

# Hey, Mr. MP3 Man

Ex-Byrd flies high on MP3.

By Steve Ditlea

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Some 35 years after becoming one of the first musicians to meld traditional folk music with rock and roll, Roger McGuinn is still pioneering the folk/tech connection-online. The founder, lead singer and lead guitarist of the legendary rock group the Byrds, has become one of the most recognizable names on MP3.com. His page on the site offers free downloads of nearly a dozen of his recent solo recordings in the MP3 music-compression format that is transforming how audio recordings are distributed. McGuinn offers renditions of old English ballads (like "John Riley"), sea chanteys (like "The Bonny Ship the Diamond"), blues (like "James Alley Blues") and gospel (like "Mighty Day")-all with his infectious vocals and trademark jangly sound of the 12-string guitar and banjo.

"It's very satisfying to get my music out so quickly and easily," notes the 57-year-old recording veteran, who satirized having to "sell your soul to the company who are waiting there to sell plasticware" in his 1960s hit, "So You Want to Be a Rock & Roll Star." The Internet has been receptive to McGuinn. "It's a good thing that a folk song can be in the top 10 of MP3.com," he says. Since the Byrds' heyday, he adds, "the music business has grown to unbelievable proportions." And its hold over pop music still impinges on the new abundance economy of digital downloads. McGuinn explains: "I had a problem last month trying to use 'Mr. Spaceman' on MP3.com. The publisher denied permission, even though I wrote the entire song." (One advantage of folk songs: They are in the public domain.)

McGuinn began putting his folk recordings online five years ago on one of the first home pages by a celebrity on the Web: Roger McGuinn's Folk Den. "I decided to record a traditional song each month in order to preserve them," he recalls. At first the tunes were available from his site ([metalab.unc.edu/jimmy/folkden/songs.html](http://metalab.unc.edu/jimmy/folkden/songs.html)) in the bulkier WAV file format, but it took MP3 and its compact files to make his Net music more accessible. MP3 music files are "ten times smaller than WAV, and [the fidelity is] almost as good," he says. For those who see irony in the use of the latest technology to preserve folk traditions, McGuinn points out that much of what he is recording

now owes its very existence to a technical breakthrough of the early 20th century: mobile sound recording. “Many songs had been field recordings, captured by folklorists John and Alan Lomax,” he observes.

Though McGuinn is convinced that “the Internet will be the future of music distribution,” his music is not about to disappear from plastic- and aluminumware. MP3.com is selling three different CD compilations of McGuinn’s downloads. In February, Sony’s Columbia Legacy series rounded out the Byrds CD catalog with newly remastered versions of three out-of-print albums, as well as a previously unreleased live recording: “The Byrds at the Fillmore-February 1969.” But it’s the online distribution that has McGuinn floating eight miles high: “I’ve never had such artistic freedom,” he says.