

Review: Google Music Plan Solid, Serendipitous

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — Google's new music service offers a lot of eye candy to go with the tunes. The song selection of around 18 million tracks is comparable to popular services such as Spotify and Rhapsody, and a myriad of playlists curated along different genres provides a big playground for music lovers.

The All Access service represents Google's attempt to grab a bigger piece of the digital music market as more people stream songs over mobile phones. Such services are also meant to further wed smartphone users to Google's Android operating system, where the search leader makes money from advertising and transactions on its digital content store, Google Play.

For a monthly fee, All Access lets you listen to as much music as you want over an Internet connection. You can also download songs onto mobile devices for smooth playback later when you don't have cellphone or Wi-Fi access.

It's worth a try for the discounted monthly rate of \$8 if you sign up by the end of June. Those who sign up later will pay \$10 a month, the same amount charged by the main competitors, Spotify and Rhapsody. Either way, you get the first month free and can cancel at any time. All Access works on the free Google Play Music app for Android devices and over Web browsers on computers — but not on the iPhone. (Spotify and Rhapsody work on both Android and the iPhone).

Visually, the app that I tested on Google's Nexus 4 smartphone is engaging. Iterating on the list-heavy layouts of its competitors, Google Play Music jazzes up the interface by adding plenty of big artist photos along with little animations, including bouncing equalizer bars and screen-size cover art that moves slowly back and forth when a song is playing.

Some of the touch features require a pixie-like dexterity, though. It's one downside to this solid entrant to the world of unlimited music streaming.

You can re-order songs that are in your queue on the fly — something not offered by either Spotify or Rhapsody. But this takes gripping a very thin digital handle to the left of a song title and sliding it up or down. Because it's much thinner than the thumb I'm using to grip it, I ended up playing songs that I only wanted to move, or deleting them from the queue by accident (which takes a swipe right or left).

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The options icon on each song title (three dots stacked on top of each other) is also tiny and caused frequent mis-taps. This means a lot of accidentally playing songs and mistakenly erasing queues that I had spent time creating.

I wasn't that impressed by the service's recommendations, although perhaps it's because I haven't used it that much. It recommended artists "like Madonna" even though I don't really listen to the Material Girl. The top recommendations were the same ones I saw onstage during Google's official unveiling of All Access last week. Digging a little deeper revealed recommendations for other works by artists whose songs I already own, like Sara Bareilles or Maroon 5. But I could have looked that up on my own.

Where the service starts to get interesting is in its radio function. Like other Internet radio plans, it takes some traits of a particular song and finds others like it somehow. Doing this with Reggie Watts' comedic beat-box tune "(bleep) (bleep) Stack," I discovered the song fits within a kind of sub-genre of humorous rappers, after it played Flight of the Conchords' "Hiphopotamus vs. Rhymenoceros," and MC Chris' "I Want Candy." I gave these songs a digital thumbs up, which marks them in a playlist so I can find them later.

Google Play Music attempts to do something that Samsung Electronics Co.'s Music Hub did before it. Music Hub, which launched last July on Samsung's Galaxy S III phone, blended four things: a music store, an online storage service, unlimited song streaming and an Internet radio player.

Google's app does all those things. In addition, because it comes as an update to the existing Google Play Music app, it preserved the music I took the trouble of uploading to my Google Music storage space prior to the revamp.

When Google first launched its music store in November 2011, it merely sold songs or albums a la carte. But it offered users free online storage for up to 20,000 songs, including ones they had bought at other stores such as Apple Inc.'s iTunes.

Starting last December, Google's uploader software added the ability to scan your hard drive for songs and match them with songs Google already has on its servers. That way, you have to upload only the songs Google didn't recognize. With that, your personal library of owned songs still exists, but the sense of ownership has blurred.

With All Access, you still see your library of owned songs in a place called My Library on the Google Play Music app. A lot of that music is stored online, or in the cloud, and requires an Internet connection to listen to. But you can "pin" a song to

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download a copy for offline listening, something that Google Play Music and other cloud lockers had offered already.

You can toggle the view in My Library to see everything you can access in the cloud, or just the stuff you can access on the device without a cellular or Wi-Fi connection. If you start running out of space, you basically "unpin" the song to free up the memory, even though your ownership still exists in the cloud.

All Access also allows you to "pin" songs you don't own. Copies will get downloaded for offline play. Or you can mark songs as favorites by adding them to My Library in the cloud. But because those favorites are stored in the same place as songs you actually own, your sense of ownership will suffer a hit. You might not know which is which until the All Access songs disappear should you ever stop paying the monthly fee.

You can share songs from the app to the Google Plus social network, but there's no Facebook integration as is the case with Spotify and Rhapsody. It also doesn't integrate with Twitter's new (hash)music service, the way Rdio and Spotify do quite well.

Google's new music service covers the fundamentals of unlimited on-demand music with Google-like solid execution. And with the radio function running on Google's vaunted ability to tweak algorithms, it adds a healthy dose of serendipity to the mix, turning up songs and artists I wouldn't have discovered on my own.

That puts it at least on an equal footing with streaming services that have come before it and will persuade some subscribers of those services to switch. Although you need an Android phone to use All Access fully, I don't believe that in itself will get Apple fans to drop their iPhones. But it's one more nice thing Android has going for it.

About All Access:

Google Inc.'s new streaming service lets you listen to as much music as you want over an Internet connection. You can also download songs onto mobile devices for offline use as long as your subscription is active. It costs \$8 a month if you sign up for a free trial by June 30, and \$10 after that. You need an Android device to get the full experience. With Google's free Google Play Music app for Android, you'll also be able to listen to music you bought through Google Play and elsewhere.

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