

Replace Your iBuds

As cute and instantly identifiable as the iPod's stock white earbuds are, they're no match for the quality of sound the iPod can produce. Listen closely, and we'll help you get the best cans for your cash. BY DAN FRAKES

LIGHTWEIGHT

These are the portable styles most people are familiar with: earbuds and small over- and behind-the-head models that use a plastic or thin metal headband. Our choices may look similar to the cheapies that come with most portable electronics, but they sound much better.

BARGAIN

Sennheiser MX400 (\$15) and **MX500** (\$20). If you like earbuds but just want better ones, start here. For the extra \$5, the MX500 gives you an inline volume control. (If you're after bass, keep in mind that earbuds tend to be weaker in the low end.)

Koss KTX Pro 1, **KSC50**, and **KSC55** (all \$20), and **SportaPro** (\$30). These models are variations on the same design and therefore sound fairly similar. But that's a good thing—you won't find better sound for an Andrew Jackson bill. The KTX Pro 1 is a pair of standard over-the-head portable phones. The KSC50 is a set of earclips—they hang over each ear with no headband to mess up your 'do. The KSC55 is Koss's version of the behind-the-head street-style models. (If you have a large head, move along; the KSC55 is clearly made for smaller noggins.) Finally, the SportaPro is a hybrid—you can use the headband in an over-the-head or behind-the-head position.

Also check out: **Sennheiser PMX60** (\$30).

VALUE

Koss PortaPro (\$50). The upscale sibling of the bargain Koss models, the seventies-style PortaPro offers better construction, as well as a fold-up headband and adjustable temple-pressure settings.

Sennheiser PX100 (\$50) and **PX200** (\$60). If the PortaPro is retro, these models are modern. You get not only impressive sound quality for the money, but also some of the most comfortable headphones you'll ever wear. Gadget points: They fold up like a pair of eyeglasses and fit in an included hard case. The PX100 emphasizes the bass slightly and doesn't block any external noise; the PX200 blocks a bit of external noise and offers slightly more-balanced sound. (The PX200 can sound thin with poor bass if you don't get the right fit, which takes some practice.)

STYLE

Audio-Technica ATH-CM5 (\$50) and **ATH-EM9r** (\$160). These aluminum models are some of the coolest-looking around. The ATH-CM5's metal earbuds perch atop black, gray, or orange sticks. The EM9r has high-tech, telescoping earclips that fit any ear size or shape comfortably. Both are lacking in the bass department, but there's no better aesthetic match for your silver iPod mini.

Bang & Olufsen A8 (\$160). This earbud-earclip hybrid is extremely comfy, thanks to superadjustable clips, and it's guaranteed to earn envious looks from passers-by. It also sounds quite a bit better than the Audio-Technica models. (The included leather travel case is a nice touch.)



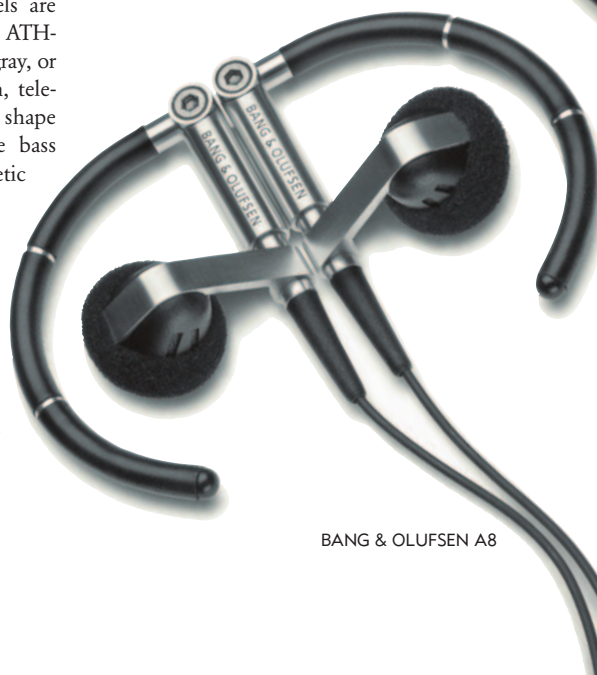
KOSS KSC50



SENNHEISER MX500



AUDIO-TECHNICA
ATH-CM5



BANG & OLUFSEN A8

FULL SIZE

BARGAIN

Sennheiser HD202 (\$30). It's tough to find a decent pair of full-size headphones for less than \$50—they're generally painful to listen to (and often to wear). The HD202 is an exception. It won't beat out the more expensive headphones here, but if you don't mind a bit of extra bass, for \$30 you get a solid pair of closed headphones that are comfortable and sound quite good.

VALUE

Grado SR 60 (\$70) and **Sennheiser HD497** (\$70). These models are likely the best full-size open headphones under \$100—many headphones that cost twice as much don't sound as good. The retro SR 60 has been called the "gateway to audiophile sound" and will floor most first-time listeners. The HD 497 is a bit more modern-looking and mellow-sounding.

Beyerdynamic DT 231 (\$60). If you want a pair of excellent closed headphones that won't break the bank, the DT 231 improves significantly on the Sennheiser HD202 with more-balanced sound and better comfort. It's among our personal favorites.

If you don't mind a bit more bulk, or if you want a great pair of headphones to use at home, full-size models often provide better sound than lightweight 'phones. Although some require more power than portable players can provide, our picks are efficient enough for enjoyable iPod use. *Closed* models block a limited amount of external sound, whereas *open* models let everything in (and out).

Also check out: **Sony MDR-7506** (\$100) and **Sennheiser HD280 Pro** (\$100).

STYLE

Sony MDR-D22SL Eggo (\$50) and **MDR-D66 Eggo** (\$90). These futuristic, egg-shaped closed cans come in several snazzy metallic finishes. Comfortable and able to fold up into a surprisingly small package, they also sound pretty good once you get accustomed to their counterintuitive fit. (You have to fit your ears inside the cups, but *behind* the cushions.)

AUDIOPHILE

Grado SR 80 (\$95) and **SR 125** (\$150). When connected directly to your iPod, these open headphones sound better than the value-priced SR 60, but you'll be able to justify their higher prices more easily when you listen out of your home stereo or dedicated headphone amp.

Sennheiser HD555 (\$170). Sennheiser makes some amazing higher-end open headphones, but most of them require a dedicated headphone amp to really show their stuff. The HD555 is one of the few that sounds great directly out of an iPod. Like most home models from Sennheiser, and unlike the Grados, it encloses your ears in cushiony comfort.



SONY MDR-D22SL EGGO (TOP);
SENNHEISER HD555, GRADO
SR 60, SENNHEISER HD202
(BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT)

TRAVEL

If you spend a lot of time on planes, trains, and subways—or in any environment where peace and quiet are the ultimate goals—get a good pair of travel headphones. These include noise-canceling headphones, which use processors that reduce external sound, and in-ear-canal models, which block external noise outright, as earplugs do. Because in-ear-canal models fit snugly in your ears, they generally provide better sound isolation and better sound quality than noise-canceling headphones—and you can listen at lower (and safer) volumes. However, if sticking bits of plastic deep into your ears makes you uncomfortable, in-ear-canal 'phones might not be for you.

BARGAIN

Apple In-Ear Headphones (\$39). These in-ear-canal 'buds sound decent if you can get a good seal, but that can be *very* difficult. Tip: replace Apple's grey rubber tips with the foam sleeves for the **Shure E2c** (\$12 for 10, www.shure.com/

earphones/eseries_accessories.asp). You'll significantly increase both sound quality and noise isolation (along with bass, which may not be for everyone).

Sony MDR-EX71 Fontopia (\$45). This pair is similar to Apple's In-Ear 'buds and is available in an iPod-matching white finish, but it provides better sound and isolation. In neither area can the EX71 match the more expensive models that follow, but at \$45, it can't be beat for traveling. Two versions are available: the SP includes a short cord and an extension cable; the LP model has a single longer cord.

VALUE

Sennheiser PXC250 (\$150). The PXC250 adds noise-canceling circuitry to the excellent PX200 (mentioned earlier). Oddly enough, whereas most noise-canceling headphones sound infer-



ETYMOTIC
RESEARCH
ER-6

FOR YOUR EARS ONLY

If you want the best seal possible for your in-ear-canal headphones, nothing beats custom-fitted earpieces. Once restricted to stage musicians, these custom modifications are now available to the average listener—as long as you're willing to pay the price. Vendors such as Westone Laboratories (www.westone.com/earmold_styles.html) provide earpiece services for in-ear-canal headphones such as the **Etymotic ER-4P** and **Shure E5c**, at prices ranging from \$100 to \$200 (this includes the earpieces and sometimes the audiologist fees, but not the headphones). Both Westone and Ultimate Ears (www.ultimateears.com) also sell complete headphone-earpiece packages for \$330 to \$550.

To get this perfect fit, you start with a trip to the audiologist, where you'll have warm silicone foam injected into your ear canals to create a mold. The 15-minute procedure is slightly uncomfortable, but it's no visit to the dentist. Once the molds are ready, they'll be sent off to the vendor, and a few weeks later you'll receive your 'phones.

iPod Protection. Evolved.

Highly evolved, colorful, and very protective (some even glow!), the silicone-enhanced iSkin eVo provides added style and cushion to your iPod or iPod mini.

iSKIN EVO

iSkins are available for all iPods.

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Dr. Bott

Compelling products. Check. Hassles: None.
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SHURE E3C

the midrange and treble. The ER-6i is our favorite here, offering the best of both worlds, as well as an iPod-matching white design.

AUDIOPHILE

Shure E3c (\$180), **Etymotic ER-4P** (\$330), and **Shure E5c** (\$500). After you seal one of these models into your

ear canals, the outside world will disappear, providing blissful silence—around -25dB to -30dB of isolation. Despite their varying prices, all three are reference-level products (which means they'll reveal the flaws in MP3 files with low bit rates). The E3c is ideal for rock and pop; the ER-4P and E5c are better suited for classical, jazz, and vocals.

Also check out: **Bose QuietComfort 2** (\$300).

Confessed audio geek DAN FRAKES (www.danfrakes.com) is a Macworld Contributing Editor, an editor at MacFixIt.com, and a book author.



SONY MDR-EX71
FONTOPIA

ior to comparable standard models, many people prefer the PXC250 to the PX200. Its great sound and excellent noise-canceling functionality come at half the price of some other popular noise-canceling models.

Shure E2c (\$100) and **Etymotic Research ER-6** (\$139) and **ER-6i** (\$149). These three in-ear-canal models claim the excellent middle ground—in terms of both sound quality and noise isolation—between the Sony EX71 and the audiophile-level Shure and Etymotic models below. As with most good in-ear-canal models, you get lots of detail, but you also get less bass than in most standard headphones. The E2c favors the low end, whereas the ER-6 focuses on

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WHERE CAN I FIND THEM?

You can find many of these headphones at your local or online electronics store, or at sites such as Amazon.com; a few are sold through higher-end audio shops or headphone-only retailers. Some good online headphone vendors are HeadRoom (www.headphone.com), GoodCans (www.goodcans.com), AudioCubes (www.audiocubes.com), and MiniDisco (www.minidisco.com). For vendor-specific information, see the following sites:

Apple: www.apple.com

Audio-Technica:
www.audio-technica.com

Bang & Olufsen:
www.bang-olufsen.com/sw1612.asp

Beyerdynamic:
www.beyerdynamic.com/com/maerkte/hifi

Bose: www.bose.com

Etymotic Research: www.etymotic.com

Grado: www.gradolabs.com

Koss: www.koss.com

Sennheiser: www.sennheiserusa.com

Shure: www.shure.com/earphones

Sony: www.sonymstyle.com

NO STRINGS—OR WIRES—ATTACHED

Headphones are great, but those darn dangling wires! They get caught on inanimate objects—often ripping your headphones off when you least expect it—and keep you tethered to your audio source. If you're listening to your iPod on the go, some iPod bags and jackets provide convenient pockets and cable openings to minimize cable clutter—but another option is to go wireless.

Although wireless headphones have historically been bulky contraptions requiring a large base station and mediocre-sounding headphones bigger than Princess Leia's hair buns, wireless technology has been steadily improving over the years, and a couple of new options are available for iPod users.

If you want to use your own headphones, try Koss's \$30 **HBRT Technology** wireless transmitter. It employs an AC-powered base

station—smaller than any other we've seen—and it includes a small, clip-on infrared receiver (with a 20-foot line-of-sight range) into which you plug your favorite headphones.

Building on even newer technology, Ten Technology (www.tenttechnology.com) will soon release **naviPlay**, a Bluetooth transmitter-receiver bundle that lets you use your favorite headphones—and control your dockable iPod—from up to 25 feet away. Best of all, it's completely portable.

The sound quality of these wireless solutions won't be as good as that of a comparable set of wired headphones, but in many environments you may not notice the difference. And for many listeners, the freedom of movement will more than make up for any decrease in sound quality.

—DAN FRAKES

WHAT'S THAT RINGING?

Preserve your most valuable instrument—your ears

BY STEVEN ROBACK

"PLAY THIS ALBUM LOUD" commands the back cover of the Pretenders' self-titled first album. The liner notes of Matthew Sweet's *Girlfriend* are a bit gentler—"DON'T BE AFRAID TO PLAY IT LOUD"—but the message is the same: you must crank the volume to unlock the album's magic.

And somehow it's true. Listening to loud music feels good, and does give you a magical sense of liberation. In fact, pop music itself is, from one viewpoint, a history of artists using ever-louder sound technology (such as electric guitars and amplifiers) to

continues on page 33



Take your iPod mini on Safari

Festooned with a selection of animal prints, the Marware Safari offers fuzzy fleece protection for your iPod. Only recycled plastic was harmed making the Safaris.

MARWARE

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continued from page 31

create this transcendent feeling. Technically speaking, louder volumes allow you to hear the entire frequency range in the music—the highs (treble) and the lows (bass)—thus letting you experience the music as the artists intended.

While loud volume has helped drive a music revolution, it has also helped give a population of music lovers ringing in their ears, or *tinnitus*. If you've been to a loud concert or positioned yourself in front of a club's PA system, you know what I'm talking about: it's that ringing, buzzing, whizzing sound you keep hearing—even after the music is over and relative quiet returns.

Any source of loud noise—be it Marshall stacks, jet engines, industrial machinery, or those benign-looking white earbuds—can cause tinnitus and potentially damage your hearing, according to Robert Sweetow, Ph.D., head of the department of audiology at the University of California, San Francisco, Medical Center. "Tinnitus has a thousand causes, but in every case it is a warning of possible hearing damage and should be taken seriously," he says.

Tinnitus and noise-induced hearing loss occur when the delicate hair nerve cells that line the inner ear (or cochlea) undergo repeated trauma from loud sound vibrations. This causes the hair cells to either die or misfire as they carry signals to the brain via the auditory nerve.

For most people, an occasional bout of tinnitus is nothing to worry about—a good night's sleep, and your ears bounce back. But musicians, audio professionals, live-music fans, headphone users, and others exposed frequently to loud noise are at particular risk for developing tinnitus and some hearing loss, particularly in the mid- and higher-range frequencies. It's wise to increase your awareness about safe listening levels *now*, because severe or even permanent tinnitus—in which the ringing *never* stops—is not uncommon, and its onset can be both physically and psychologically debilitating.

Listen Safely

According to Sweetow, "Listening safely is not just determined by how loud a sound is, but by the combination of how loud and how long your exposure is to that sound." With that in mind, here are some commonsense guidelines for safe headphone usage:

- If you use headphones frequently, take plenty of breaks.
- If your ears hurt after using headphones, you're listening too loudly.
- Never fall asleep with headphones on.
- Don't turn headphones up to mask external noise such as a loud subway car.
- Consider purchasing in-ear-canal headphones (see page 28). These might seem dangerous since you wear them deep inside your ears, but just the opposite is true: they seal out external noise, so you tend to listen at much lower volumes. For the best seal possible, get custom-fitted earpieces for these 'phones.

And *always* wear earplugs at loud concerts. Just as you can have an audiologist fit you with a pair of molded-to-fit earpieces for your headphones, you can get custom-fitted earplugs. These provide the most protection and the best listening experience—so you can bang your head safely.

If you do notice persistent ringing in your ears, don't panic, says Sweetow—give it a couple of weeks to calm down: "Tinnitus cases don't usually get worse. But there's an emotional component, and by focusing on it too much, you can get caught in a vicious cycle of anxiety. If your symptoms persist, see an ear doctor and have your hearing tested by an audiologist."

While there's no cure for tinnitus, Sweetow says, "In almost all cases, the brain eventually habituates [itself] to the noise, and after a while you won't notice it anymore."

STEVEN ROBACK has recorded and produced 18 albums since 1982. He is the author of Pro Tools 6 for Macintosh and Windows (Peachpit Press, 2004).



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