Digital Media Edition and Windows XP Media Center Edition is Plus! Party Mode (Windows Party Mode in Media Center). Party Mode provides a fun full-screen front-end for WMP10 that turns your PC into a digital jukebox that's perfect for parties. Here's how it works. You run Party Mode and configure it using a settings page, shown in Figure 1-34, which determines how much access your party guests will have to the song selection, what skin to display, and other options.

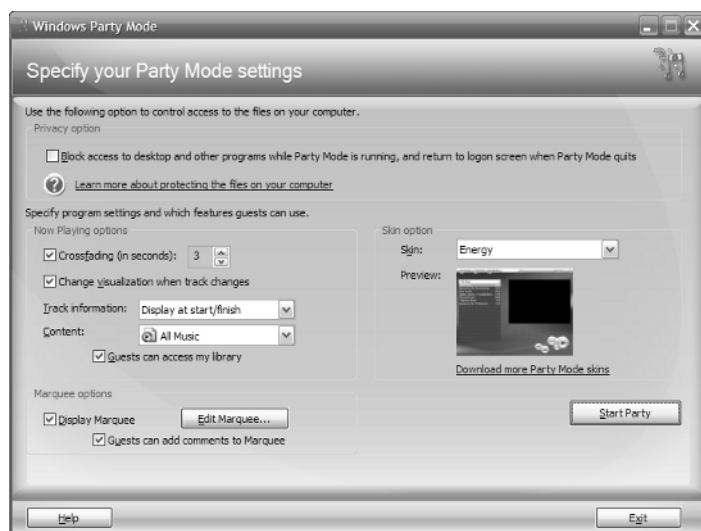


Figure 1-34: Party Mode lets you use your PC as an entertainment center during parties and other events.

Then press Start Party to ...ahem... start the party. In its full screen display, Party Mode offers access to the playlist you've selected, lets guests modify the playlist (if you set up Party Mode to allow that access), lets guests optionally add text to a scrolling marquee, and provides large onscreen knobs for controlling the music. Party Mode is shown in Figure 1-35.

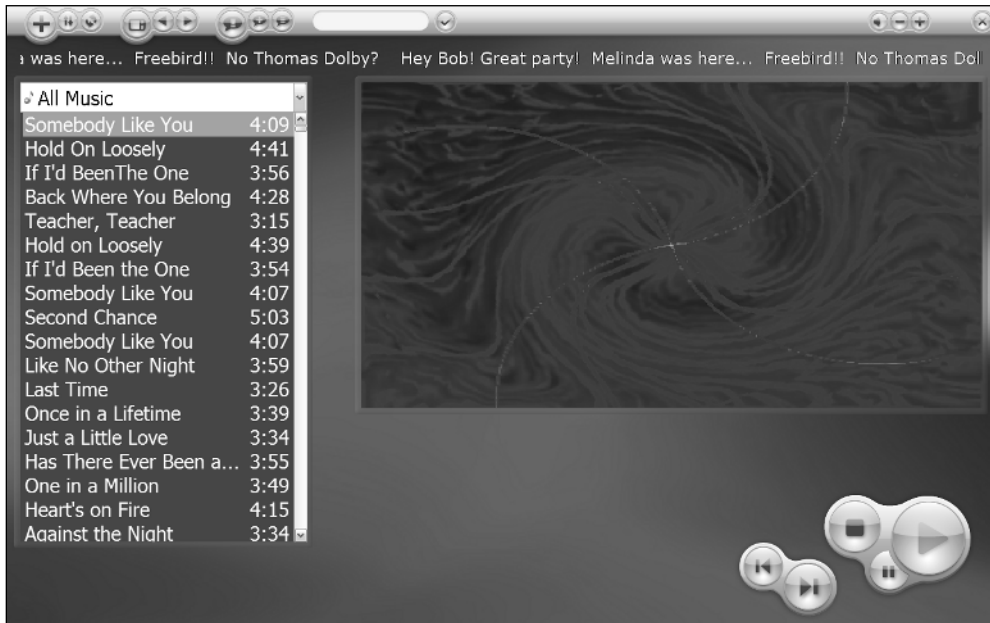


Figure 1-35: Party Mode: Fun or lame, depending on your age, I guess.

Summary

Windows XP with Windows Media Player 10 and, optionally, Media Center Edition 2005, provides a rich environment for playing back music from a variety of sources, including local files, audio CDs, streaming audio, Internet radio, and others. With WMP10, you can listen to music, find radio stations on the Internet, and perform other related tasks. Add Media Center to the mix, and your choices get more visual, with cool TV-based interfaces to popular digital music tasks. Finally, digital media add-ons, like WMP10 Visualizations, Dancers, and Party Mode, can help you take your enjoyment of digital music to the next level.

Now that you can use the most basic features of WMP10, it's time to turn it up a notch. In Chapter 2, you examine how to configure and tune WMP 10 with playlists, the Now Playing list, skins, plug-ins, and other features.

