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MUSIC

The iPod is back. Here's what's driving the revival of the obsolete music player

The #iPod hashtag on Instagram currently points to 1.8 million posts, and YouTube overflows with tutorial videos.

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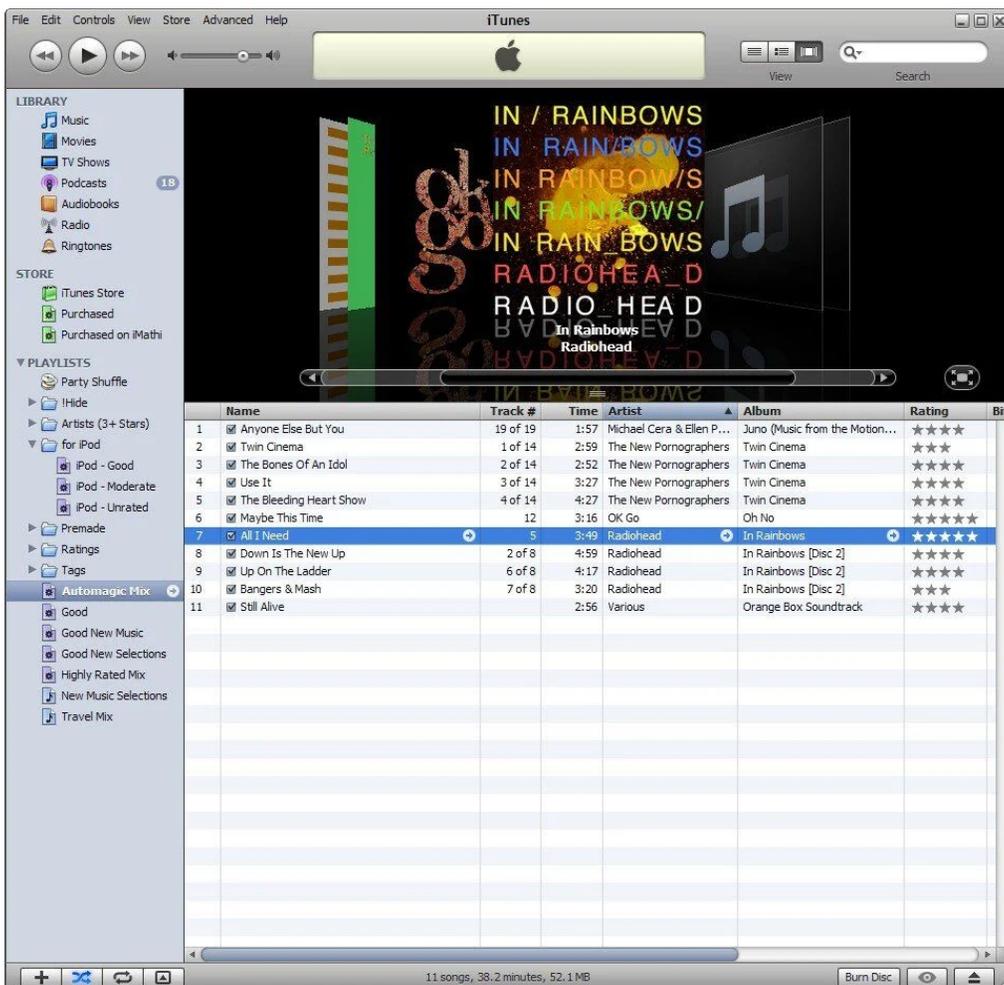
By **Stuart Berman** Special to the Star

When Steve Jobs unveiled the iPod in October 2001, his sales pitch for Apple's first portable digital-music player trumpeted its ability to put 1,000 songs in your pocket. But a decade later, the advent of iPhones and streaming services had already made mp3s seem as archaic as eight-track tapes, by which point the iPod more accurately represented 1,000 songs in your junk drawer.

That's where musician Kat Burns' iPod Mini had lived since she last updated it in 2012, a once cutting-edge piece of technology demoted to the status of paper clips and rubber bands. However, after years of exchanging passing glances with her neglected gizmo, Burns decided to boot it up a few weeks ago and give the ol' click wheel a spin. And the experience of scrolling through her iPod library proved oddly emotional — like flipping through an old high school yearbook, but with the dorky photos replaced by Constantines and Born Ruffians songs, and other Chicago-font reminders of a time when Burns' band, Forest City Lovers, were fixtures in the late-2000s Toronto indie scene.

“Back then, you would burn all your CDs into iTunes and then you'd make these

epic playlists that you could put on your iPod, which was so sweet,” said Burns, who’s currently based in Prince Edward County and records under the name Kashka. “Even when (file-sharing services) Napster and Limewire were around, there was the thrill of hearing something cool from a friend, and you’d go seek it out and download it.



During the iPod era, you’d burn CDs into iTunes or add music purchased from the iTunes store.

“I don’t know what happened when iTunes turned into Apple Music,” Burns added, “but all my stuff from my old iTunes (on my computer) basically disappeared unless I purchased it from the iTunes store. All these amazing artists that I had — like, all these pop-punk songs I had ripped from Napster when I was 18 — were gone. But they were still on this iPod!”

Burns turned her iPod-rediscovery adventures into an Instagram reel, where she posed the question: “Is 2026 the year we return to slow music?”





Musician Kat Burns, who records as Kashka, turned her iPod-rediscovery adventures into an Instagram reel.

David Leyes

A growing community of online iPod enthusiasts would concur. The #iPod hashtag on Instagram currently points to 1.8 million posts, while YouTube is overflowing with tutorial videos on how to revive and upgrade your player.

And if you're too timid to go the DIY fixer-upper route, you can head over to the Danforth location of Apple-product maintenance shop iRepair, where owner Michael Rosenberg offers a suite of services that could best be described as "Pimp My Pod," tricking out your old device with a new terabyte hard drive and fresh battery that can last up to 30 hours.

"The greatest thing is having these older people coming in with their iPods and they're like, 'Oh my God, I got my playlists back!'" Rosenberg said. "It's the nicest feeling in the world to pop a battery into somebody's old iPod and, for 45 bucks, they walk out so happy.

"It's like they've got their old friend back."

Look who's listening

If the past half-century has taught us anything, it's that every music format has its revival moment. Once consigned to yard-sale and Goodwill purgatory during the peak CD era, vinyl has enjoyed a dramatic sales upswing that's lasted for nearly two decades, presenting itself as a tactile alternative to digital music's domination in the 21st century.

In fact, vinyl has become such a prestige product — with \$50 for a standard new release becoming the norm — it's spurred a reactionary demand for the more cheaply produced pleasures of CDs and even cassettes, particularly among indie musicians who want to sell product at their merch tables, but can't foot the high production costs or endure the long turnaround times of a vinyl shipment.

Unlike a vintage vinyl record, the iPod doesn't really seem like something to be romanticized. After all, this was a mass-market corporate product that effectively mainstreamed the idea that you don't need to buy physical media anymore, with the promotional muscle to turn wearing white wired earbuds into the hipster version of rocking gold chains and transform rising artists into overnight superstars with their ubiquitous ads.

And yet, the iPod has re-emerged as a sentimental symbol of all that's been lost as the listening experience got absorbed into our smartphones, where practically every song in the history of recorded music is instantly accessible with a simple Siri

command.



Apple CEO Steve Jobs introduced the iPod Mini at a tech conference in January 2004.

Marcio Jose Sanchez/Associated Press file photo

Emily White is a New York-based music-tech product adviser who publishes the *emwhitenoise* newsletter, in which she recently conducted a survey of mp3-player users and discovered there was a lot more driving people back to iPods than the simple nostalgic-novelty factor. Where the sustained interest in vinyl has been partly fuelled by an appreciation for the artwork and liner-note details that have been greatly diminished in the digital-music experience, White discovered that the iPod's greatest attribute in 2026 is what it *doesn't* offer versus what it does.

"Every generation is reacting against something from the previous generation," White told the Star. "If you think about millennials like me, we came up in an era that's very much been dominated by convenience. Not just in terms of music and the transition from ownership to access, but in terms of Uber and DoorDash and having a laundry service and really optimizing for maximum convenience. So what's Gen Z rebelling against? Instant access. For a generation that has grown up totally online, you rebel by going offline.

"And so, yes, there's definitely a Y2K-nostalgia aspect to the iPod resurgence, but also, from the people I spoke to, it felt like more of a practical solution to just feeling really overwhelmed by having your whole life online. There's no algorithm with the iPod. You're not getting pinged with notifications. It doesn't even connect to Wi-Fi. There are no advertisements. It's like a balm against a life that's very much otherwise online."

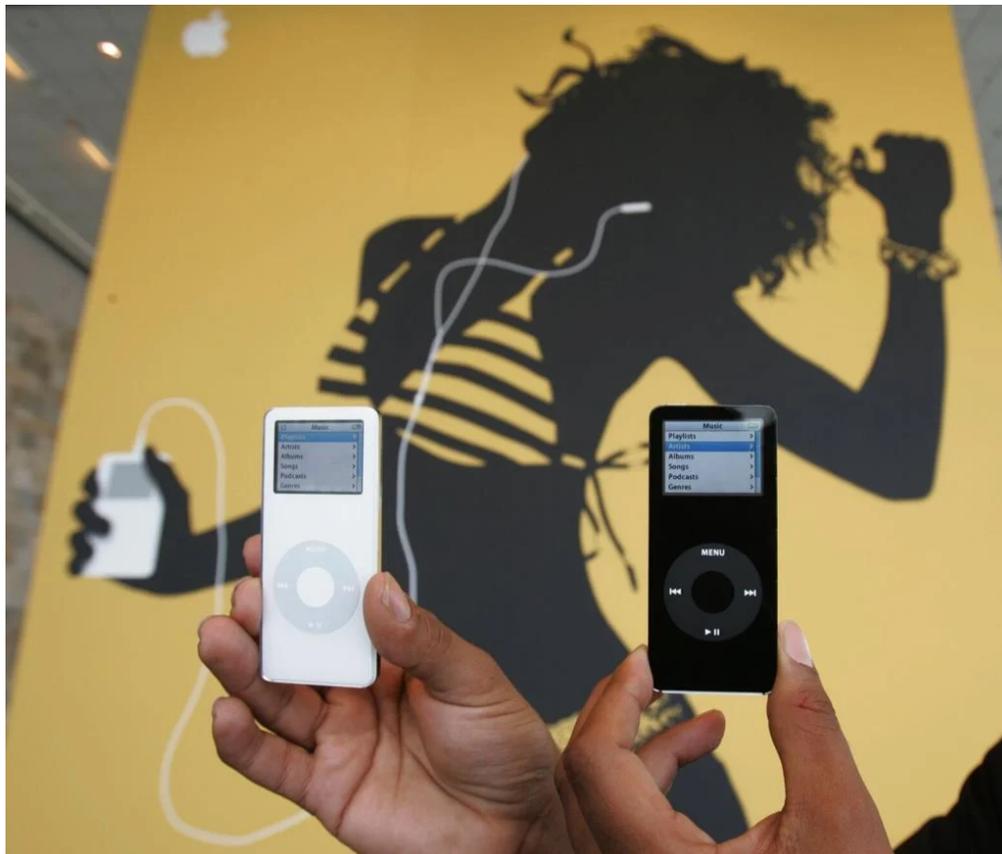
White sees the iPod as an instructive example of "good friction," a design philosophy that posits "taking extra steps of having an extra layer of intentionality behind something actually increases the value."

Burns can relate: Inspired by that initial reboot experience that she documented on Instagram, she's currently scouring thrift stores for cheap old plug-in computer speakers so that she can set up a dedicated iPod listening station in her studio.

"I think there's something about having a little bit of a challenge," she said. "Now, you don't go through any steps to listen to anything, so you kind of lose a connection to what you're doing. It becomes mindless. It's so boring to have everything at our fingertips. Honestly, I just feel like it takes us further away from community and connection and our humanity."

Sounds great

But even if you're not deliberately raging against the stream, Rosenberg offers a more pragmatic reason for dusting off that old Nano.



Apple announced the iPod Nano, one-fifth the size of the original iPod, in September 2005.

Paul Sakuma/Associated Press file photo

"I had a 14-year-old girl come into the shop recently," he said, "and she said she wanted to buy an iPod because she just wanted to listen to music — she didn't want to have any texts, she didn't want to answer any calls, she didn't want TikTok or Instagram on it. So I showed her how it worked, and the first thing she noticed was the sound — and that's because the electronic guts of these things were designed specifically for playing music. A lot of people still have really good wired headphones at home that they've had to set aside as we've moved toward the Bluetooth world.

"But boy, when you plug them into an iPod, it just sounds great."

Stuart Berman is a Hamilton-based producer for the CBC Radio One show

“Commotion,” writer for *Pitchfork* and publisher of the *stübermania* newsletter.

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