

Customized cellphone tones a hit

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It's no longer a choice between two beeps or one, now cellphones are ringing to the tune of the latest pop hits and movie catchphrases.

Assigning a song to make a personal statement or to screen cellphone calls has gone mainstream.

"I use the ring tones as an excuse to hear the songs I like, and then hook them up with the people they suit," said Ann Helms, 44, of Chandler. She has about 15 songs on her phone.

The theme from the Disney movie The Little Mermaid rings when her daughter calls, Hells Bells by AC/DC rings when her son calls, and the Beatles' Help! rings when her sister-in-law phones.

Music and movie industries are capitalizing on consumers' desire to express themselves via ring tones, driving up sales for service providers and record companies. Broadcast Music Inc. estimates customers will spend at least \$500 million this year to personalize their cellphone ring tone.

"It's kind of boring to just hear ringing," said Jen Chase, 13, of Chandler. "You can sing along to a ring tone, and it kind of shows expression. My cellphone plays my songs; it's what I think of myself."

About \$245 million was spent nationwide on downloaded ring-tone sales in 2004, up from \$68 million in 2003, according to BMI. The worldwide performing rights organization represents songwriters, composers and music publishers. It collects data from more than 200 sources, including wireless carriers and Web sites that sell ring tones.

Cellphone users can spend about \$2 to \$3 to download a 30-second snippet of songs, comedy bits and sound effects.

"Ring tones are one of the few things the music industry can make obscene amounts of money on," said Jerry Del Colliano, a music industry and recording arts professor at the University of Southern California.

"They have a much shorter shelf life than a record, though, so I see them selling at a brisk pace for the next few years," he said.

Ring-tone technology became possible two years ago, when improvements made it feasible for radio-quality sounds to be played on phones.

The newest trend to hit the market: bands releasing singles as ring tones before they are played on the radio.

Speed of Sound, Coldplay's first single from its album X&Y, was offered in April as a Cingular ring tone before it hit the airwaves. In early June, Gwen Stefani's Hollaback Girl was released as a ring tone and as a video clip.

"I have songs I like listening to, like hearing," said Stephanie Fields, 16, of Chandler. She has about 10 songs, mostly hip-hop and rap, on her phone.

"Young people are into the new thing," she added. "If my friends and I are sitting around listening to a song, and we all love it, I'll get it on my phone for when they call. It'll remind me of them."

Even movies are getting into the ring-tone action.

A week before Wedding Crashers was released into theaters, promoters offered free movie quotes as ring tones.

Industry insiders say ring tones are most popular among teenagers and hip-hop music fans, but now that almost everyone has a

cellphone, users want to customize it with their favorite songs, even assigning different tones to different callers.

"It's good entertainment," said Helms. "It makes me smile every time my phone goes off."

The Helmses spend about \$300 a month on their four phones, including ring tones.

Thomas Hesse, president of global digital business at Sony BMG Music Entertainment in New York, said about 5 percent of Sony's business is ring tones.

People are willing to pay \$3 for snippets of songs because it's worth it to them, he said.

"People's phones are important to them and it's testimony to a new generation that acts differently than previous ones," he said. "This mobile generation has their phone with them 24 hours a day, they never switch it off, and the music is near and dear to their hearts. People prefer it to any other mode to play their music."

Cellphone providers such as T-Mobile and Cingular offer a selection of ring tones on their Web sites or, in Verizon's case, from the phone's Internet connection.

"Consumers are looking to personalize their wireless," said Art Navarro, who works in Cingular's Western regional office in Los Angeles. "Technologies make it easy, and it demonstrates the importance of music to customers."