Spotify vs YouTube Music: music streaming services compared

Published Sep 6, 2026 via CobaltCapture

Reviewing https://www.spotify.com/us/premium/

Summary

The short version: Spotify, clearly, at about 63 to 37 on the approved weights. For a dollar a month more it gives you the best recommendations in the category, lossless audio where YouTube Music tops out at 256 kbps, podcasts and audiobooks in the same app, and a free tier you can actually live on. YouTube Music wins two rows and wins them properly: it is cheaper, and its catalogue contains the remixes, live sets, covers and DJ sets that exist nowhere else because they were never commercially released.

What would flip it, and for a lot of people it does: you already want YouTube without ads. YouTube Music alone is $11.99 a month, but YouTube Premium is $15.99 and contains YouTube Music in full. **The marginal cost of the music service, for someone buying ad-free YouTube anyway, is $4.00 a month.** At four dollars against Spotify's $12.99, the price row stops being a dollar and starts being the whole comparison. The second flip is narrower and absolute: if the music you actually listen to is live recordings, remixes and covers, Spotify does not have it and no other row matters.

Spotify's figures are captured from Spotify's own page on 5 September 2026. YouTube's are sourced from its help documentation and the trade press, because YouTube's pages could not be captured at all.

The matrix

Criterion	Weight	Spotify Premium	YouTube Music Premium	Edge
Real price, one person	20	$12.99/month	$11.99/month, or $4.00 marginal inside YouTube Premium at $15.99	YouTube, clear, and decisive if you want ad-free YouTube
Real price, family		$21.99/month for 6	$18.99/month for 6	YouTube, $36 a year

Criterion	Weight	Spotify Premium	YouTube Music Premium	Edge
Discovery and recommendations	15	The category benchmark, and the reason most subscribers give for staying	Draws on your YouTube watch history, which is either excellent or contaminated by everything else you watch	Spotify, clear
Audio quality	14	Lossless since late 2025, up to 24-bit/44.1 kHz FLAC	256 kbps, per YouTube's own documentation. No lossless tier	Spotify, clear
Catalogue	13	Over 100 million commercially released tracks	Everything above, plus "remixes, covers, and DJ sets", live uploads, and versions that were never released	YouTube, clear, on a dimension Spotify cannot match
Free tier	10	Free tier permits background play on a phone	Free tier does not: lock the phone and the music stops	Spotify, decisively
What else is included	10	Podcasts and 15 hours a month of audiobooks in the same app	Podcasts live in the YouTube app, video-first, and there are no audiobooks	Spotify, slight
Devices and multi-device control	8	Spotify Connect: hand playback to a console, a car unit, someone else's speaker	Casting is strong on Google and Android hardware, thinner elsewhere	Spotify, clear
Library management and lock-in	6	No first-party export; needs a third-party transfer service	Same	Even
Staying power in music	4	About 31.7% of the global market, and music is the entire company	About 10.3%, inside a company for which music is a side business	Even, for opposite reasons

Critical differences, most consequential first

1. **The bundle is the real question.** Nothing else in this comparison moves the numbers as far. Decide whether you want YouTube without ads first, then pick the music service, because

that order gets you the right answer and the other order does not.
2. **The free tiers are not comparable.** Spotify free plays with the phone locked. YouTube Music free does not. For anyone intending to use the free tier as anything other than a demo, that single behaviour settles it.
3. **Audio quality has separated.** These two were level on this row two years ago. Spotify shipped lossless in late 2025 and YouTube Music still documents 256 kbps, so the gap now runs one way.
4. **Catalogue depth runs the other way, and absolutely.** If what you want is a 1994 live set or a mashup, one of these services has it and the other does not. No amount of recommendation quality substitutes for the track not being there.

Not separating factors

- **Ad-free playback and offline downloads.** Both, on every paid tier.
- **Student pricing.** $6.99 against $5.99. A dollar, on a plan you hold for a few years.
- **Platform availability.** Both run everywhere that matters.
- **Catalogue size as a number.** Both are past 100 million tracks. The difference is in what kind of thing is in there, which is the catalogue row, not a size row.

How this was run

Nine criteria weighted for a US listener choosing one music subscription, set before any capture. Spotify's US Premium page was rendered and captured on desktop, and its prices are quoted from that capture. Independent figures for market share, audio format and catalogue come from dated third-party sources, linked in the notes. No account was created, nothing was purchased, and neither service was used hands-on.

Coverage gap, stated plainly: YouTube's own pages could not be captured. Every path tried on youtube.com and music.youtube.com refuses a server-side render with a content-security-policy error, and the YouTube Help article returns a blank frame. YouTube Music's prices here therefore rest on the trade press reporting the 10 April 2026 US increase, captured as the receipt, and its feature and audio claims on YouTube's own help documentation read as text. That is a weaker evidentiary basis than Spotify's side of this study and it should be read as such. It is not a claim that YouTube blocks AI assistants; only YouTube's own logs could show what it blocks and why.

What could not be verified: recommendation quality, which carries 15 points, rests on the weight of published verdicts rather than a controlled test. YouTube Music's audio ceiling is taken from YouTube's documentation of 256 kbps and was not measured.

The receipt for YouTube Music's April 2026 US price rise, from the trade press

NEWS

YouTube raises Premium and Music subscription prices in the US



by **Stuart Dredge** April 13, 2026

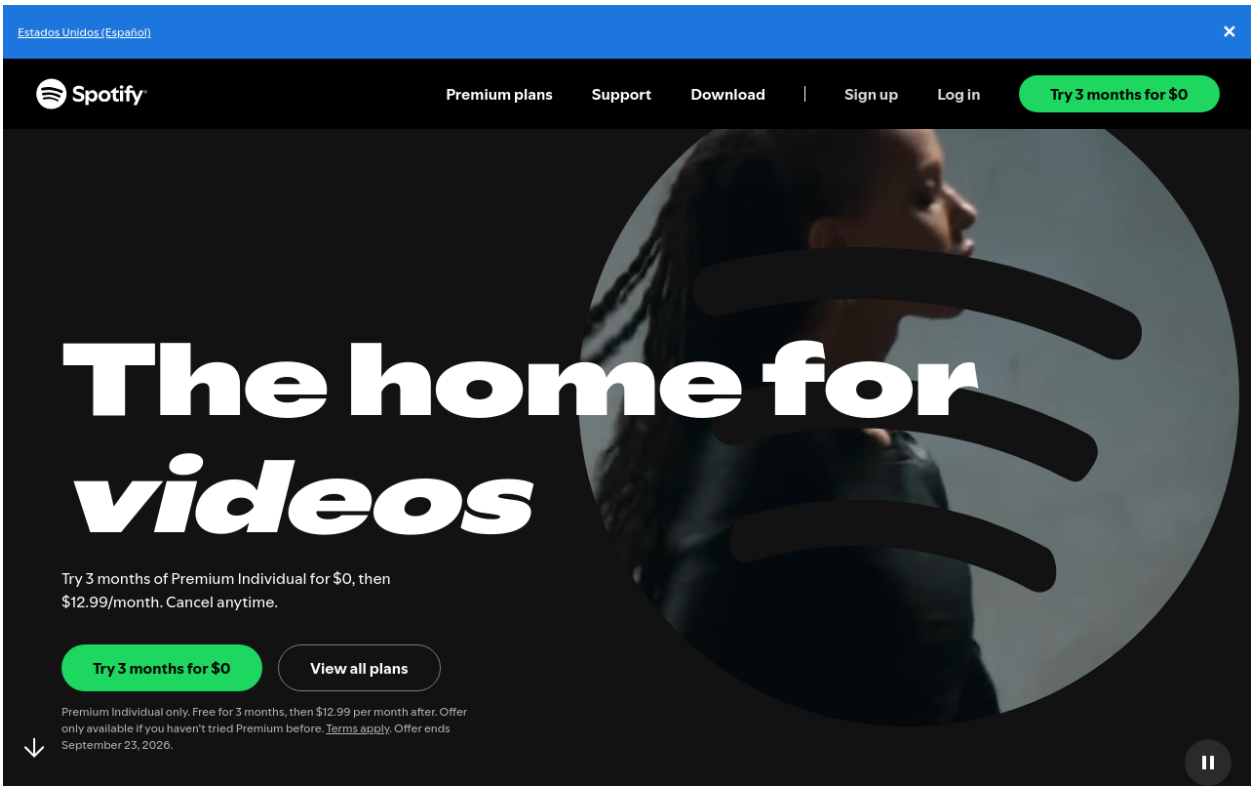
South Asia
the bulletin
Brought to you by Spotify
South Asia Newsletter
Music Ally South Asia is your guide to the music business in the subcontinent – in association with Spotify – and it's got all the



Source: https://musically.com/2026/04/13/youtube-raises-premium-and-music-subscription-prices-in-the-us/

YouTube's own pages could not be captured at all: every path on youtube.com and music.youtube.com refuses a server-side render with a content-security-policy error, and the YouTube Help article returns a blank frame. This is the coverage gap, stated up front. Prices for YouTube Music in this study therefore come from the trade press reporting the April 2026 increase, and from YouTube's own help documentation read as text, rather than from a captured pricing page. Spotify's prices are captured from Spotify's own page.

Spotify Premium, official US page, desktop



Source: https://www.spotify.com/us/premium/

The criteria, and how they were weighted

Set before capture, for the default buyer: **one person in the US choosing a single music subscription.** Nine rows, weights summing to 100.

Criterion	Weight
Real price for your situation	20
Discovery and recommendations	15
Audio quality	14
Catalogue: official releases against everything ever uploaded	13
Free tier terms	10
What else the subscription includes	10
Devices and multi-device control	8
Library management and lock-in	6

Criterion	Weight
Staying power in music	4

The question that would most change these weights: **do you already watch enough YouTube to want it ad-free?** It reverses the price row completely, and it is the real decision hiding inside this comparison.

Spotify Premium

OFFICIAL (spotify.com/us/premium, captured 5 September 2026):

- Individual **$12.99/month**, Duo **$18.99/month** for 2, Family **$21.99/month** for up to 6, Student **$6.99/month** with Hulu
- "Free for 3 months, then $12.99 per month after," new subscribers only, "Offer ends September 23, 2026"
- Premium includes ad-free listening, **lossless audio**, offline downloads, and 15 hours a month of audiobooks
- A permanent free ad-supported tier

INDEPENDENT: about **31.7%** of the global streaming market against YouTube Music's 10.3% (MIDiA via SQ Magazine, 2026). Lossless arrived late 2025 at up to 24-bit/44.1 kHz FLAC (HiFiWalker, 2026). Over 100 million tracks plus more than 7 million podcast titles.

WHO IT'S FOR: the listener who wants the best recommendations in the category, CD-quality audio at no extra cost, and music, podcasts and some audiobooks in one place. Also anyone who wants to use a music service seriously without paying, because Spotify's free tier permits background play and YouTube Music's does not.

YouTube Music Premium

OFFICIAL (youtube.com help documentation, read as text 5 September 2026, page could not be captured): "millions of songs, videos, and hard to find content like remixes, covers, and DJ sets without ads," offline downloads, and audio at **"256 kbps when listening to music videos."** No lossless tier is documented.

INDEPENDENT (prices, since YouTube's pricing page cannot be rendered): on **10 April 2026** YouTube raised US prices. Individual went from $10.99 to **$11.99/month** and family from $16.99 to **$18.99/month**, effective immediately for new subscribers and from the June billing cycle for existing ones (Music Ally, 13 April 2026; Digital Music News, 10 April 2026). Student is **$5.99/month**. The wider **YouTube Premium** bundle, which contains YouTube Music Premium in full plus ad-free and background YouTube video, is **$15.99/month** individual.

WHO IT'S FOR: the listener whose real library is on YouTube. Remixes, live sets, covers, radio edits, full concert uploads, the version with the intro, things that were never released commercially and exist nowhere else. And anyone who watches a lot of YouTube, for whom the music service is almost a rounding error on a subscription they want anyway.

The arithmetic that decides this comparison

YouTube Music alone is $11.99. YouTube Premium is $15.99 and contains it.

The marginal cost of YouTube Music, for someone who wants ad-free YouTube anyway, is $4.00 a month. Against Spotify's $12.99 that is not a price difference, it is a different category of decision. Conversely, for someone who does not care about YouTube video, YouTube Music at $11.99 is being asked to beat Spotify at $12.99 on a dollar, and a dollar does not buy the recommendation engine, the lossless audio, or the podcast and audiobook library.

So this comparison has a hinge rather than a winner, and the hinge is not about music at all.


Made with **CobaltCapture** · https://cobaltcapture.com