Creating a virtual radio station with Last.fm

PERSONAL PLAYLIST

Last.fm tracks your musical tastes and helps you find users with similar interests. **BY MARCEL HILZINGER**

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I f your computer is anything like mine, it is probably full of MP3 and OGG Vorbis songs from various sources. Internet radio is a genuine alternative to filling up your hard disk with audio files. But just as with ordinary radio, the songs tend to repeat after a while, and you have to look around for a new station. Last.fm [1] is an alternative to traditional Internet radio players.

The Last.fm player is linked to an on-line database that stores information on your musical interests. When you set up a *musical profile*, you create a space for Last.fm to store information on the music you like. This information can then be used to create a "personal radio station" based on your listening habits. Last.fm builds a music list tailored to your interests.

Last.fm, which is produced by the project formerly known as Audioscrobbler [2], attempts to provide a complete listening experience. The system can even suggest new recordings that are similar to the music you have selected in the past. Listeners are encouraged to keep an online journal of information about their musical tastes at a personal webpage, and the database lets you maintain a "friends" list of other listeners with interests similar to your own.

Getting Started

The easiest way to get started with Last.fm is to register at the Last.fm website [1]. The web-based enrollment form is very easy to use. Start by creating a username and password (Figure 1). After

Figure 1: Creating a profile at the Last.fm website.

Figure 2: The Last.fm main window offers configuration options and provides links to information on the current track.

INFO

[1] Last.fm: *http://www.last.fm*

[2] Audioscrobbler: *http://www.audioscrobbler.net/*

Figure 3: The Settings dialog box lets you enter configuration information, such as your user credentials and browser.

Figure 4: The Last.fm website provides background information on the song, album, or artist.

you have created the account, Last.fm installs the Audioscrobbler plugin, which sends information on the tracks you listen to to the server. The last step is to download the Last.fm player. When you have finished registering and downloading the tools, you are ready to start exploring Last.fm.

Last.fm

The Last.fm player appears as a simple desktop GUI (Figure 2). The system is really very friendly for beginning users. Click on the wrench icon to set up the player. You can enter your user credentials in the *Settings* dialog box (Figure 3). To be able to use Last.fm's advanced features, you should also enter your default browser. If you really like a song, click on the heart icon (Figure 2). The system stores the track name and artist. If you

Figure 5: The User section of the Last.fm site helps you find other users with similar musical interests.

really hate a song, click the no parking icon to throw the song off your playlist. For songs that you actually like, but don't want to listen to right now, click on the icon with the two greater than symbols. Last.fm will then search the Internet for a new song.

To learn more about a song, album, or artist, click on the appropriate heading. The program then launches your default browser, takes you to the Last.fm homepage, and shows you the information (Figure 4). The two gray, rectangular icons in the top right let you edit tags for tracks or post a comment on the Last.fm website.

Community Matters

Last.fm is very interested in promoting listener interaction. The design for the system leverages the fact that web users like to seek out other web users with common interests.

The Users area of the Last.fm website provides an interface for interacting with the Last.fm community (Figure 5). Click on a user icon to visit the user's personal page. Note the box on the left titled "Find by Musical Taste." You can enter the name of an artist or group in the box and click the Go button to display the icons of other users who have expressed an in-

terest in this artist or group.

The personal web page for each user lists the user's favorite picks. The page also contains some brief biographical information on the user, as well as options for sending the user a message or adding the user to a Friends list.

Searching

To start listening to Internet radio, click on the wrench icon and select *Change Station*. In the dialog that appears, select the *Search* tab. You can search by artist or by genre. The *Similar Artist Radio* function is enabled by default. Type the name of a group or artist, and click *Listen Now*, to tell the player to start playing. If you search by genre, click on *Similar Artist Radio* and select the *Tags* entry; then type a search key (for example "Blues") and press *Go*. Last.fm will show you a list of genres. Select a genre from the list and press *Listen Now*. Before you get too excited, though, let me tell you that searching for *Jazz-Fusion* turned up a Frank Sinatra song.

The Last.fm website provides an extended search function. You can enter multiple artist names in a search mask. The website then shows you a button labeled *Play Music Like These Artists*, which points to a URL starting with *lastfm://*. Copy this URL to the clipboard, and then click the wrench icon and select *Enter Station Address*. Now paste the new URL, and click *OK* to listen to 30 seconds of the track. This feature did not work reliably in our lab. After a while, I started doubting the sanity of Last.fm's *Play Music Like...* feature. For instance, the website turned up a number of songs by Guns n' Roses, but when I pressed *Listen Now,* I was treated to a song by Herbie Hancock.

Conclusions

The idea behind Last.fm is excellent, but the implementation leaves much to be desired. Another thing that bugged me was that Last.fm played music by artists that sounded like my favorite band, but never actually gave me my favorite. ∎