

Mono jukebox for the Gnome desktop

BURNING BANSHEES

In Irish mythology, the banshee's mourning call is heard when a member of the family is about to die. The Banshee tool on Linux makes noise too, but for a far happier purpose. This banshee helps you organize your musical collection. **BY RÜDIGER ARP**

If you have hundreds of digitized tracks on your PC, you'll eventually need to impose some form of structure. The trend launched by Apple's iTunes has led to a crop of powerful, but easy-to-use, audio players on Linux. In this article, we will be looking at the Banshee audio program, which was written in **Mono**, and which has gathered a steadily growing community of fans. This article focuses on the current Banshee version 0.10.8.

Installation

Banshee is based on the Mono framework, so you do need to resolve a number of dependencies before you can get started. Fortunately, pre-compiled binaries exist for more recent versions of the Suse, Debian, Ubuntu, Fedora, Gentoo, Mandriva, and Foresight distributions. A Howto on the Banshee homepage [1] tells you how to add the installation resources to your system.

The installation depends on the features you need. As Banshee is based on the GStreamer framework, you need GStreamer plugins for Ogg or MP3, for example, to play audio formats. If you have Ubuntu Dapper or Debian Sid, you can install the *gstreamer0.10-plugins-base*, *gstreamer0.10-plugins-good*, and *gstreamer0.10-plugins-ugly* to add these capabilities.

If Banshee is not present on your distribution, or if you want the latest Banshee version, you will have to roll up your sleeves and build the source packages manually. This is not impossible, but it is extremely time-consuming on account of the dependencies you need to resolve; the Howto [2] on the Banshee homepage will help those who are brave enough to try. If you have an external player, such as an Apple iPod or a

GLOSSARY

ID3: Short for "Identify an MP3" – additional information that MP3-formatted audio files can store, such as the track name, artist, and genre.



Figure 1: Banshee handles audio CDs and tracks released by Rhythmbox.

Nomad Jukebox, there are a number of additional libraries to install if you want your player to talk to Banshee.

Feed Me!

After completing the installation, you might like to open the program settings

under *Edit | Properties* before you start importing your collection of tracks. The program uses these settings later for tasks such as burning audio CDs.

The settings are neatly divided by function: *Library*, *Encoding*, *Burning*, and *Advanced*. *Library* is where you set

the path to your Banshee music folder and say whether you want Banshee to copy audio files from the library you are importing to this folder. This is a useful function for laptop owners who store tracks on their PCs or servers but don't want to do without music on the move.

The *Encoding* tab has details on file formats and the bit rate at which audio CDs should be ripped to disk. This is also where you will find the settings for the Apple iPod MP3 player, if you happen to have one. *Burning* has settings for burning CDs. The *Advanced* tab shows you which audio engine Banshee uses.

To import a collection of tracks, select *Music | Import Music*. When I tried to import about 740 Ogg and MP3 files from a local disk, I had to relaunch the operation multiple times before it finally completed, as Banshee tended to hang.

After completing the original import, future import sessions completed without any trouble, and I had no problems getting Banshee to talk to my Apple iPod MP3 player. As soon as I plugged the player into the USB port, Banshee showed me the track library stored on

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Figure 2: Use the iPod Properties dialog box to manage iPod settings.

the iPod. And it was easy to transfer tracks between Banshee and the iPod.

Playlists

The two-panel Banshee user interface is tidy to the point of being spartan. The left panel just has a *Music Library* entry when you start; and its content is shown on the right. Banshee does not currently support the kind of intelligent playlists you may be familiar with from Rhythmbox [3] or Amarok [4], which show you the last songs played.

The search box in the top right makes it easier to create lists or browse your music library. When you enter a search key, the list in the panel below the search box displays a list of matches. You can use the column headers to sort the list by artist or genre. The column order is freely configurable; just click on a column header, hold down the left

mouse button, and drag the header to the required position.

To add the whole list of matches to a playlist, press [Ctrl] + [A] to select the list, and right click to drop down the context menu. You will not have a playlist at first, so your only option is to select *Add to Playlist | New Playlist*. Right click the new playlist, and select *Rename Playlist* to change the name. You can then build a customized list step by step.

Tags vs Metadata

The *Edit Song Metadata* item supports easy editing of track information. My first attempt to edit the track information stored in the ID3 tags of a music library on a mounted Samba share led to surprising results. Although Banshee applied the changes straight away, other audio players that accessed the same data just ignored the changes.

Some research revealed that Banshee will read existing ID3 tags but not store changes in the tags. Banshee stores track information in an *Sqlite* database below `~/.gnome2/banshee/banshee.db`. Of course, the information is not accessible to other jukebox programs.

Rip and Burn

Banshee makes it easy to add audio CDs to your collection. When you insert a disk, Banshee automatically queries the CD information and displays the album title. Clicking the album title displays the tracks in the right panel, and the *Write CD* button toggles to *Import CD*.

Burning Ogg and MP3 files is very easy: use a playlist or search list to create a CD, and then press *Write CD* to cre-

ate an audio CD for the player in your car. Banshee passed our tests of various output formats with flying colors.

Conclusions

Some functions, such as ripping and burning audio CDs, or easily hot-plugging iPod MP3 players, are really convincing. And Banshee has a classy look. On the downside, creating a playlist was less than intuitive.

The workaround Banshee uses when storing track information is questionable. However, the program is at an early stage of development, so there is hope. No matter whether Banshee becomes your favorite player, you will definitely be hearing more of the Banshee's wail in the future. ■

Banshee Plugins

Banshee has the following plugins, which are accessible via *Edit | Plugins...*

Audioscrobbler: Sends information on the tracks played in Banshee to the website, Last.fm [5], [6]. The plugin assumes a Last.fm user account.

Music Sharing: Shows your collection to other users with Banshee, Rhythmbox, and iTunes. To enable the plugin, you need the *banshee-daap* and *avahi-daemon* packages.

File System Monitor: Monitors the status of your music folder and updates the audio library if necessary.

Multimedia Keys: Adds support for multimedia keys configured in Gnome.

Metadata Searcher: Searches the audio library and adds missing track information and album covers.

Notification Area Icon: Displays the program icon in the Gnome panel message field.



Figure 3: The Tray plugin provides stylish presentation of track information.

INFO

- [1] Banshee homepage: <http://banshee-project.org>
- [2] Installing from source code: http://banshee-project.org/Banshee_Source
- [3] Rhythmbox homepage: <http://www.gnome.org/projects/rhythmbox>
- [4] Amarok homepage: <http://amarok.kde.org>
- [5] Last.fm homepage (Audioscrobbler): <http://www.last.fm>
- [6] "Personal Playlist: Creating a virtual radio station with Last.fm," By Marcel Hilzinger, Linux Magazine, May 2006, pg. 44.