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Compact digital discs offer improved sound, quality

By MATT OKERLUND

After invading the world audio industry 18 months ago, laser-based compact digital audio discs — CDs — have begun to cut down all that stands in their path.

The start for these compact audio discs was far from blazing. Developed by Holland Philip's and Sony Corp. of America, CDs were tagged with a \$1,000 retail price — more than five times the price of the conventional turntable — that left the average stereo buyer's head spinning.

In 1983, however, CD sales heated up when manufacturers and retailers lowered prices to less than \$500. By the end of the year, sales totaled 500,000 and were expected to reach nearly \$2 million by the end of 1984.

Currently, Sony is selling more CDs than the other 51 manufacturers of the product combined.

Bruce Weidenhamer, assistant manager of World Radio, 1323 O St., predicts that sales will continue to rise as the price of CDs drops below \$300 in 1985.

"Manufacturers (of CDs) are pouring a lot of money into improvements of their audio equipment because of the competition they have from other technical markets," he said.

Compared with the conventional record player, CDs offer music listeners a cleaner sound. While a regular stereo transmits the music to the player through a needle, CDs use a laser to read a computer code that is grooved into a 4.7-inch plastic disc. The coded music is then sent to the player and disseminated into sound waves.

"CDs put out perfect music quality," Weidenhamer said. "The laser doesn't pick up any extra garbage like pops or hisses or cracks that you get with a stereo needle."

In addition, since the music is read by a laser and not a needle, the record discs never wear out. Because the music is coded, a disc can store more than twice the amount of music — about 60 minutes each side — than an album can store.

The small size of CDs and their discs also have made them prime targets of car stereo manufacturers. The first CD car stereo, developed by Fujitsu Ltd. and Toyota Motor Co., will be introduced in the Japanese market late in 1984 and is expected to enter the \$1.5 billion U.S. car stereo market soon after.

If sales of conventional car stereos are any indication, Weidenhamer said, CD car stereo sales should be hot.

And because CDs read a computer code, he said, CD car stereo cassettes eventually will be the size of a credit card.

CD makers were not always so enthusiastic.

Contributing to the CDs plodding start in 1982 was the fact that digital record discs for the players were difficult to get as record industries were reluctant to invest the \$20 million needed to set up production for the discs.

"Most of the early albums were jazz and classical because the people who buy those records have the big money (to buy a CD)," Weidenhamer said.

However, he said, almost every major record industry is now making CD records. In 1983, manufacturers sold about 12 million discs and forecasted a tripling of that total in 1984. Weidenhamer said increased production should drop the disc's \$15 price to about \$10 within the year.

The future of CDs is promising. Already a tidal wave of technological accessories is being targeted to accompany CDs.

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