MEDIA-PLAYING APPS

Music maestros

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Is iTunes really the best music player, or are there better options? MacFormat puts it to the test

Apple *iTunes* is the most popular music player software in the world. Almost everyone has it now. It organises and plays music, video, audiobooks and podcasts, runs iPods, iPhones and Apple TVs, lets you buy music from the Apple Store, tunes into internet radio stations and more.

But is it the best at everything? *RealPlayer* was number one until *iTunes* overtook it last month, so maybe it has something going for it. And despite the demise of the likes of *Audion* and *MusicMatch*, there are still plenty of competitors to *iTunes* that are thriving.

To see whether *iTunes* was top just because it's free and you need it to buy from the Apple Store, or because it genuinely is the best, we pitted it against five other media players: *RealPlayer*, the former champ; *Jajuk*, the king of the cross-platform, high-end players; *MediaCentral*, the does-everything media hub; *Silverjuke*, the jukebox for your Desktop;

> ## "We pitted iTunes against five other media players. Who will win in the battle of the bands?"

and *Songbird*, the open-source movement's attempt to do to *iTunes* what *Firefox* has done to *Internet Explorer*. Who will win in the battle of the bands? Turn the page to find out. ▶

Mac FORMAT On the DVD
You'll find the software on this issue's DVD

ON TEST

iTunes 7.6 £Free

RealPlayer 11 £Free

Jajuk 1.4.6 £Free

MediaCentral 2.6 €30 (£23)

Silverjuke 2.5 €29 (£22)

Songbird 0.4 £Free

Shock discovery number one: *Silverjuke's* interface (pictured here) scores five out of five, while *iTunes'* scores three!

TEST ONE

Interface

Here, we look for ease of use and ergonomic design

Apple has a reputation for producing the best interfaces, so it would be tempting to think this should be a slam-dunk for *iTunes*. However, on first use, *iTunes* isn't the most intuitive of interfaces. How do you create a smart playlist? Oh, yeah, hold down the ⌥ key when clicking on the + button. How do you set the video kind of three movies to **TV show** in one go? Oh, you can't.

But are the others' interfaces better? *MediaCentral*'s is very simple, much more like *Front Row*'s than *iTunes'*, although the key controls aren't necessarily the most obvious. *RealPlayer*'s is also more simple than *iTunes'*, but that's mainly because it doesn't do much. *Jajuk*, by contrast, is ugly and has so much going on, you

need a PhD in computer science to work out how to do anything.

Songbird is the prettiest of all the apps, and it borrows features from web browsers that make it easier to use than *iTunes*.

Yet the winner, despite its slightly unpleasant font rendering, is *Silverjuke*. It's simple to use and its jukebox-style album display is even better than *iTunes'* coverflow.

RESULTS

iTunes	★★★☆☆
RealPlayer	★★★☆☆
Jajuk	★★☆☆☆
MediaCentral	★★★★☆
Silverjuke	★★★★★
Songbird	★★★★☆

TEST TWO

Playback

Next, we look for sound quality and decent visuals

Of all the programs we tested, none has poor sound playback. *Silverjuke's* boast of 32-bit internal sound processing, et al, is pretty meaningless, but it does have dedicated playback functions that the others lack: jingles between tracks, smart crossfades, decent autovolume, a smart shuffle function, an advanced equaliser and effects engine. Its kiosk mode is also second to none.

iTunes has the broadest range of visualisation plug-ins, as well as one of the best equalisers and the ability to specify an equaliser preset for each track, which really does improve the sound quality noticeably.

Surprisingly, playback is one area where *RealPlayer* does a good job, with an equaliser, a preamp and

controls for reverb and room size. Visualisations are non-existent.

Jajuk has some visualisers (but we couldn't find them) and some rudimentary text animation effects, but surprisingly, there's no equaliser.

It's *Songbird* and *MediaCentral* that prove to be the lamest on test, with nothing beyond simple play functions. Get your fingers out, lads.

RESULTS

iTunes	★★★★☆
RealPlayer	★★★★☆
Jajuk	★★☆☆☆
MediaCentral	★☆☆☆☆
Silverjuke	★★★★★
Songbird	★☆☆☆☆

Thanks to its vast feature-set, *Silverjuke* beats *iTunes* again when it comes to playback functionality – but only just…

FUNCTIONALITY | Unique features

While some of the players fared poorly in the tests we chose, they would have done well in others, since they all have unique functions.

RealPlayer now has a plug-in that allows it to spot when there's a video on a web page you're browsing, then download it for you. It also has built-in bookmarking of URLs that you can share with others using Bonjour.

MediaCentral has an insane number of extra functions. It has support for digital and IPTV, Skype messaging, DVD playback, games, *iPhoto* and Flickr photo galleries.

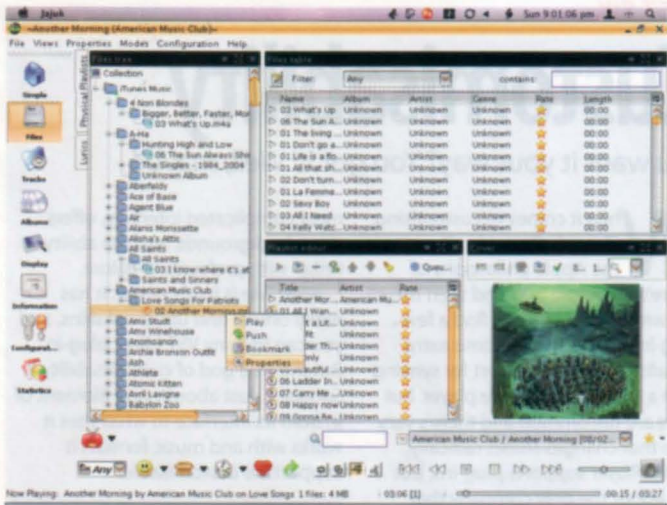*Jajuk* prides itself on high-end features such as customisable cross-fades; ambience

management; integration with Last.fm, Amazon, CDDB and lyrics services; the ability to navigate CDs that you don't have in your drive; and Wikipedia integration. It also has a digital DJ that works like *iTunes'* party shuffle and smart playlists, but with a bit more subtlety.

Silverbox, with its focus on playback, has the most advanced kiosk mode of all the apps, with support for multiple monitors and visualisations, and it includes a virtual keyboard. For the truly drunk, there's a karaoke mode to sing along with, too.

So, while they may not be the best of music players, they may still have a place on your Mac.

When it comes to extra features, *MediaCentral* has an enormous list – as you can see from this overview.

Despite having the worst interface of all the apps here, *Jajuk* is great when it comes to organising and managing music.

Managing tracks

Keeping track of music is next on our testing agenda

pple *iTunes* has been a leader in library management, using the tags in MP3 and AAC files to keep everything organised in your file system. It's also good at playlists – regular and 'smart' rules-based lists – and providing quick search facilities, as well as adding cover artwork.

By contrast, cast your eye over *RealPlayer* for no more than a second: the most it has is a single playlist and no library management functions.

Songbird is sub-par compared with *iTunes*, and has dodgy album cover support. No smart playlists either, but it does have simple, regular, drag-and-drop playlists.

Silverjuke has reasonable library management, a fast search engine and unique skills, including the ability

to extrapolate info from filenames if no one has bothered to fill in tags, scan Zip archives, combine tracks into albums according to rules, and manage its playlist dynamically.

Jajuk has problems with AAC tags. But, when it does work, this is an area where it excels, offering everything *iTunes* does, plus sophisticated playlist and album cover search systems. Shame about that interface!

RESULTS

iTunes	★★★★☆
RealPlayer	★☆☆☆☆
Jajuk	★★★★★
MediaCentral	★★☆☆☆
Silverjuke	★★★☆☆
Songbird	★★★☆☆

Online stores

Next, we want internet radio and a good online store

ost players offer the ability to listen to music stored elsewhere, or that you can buy online. *iTunes* has exclusive access to the Apple Store, but it also offers Bonjour-based sharing of other people's *iTunes* libraries and has a broad range of radio stations built-in.

One of the only easy-to-use features of *Jajuk* is its web radio function: it can deal with most stations that use the standard http protocol or Windows Media protocol, and there's a pop-up button for access.
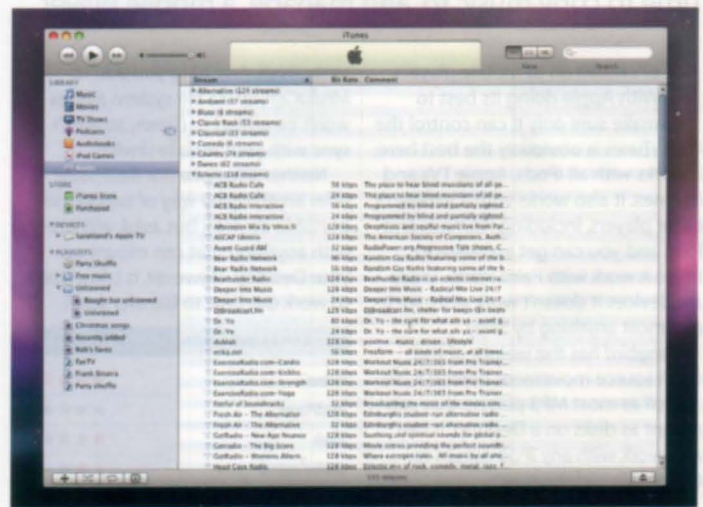
While *Songbird* has no radio system, it does have quite a pick of stores that you can download from, and there are add-ons for stores like eMusic.

RealPlayer, unlike its superior Windows counterpart, has no built-in

store, no built-in file sharing and no built-in list of radio stations. That's not to say there aren't any, but you have to go online to find them.

MediaCentral has a better idea of which radio stations use *RealPlayer* than *RealPlayer* does; its extensive radio station list includes stations from all round the world that use the *Windows Media*, *RealPlayer*, *QuickTime* and *Shoutcast* systems. Which is nice.

RESULTS

iTunes	★★★★★
RealPlayer	★★☆☆☆
Jajuk	★★☆☆☆
MediaCentral	★★★★☆
Silverjuke	★★★★★
Songbird	★★★☆☆

When it comes to built-in radio, sharing music or downloading from a store, *iTunes* has all bases covered. Superb.

FORMATS | Playing nicely with your music

If all you have in the world are MP3s and AAC files, rest assured, just about any player featured in this Group Test can deal with your music, although sometimes only after you've downloaded a plug-in. After that, it gets a little bit random.

Jajuk plays some of the more common formats, as well as things like Monkey's Audio and other open source formats such as Ogg Vorbis, but it is pretty inextensible.

In comparison, *MediaCentral* is something of a leech, so if *iTunes* can play your music, so can *MediaCentral*, making it equally versatile. Of course, if *iTunes* can't, neither can *MediaCentral*.

Still, *iTunes*, for its part, can play anything *QuickTime* can play, which is a very good starting point indeed. And, while it can't play Ogg Vorbis, FLAC or Windows Media Audio files out of the box, if you download suitable *QuickTime* components it'll soon be able to join in with both the open and the closed source crowds. And so will *MediaCentral*, of course, because it's doing its *iTunes* thing.
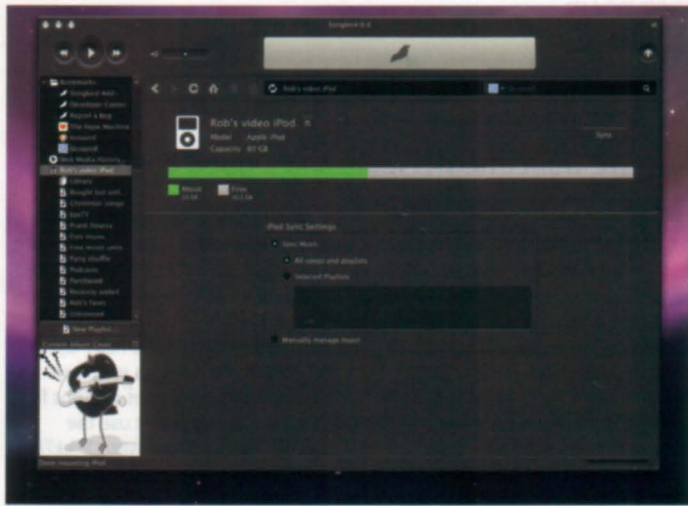
Let's move on to *Silverjuke*, and it is a move, because this media player is more for the real audio geek; if you know your formats inside and out, you'll probably be using *Silverjuke*. It can play True Audio, Speex and OptimeFROG files.

RealPlayer is the choice for RealAudio (RAM) files.

Of all the media players in this Group Test, few can play RealAudio files, and *RealPlayer* is the one that copes with them best (unsurprisingly). But where it all gets a little more difficult for everyone is where Apple has been having some fun of its own with formats. Things like its bookmarkable AAC files extension (.m4b files), as well as its Fairplay protection system (.m4p files) mean that cross-platform programs such as *Jajuk* and *Silverjuke* will come a cropper and not even be able to recognise them as music.

Don't, however, expect to find anything that can play protected Windows Media files.

iTunes is the daddy of mobile music, but *Songbird* (pictured here) plays on many iPods and gives it a run for its money.

TEST FIVE

Music on the move

Time to copy music to, and manage, a mobile player

Let's move on to mobile players. With Apple doing its best to make sure only it can control the iPod, *iTunes* is obviously the best here: it works with all iPods, Apple TVs and iPhones. It also works with a variety of other players, including Nomads and Rios, and you can get software to make it work with Palm Pilots. There are devices it doesn't work with, such as almost anything by Sony.

Songbird has the weight of the open source movement behind it, so as well as most MP3 players that can mount as disks on a Desktop, it can also work with any iPod except for the classic and the touch.

MediaCentral works on top of *iTunes* but doesn't bring much to the

party itself. Anything you add to *MediaCentral* via file system aliases won't be added to *iTunes*, so won't sync with your mobile device.

Neither *Silverjuke* nor *RealPlayer* offer anything by way of support for portable devices, but *Jajuk* will work with anything that can mount on your Desktop. However, it takes hours to work out how to transfer stuff!

RESULTS

iTunes	★★★★★
RealPlayer	★★★★★
Jajuk	★★★★★
MediaCentral	★★★★★
Silverjuke	★★★★★
Songbird	★★★★★

TEST SIX

Customisability

You want it your way? You got it! Well, maybe

When it comes to customising, *iTunes* is the embodiment of the Apple philosophy of 'there's the Apple way and then there's the wrong way'. You can find a few plug-ins, AppleScripts, some extra visualisations and support for syncing with a PalmPilot's *Audible* player, but skins are uncommon and there's very little that changes *iTunes* radically.

RealPlayer supports plug-ins, but just about the only company that produces Mac plug-ins is Real, and that's only for extra sound formats.
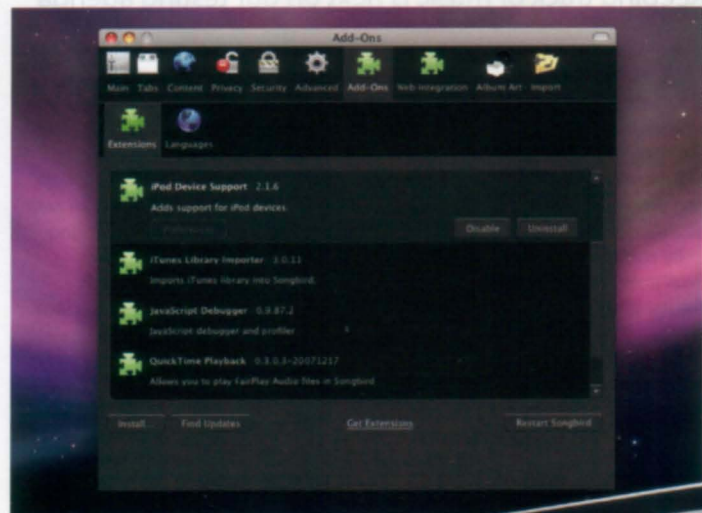
MediaCentral does offer limited customisation, but it amounts to little more than deciding what colour it should be and what should appear in its menus, while *Jajuk*, if you can find the option you're after in the world's

most complicated interface, offers skins, backgrounds, and the ability to tinker with preferences galore.

Silverjuke is loads better. It has many official and unofficial skins, and you can use any VST Effect plug-in. But the true god of customisability is *Songbird*. Just about every element of it, from its interface to what sites it works with and music formats it supports, is customisable.

RESULTS

iTunes	★★★★★
RealPlayer	★★★★★
Jajuk	★★★★★
MediaCentral	★★★★★
Silverjuke	★★★★★
Songbird	★★★★★

Songbird is like *Firefox*: infinitely customisable.

AND THE WINNER IS | Apple iTunes

While not always the best, *iTunes* was consistently good in every category, with unique features that no other player has. Easy to use yet powerful, able to work with the majority of mobile devices and many radio stations, it's the most popular music player in the world for a reason.

On the other hand, there's *RealPlayer*, which came a convincing bottom in almost everything. Now, clearly the Mac version of *RealPlayer* lacks a little something compared to the Windows version – okay, it's massively crippled compared to its iPod-compatible, DVD-burning, file-format converting, LP-digitising,

jewel-case printing, CD-ripping Windows cousin – but at the moment, it serves only one purpose: playing RealMedia files.
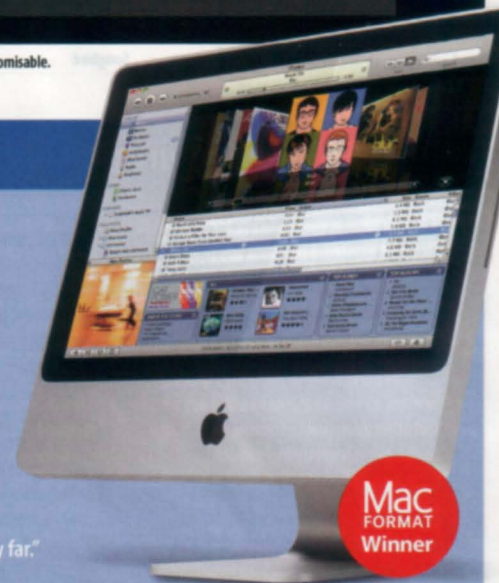
The rest of the applications are good in their own ways, but obviously no *iTunes*. *MediaCentral* is good as an alternative to *Front Row*, but lacks any real standout music-playing features to make it a good (or any kind of) alternative to *iTunes*. *Silverjuke* is an excellent jukebox application, while *Jajuk* could well be the most powerful music app in the world if only it were possible to work out how to use it. It's certainly one of the best DJ-ing apps around when it works.

Songbird, which is trying to take on the might of Apple, isn't quite there yet: not so much a David v Goliath as a David v Goliath in a Sherman tank. But it's only at version 0.4: version 1.0 might be something else!

FINAL VERDICT
★★★★★

"*iTunes* may not be the best at everything, but it's the best all-round app by far."

Mac FORMAT Winner

iTunes 7.6
Mac FORMAT Winner
★★★★★

RealPlayer 11
★★☆☆☆

Jajuk 1.4.6
★★★☆☆

SPECIFICATIONS

	iTunes 7.6	RealPlayer 11	Jajuk 1.4.6
Price	£Free	£Free	£Free
URL	www.apple.com/itunes	www.real.com	www.jajuk.info
Min Specs	OS X 10.3.9/10.4.9, 500MHz G3, 256MB RAM, *QuickTime 6.5*	OS X 10.4, G3+, 256MB RAM	Java 1.5, 1,024x768 screen resolution, Mplayer
Audio Codecs	QuickTime	QuickTime + RealAudio	MP3, OGG, FLAC, AAC, WAV, SPEEX, AU, RealAudio, WMA, MPEG 2, Monkey's Audio
Devices	iPod, iPhone, Nomads, Rios, mountable	None	Mountable
Plays Fairplay Tunes?	Yes	No	No
Library management	Yes	No	Yes
Visualiser/kiosk mode	Yes	No	–
Skinnable	No	No	No
Radio	Yes	Yes	Yes
Plug-ins	Yes	No	No
Equaliser	Yes	Yes	No
Music Store	Yes	No	No

MediaCentral 2.6
★★★☆☆

Silverjuke 2.5
★★☆☆☆

Songbird 0.4
★★★★☆

SPECIFICATIONS

	MediaCentral 2.6	Silverjuke 2.5	Songbird 0.4
Price	€30 (£23)	€29 (£22)	£Free
URL	www.equinux.com/us/products/mediacentral/index.html	www.silverjuke.net	www.songbirdnest.com
Min Specs	OS X 10.4, G4 processor	None given	OS X 10.4, G3+, 256MB RAM, 61MB HD space
Audio Codecs	QuickTime + RealAudio + WMA	AAC, AIF, MP3, MP1, MP2, MP+, MPTC, MTM, UMX, WAV, XM, UMX, S3M, Monkey's Audio, Ogg-Vorbis, FLAC and more!	QuickTime
Devices	None	None	iPods except iPod touch and iPod classic, mountable
Plays Fairplay Tunes?	Yes	No	Yes
Library management	No	Yes	Yes
Visualiser/kiosk mode	–	–	–
Skinnable	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radio	Yes	No	No
Plug-ins	No	Yes	Yes
Equaliser	No	Yes	No
Music Store	No	No	Yes