

ELECTRONIC JUNGLE

Chill Pill Will Warm Your Ears



KEVIN HUNT

khunt@courant.com

Here's a possible cure for those midwinter MP3 blahs — the Chill Pill, two speakers that travel together as a too-cute little black capsule. If this thing sprouted fur, it would be a Chia Pet.

The Chill Pill, from Apple specialist Small Dog Electronics of Waitfield, Vt., is so heavy on cuteness and ingenuity, in fact, that it's enough to forget this mobile speaker doesn't sound much better than other \$40 mobile speakers. Who cares?

Two speakers, all the necessary wiring and a rechargeable lithium-ion battery somehow make it, like clowns in a circus car, into a capsule not even 4 inches tall and 2 inches in diameter. Oh, doctor.

Now watch as we dissect the Chill Pill. The speakers, conjoined magnetically at the hip, separate easily. Next, turn to the two tiny plastic trapdoors. Behind door No. 1 is a mini-USB cable that uncoils about a foot. It's both a speaker cable (connecting to the other speaker's mini-USB port) and a link (with the included USB adapter) to charge the speakers via a computer's USB 2.0 port or an iPod AC adapter.

Behind door No. 2 is a minijack connector that mates with an iPod or other digital music player. A mini-volume dial and power/charge indicator LED appear to complete the Chill Pill tour, leaving us with a pair of 1.75-inch-tall speakers — each with a single driver peering upward through a plastic domed grille.

But a symbol inscribed on one speaker that would seem to say "You have a big mouth!" in the language of 3200 A.D. Egypt, followed by the 20th-century word "bass," promises more. The image actually encourages the user to lift the dome from each speaker, a slight twist that suddenly makes it an inch

taller. That extra space, enclosed in an accordion of plastic, is the Chill Pill's "extendable resonance," which means the speaker sounds more authoritative in this configuration.

I loved the Chill Pill even before the first listen. It's hard to resist a speaker that entertains without playing music. For its size, the Chill Pill sounded surprisingly good, better with the added height, and best, to these ears, with the speaker's drivers angled toward the listener, not firing upward.

The Small Doggies have a good eye. They picked out this OEM product — speakers made by an "original equipment manufacturer" — to sell under their own Chill Pill Audio brand.

It's a lot of entertainment for \$40.

The Blu Knight

Some movies on Blu-ray and DVD now come with a bonus, a compressed "Digital Copy" of the movie that's transferable to a computer (Windows or Mac) and also watchable on an iPod, iPhone or other portable advice.

Let's not get too excited. The Digital Copy is still the industry's Digital Rights Management — which restricts the use of music, movies and portable devices people buy — wrapped in a sugary-sweet candy cane.

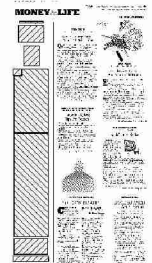
The \$35 Blu-ray edition of "The Dark Knight," for instance, includes an extra disc with a Digital Copy that I transferred within minutes to my MacBook, using iTunes. (PC owners can use either iTunes or Windows Media Player.) To get it, I only had to select "Digital Copy Disc" under "Devices" and enter an authorization code.

Although "The Dark Knight" Blu-ray disc is full-blown 1080p high-definition, the copy is 853 x 480 video compressed to 1.67 gigabytes in an MPEG-4 file. That's perfectly suited to an iPod Touch or other portable player, but it's still not the freedom consumers deserve.

The music industry is in such bad shape that the three largest record labels — Universal Music Group, Sony Music and Warner Music Group — have agreed to join EMI and thousands of independent labels in offering unprotected music files on iTunes. Although consumers will pay more (\$1.29) for newer songs at the iTunes Music Store, they can now use their property — the DRM-free music files — however they wish.

They can send them throughout their house via multiroom systems like those from Sonos and other companies formerly restricted by DRM. They can also load them onto any portable device, even if it's a gulp, Microsoft Zune.

Someday, movie fans might have the same freedom with their fresh downloads and old DVDs. But for now, a Digital Copy is as good as it gets.



CHILL PILL MOBILE SPEAKERS

PRICE: \$40

HOT: Clever design, small size, six-hour charge on battery.

NOT: So small it can't possibly sound big.

INFORMATION: chillpillaudio.com.

AVAILABLE: www.smalldog.com.

