

Sound check

18
PLAYERS
TESTED

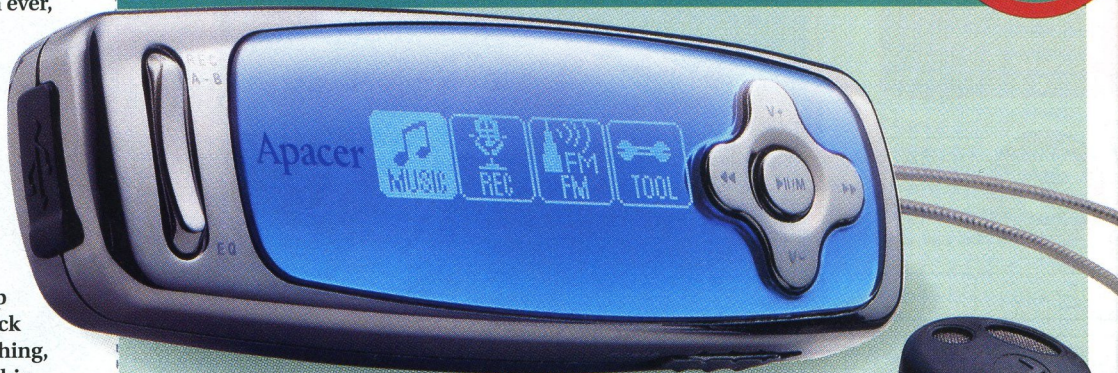
Darren Yates rounds up 18 of the latest portable media players and runs them through the *PC User* benchmark tests.

PC USER
BEST
BUY

While portable music and video players are more popular than ever, Apple's overwhelming dominance of the market means it's getting harder for competitors to make a buck. The market has shrunk a bit, with Creative Labs, SanDisk, Toshiba, Sony and iRiver the only significant brands remaining other than Apple.

The two major improvements in this roundup were support for video playback and battery life. Music is one thing, but video playback is the next big feature to hit these players. The fact Apple's new iPod Nano supports video has helped consolidate the move amongst other brands. But battery life showed the biggest improvement — we ended up just 37 minutes short of two days continuous playback from the 160GB iPod Classic, and the number of players with at least 20 hours playback is up considerably from last year.

_ FLASH PLAYERS UNDER 4GB



APACER AUDIO STENO AU581

PRICE \$85 / CONTACT BLUECHIP IT
PHONE 1300 727 474 / WEB <http://ap.apacer.com>

85%

With the big-name brands doing such a roaring trade, the smaller, lesser-known brands have to work even harder to get noticed, and in the case of Apacer, that means delivering excellent value. The AU581 delivers 2GB of storage and quite-decent battery life with an \$85 online price-tag. What's more, it surprised us with its remarkably good audio quality. We wouldn't call any of the players in this group perfect, but the AU581 delivered better than most

with its 13 hours 27 minutes of battery life. It's also one of the few to claim it works with Windows 98SE. Total harmonic distortion (THD) with 30kHz filtering was generally nice and flat across the audio frequency bandwidth, and its flat-response signal-to-noise Ratio (SNR) of 70dB was excellent in this group. At this price, Apacer is definitely one to watch.

PC User says: Great value, decent battery life and good audio quality.

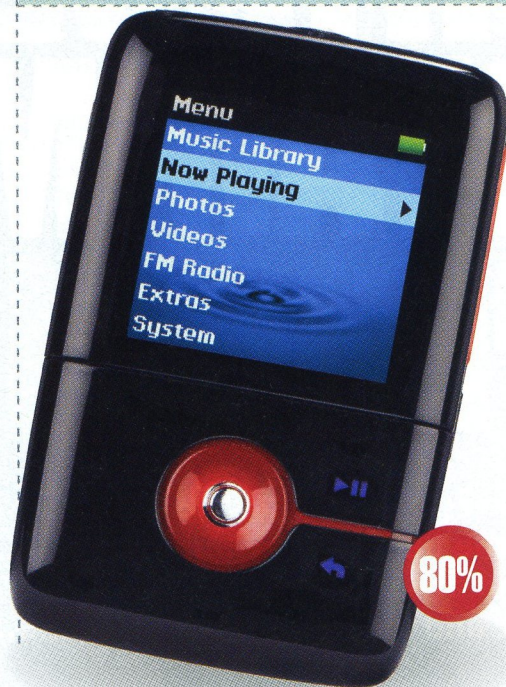
Buyer's checklist

If you're after a portable media player, here are some key features to look for:

* **Storage.** Make sure you get sufficient storage to make it worthwhile. Go for at least 1GB and shop around before you buy. Typically, \$199 is a good price to pay for a 4GB player. Hard drive models offer far better bang for buck but are less robust than flash memory players.

* **Supported formats.** Make sure the player supports the audio and video formats you want to play. Failing that, make sure you have software to convert your files into the player's supported formats. For video, avoid players with proprietary formats and look for ones that handle MPEG-4 and H.264 or similar.

* **Battery life.** If you want your multimedia on the go, you need a player with decent battery life. Beware of tiny flash players — they may look cute, but often the size comes at the expensive of battery run-time.



80%

CREATIVE ZEN V PLUS

PRICE \$129 / CONTACT CREATIVE LABS
PHONE (02) 9021 9800
WEB www.australia.creative.com

Creative's Zen V Plus has been kicking around for over a year but it still shows more fancied rivals how to do it. The 15 hours 3 minutes battery life placed it third behind Toshiba's Gigabeat U201 and SanDisk's Sansa Express, while its 30kHz-filtered THD results were generally quite good. But its SNR results were fairly 'middle of the road'. What makes this player stand out is it's the only one here to offer video playback. However, it's only a proprietary Creative format and the 128 x 128-pixel OLED screen is hardly worth the effort. It only supports WMA and MP3 audio codecs to any worthwhile degree, but navigation is easy and the screen is big enough to be useful in that regard.

PC User says: Still around, but delivers well on audio quality and battery life.