

**Article Summary:**  
**"Mostly Data: How Low Can You Go?"**  
by Stephen St. Croix  
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Stephen St. Croix is a fixture to Mix Magazine and its readers. His monthly columns ("The Fast Lane") are both irreverent and insightful. This month, he chose to devote his whole article to the topic of the MiniDisc. I thought this topic was rather interesting since the MiniDisc players are rather affordable (compared to a portable DAT player) for in-the field recording. My brother the French Horn player, for example, has forsaken his high-fidelity stereo cassette recorder and the four-track I gave him for his birthday in exchange for making all of his live recordings with MiniDisc. The question remains: does it really sound any good?

In the beginning of this article, St. Croix reveals a little history of Sony's product. Indeed, when the MiniDisc was first released, the sound quality was abominable. In fact, the sound quality was worse than most comparably priced portable recorders (even just a plain old cassette walkman). At this point in the marketing scheme, it was very curious why Sony had released such a product—a product whose very "lossy" compression algorithms were not only lossy, but bad lossy.

The good news is that Sony has refined and perfected these compression techniques. We've all heard about psychoacoustics and masking, but the MiniDisc proves that these theories can be implemented in both successful and unsuccessful ways. On the advice of a respected colleague, St. Croix purchased a new MiniDisc player and was extremely impressed by the advances in sound quality and compression techniques. He still admits that the sound quality is not as high as the common Compact Disc, but the MiniDisc does offer advantages and options that are unavailable with CDs or CDRs.

The main advantage of the MiniDisc over CDRs, of course, is their portability. Compared to DAT machines, MiniDisc players are much cheaper. Also, MiniDisc are very easy to resequence since the storage format is magneto-optical (basically random-access computer media for storing digital data. Not only can songs be resequenced, but they can be reordered "on-the-fly", i.e. while the MiniDisc is playing. Songs can be named with text and also start ID markers can be moved at will. Optical ins also allow for a complete digital transfer chain.

Oddly enough, the larger component version of the MiniDisc player does not offer all of the features of the smaller hand-held version. In particular, the "on-the-fly" marker editing is removed. Even in general, the operational controls are rather different from the two versions. For someone who owns both the in-field and in-home formats, these differences can be somewhat annoying and confusing. In summary, however, St. Croix admits that Sony has developed a rather useful product for certain applications. Although most people do not own MiniDisc players (which limits the amount of copying and trading people can do) the MiniDisc player serves as a useful, portable, stereo recording device.