



NO MORE CDS? Boston rockers the Information, left, have released their EP, 'Natural Language,' on flash drives, below, rather than on CD. Far left, Nine Inch Nails created buzz for their latest CD by leaving flash drives in concert-venue restrooms.



Flash forward

WHITE STRIPES, NINE INCH NAILS PUSH USE OF USB DRIVES



PLUGGED IN: The White Stripes have made copies of their new CD, 'Icky Thump,' available on limited-edition USB flash drives, right, designed to look like the members of the band.

By **KERRY PURCELL**

MUSIC

Gramophone records, LPs, tape cassettes, CDs and downloads all revolutionized music delivery.

Are USB flash drives the next hot medium?

USB flash drives are data storage devices that essentially do the same thing as old-fashioned floppy disks, but are smaller, faster and hold much more data. Sales of these compact, portable and rewritable drives are expected to grow from 149 million units sold in 2006 to 242 million units in 2008. But that number could be much bigger if more musicians follow the example of the White Stripes and Nine Inch Nails, who have released their new recordings on these portable storage devices.

Yes, you can still purchase the White Stripes' "Icky Thump" on CD, as a digital download, even on old-fashioned vinyl. But the rock duo, which is at Agganis Arena on July 23, also is selling "Icky Thump" as limited-edition

USB flash drives designed to look like either of the band's two members, Jack White or Meg White.

"(They're a) unique, fun, collector's limited-edition item for fans," said Robin Bechtel, head of new media at Warner Brothers Records. Expect other bands to follow suit.

"Yes. We will definitely make these for other bands," Bechtel said. "Now that the Whites Stripes is doing it, many of our bands want them. None in production yet, just lots of interest from our artists."

Nine Inch Nail's Trent Reznor exploited USB flash drives' tiny size and futuristic aura to create a viral buzz for his latest album, "Year Zero." Reznor allegedly left memory sticks containing unreleased songs from "Year Zero" in restrooms at venues where NIN was playing. Fans discovered the drives in Portugal, Barcelona, Spain, and Manchester, England, and quickly downloaded the songs so other fans could hear them.

Local bands are also putting flash drives to use.

Boston rockers the Information have released their EP, "Natural Language," on drives they bought and then customized on their own.

"The advantage is clear," said Max Fresen, the Information's singer. "We're not obligated to pay anyone anything. The profits from each USB or iTunes sale are purely our own. In today's music industry, that's really unheard of."

"CDs are passe," Fresen continued. "They're delicate, they take up a lot of space and they're pricey thanks to the overhead of production costs incurred by the labels and manufacturers."

The Information bought cheap USB flash drives at Target and covered them with nifty wrappers of their own design. But at least one local company, Mimoco, believes it has a future custom-designing flash drives for musicians who may not want to go the do-it-yourself route.

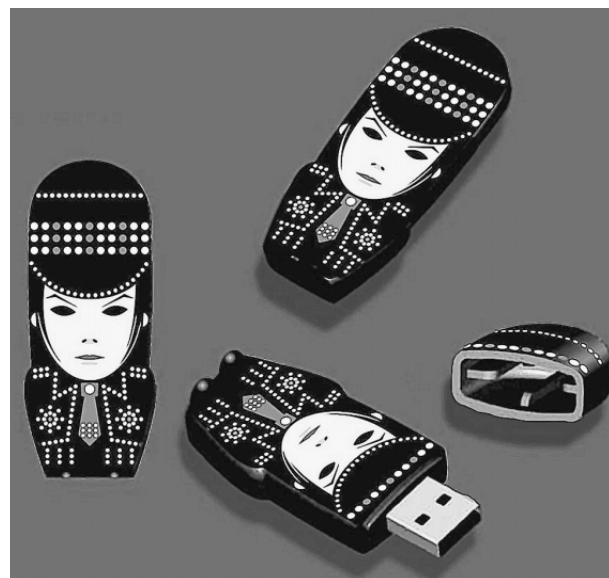
Boston-based Mimoco makes what it calls Mimobots, USB drives that, like the White Stripes figurines, are fun pieces of collectible art. Michael Mackey, production editor at Mimoco, said the company expects to produce toy-like flash drives for several bands in the next year.

Might USB flash drives replace CDs entirely?

NIN's Reznor thinks so. In an interview in the UK's Guardian Unlimited, he called CDs "outdated and irrelevant."

The Information's Fresen also believes the CD as the main means of music delivery is headed for obsolescence.

"If you disagree," Fresen said, "you probably work for the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) and live in a fantasy world."



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