

Hearing Protection for Musicians and Music Lovers



Okee dokee folks... If your ears are ringing then someone is talking about you. That is an old wives tale. If your ears are ringing, it is not really a good thing. My ears ring because I have tinnitus and it sucks. I am not sure what the cause is. I have tried over the years to protect my hearing, but there have been some lapses.

When I first started going to concerts in my early teens I thought it was great that they were loud. That was until I noticed noise hangovers. I found an ad for special music earplugs in the back of *Rolling Stone Magazine* and ordered them. After they came in the mail I religiously wore them at every concert I went to, and there were a LOT. I was especially thankful for them at the Triumph concert about 35 years ago. This was by far the loudest show I have ever been to.

When I was young I worked a couple of jobs that should have REQUIRED hearing protection for employees, but didn't. Times were different. For five years my ears were assaulted daily by over 100 loud video arcade games. I used to hear them in my sleep. After that, I bartended in a dance club for three years. People thought that the louder the music was, the better. The only way THAT music would have been better was if it was turned OFF! All that time I should have been wearing hearing protection but didn't.

Nowadays I am faithful with hearing protection, and I carry a set with me at all times. At the Steven Tyler concert at PPAC a couple of months ago I saw a friend after the show and he said, "Man, my ears will be ringing tomorrow!" On the way home I decided to dedicate a column to encouraging EVERYONE to start using hearing protection.

I talked with audiologist Dr. Sara Carnevale Fearon by phone and asked her about hearing loss caused by loud sounds. I wanted to know at what decibel level hearing damage would occur. She told me, "The OSHA standard is over 80 decibels for more than hour, but it can vary. Usually I tell patients if they are going to do anything they have to yell to be heard over and are going to do it for more than a half an hour, to wear ear protection." I was curious if there were certain kinds of ear protection that she would

recommend for people who are going to be exposed to loud music. Her suggestion was to get music filters that are made to specifically reduce the decibel level, but don't distort the music. She mentioned, "Typical foam ear plugs that you buy over the counter will distort the sound. They will cut the lows much more than the highs and give you a muffled sound." When I asked what particular brand are best she informed me that Etymotic Research makes most of the filters used in the music ear plugs. She added, "You want a 15 or 20 decibel reduction, depending on the type of music you are listening to. If you are going to a hard rock concert, you are going to want the maximum. Same if you are a percussion player or if you are a musician and play drums or you play horns. Horns are pretty bad as far as the noise level goes. They need more protection than if you are playing the violin." I asked, "Would you recommend hearing protection for people who go to hear or play music?" Her response was, "Everybody's sensitivity is different and it's hard to know what is going to cause certain people's hearing loss. I have seen patients who have hearing loss just from attending one concert. If you go and it's loud enough and you are standing close enough to the speakers, it could happen." She continued, "Hearing loss is usually a combination of your genetic predisposition, medications and noise exposure. It's hard to pinpoint what it came from."

As we wrapped the conversation, I questioned her again about the 80-decibel level needing protection and she went further this time by saying, "We recommend protection for people who go to spinning classes where they play loud music. If you're going to be there and it's going to be loud, better to protect your hearing than to lose it!" I was curious if most people ignore this advice. She told me, "Yes, absolutely."

As I continued my investigation of music volume and hearing protection I figured that I should measure what kind of decibel levels I am exposed to. I purchased a decibel meter and brought it with me to check out the volume of the shows I attended. My band rehearsals can easily reach 90 decibels. Most of the concerts that I went to were in the 90 to 110 decibel range. I took a reading on The Extraordinary Rendition Band (lots of horns and percussion), and that band's level was between 95 and 105. They did not use amplification. I even went to a small pub where a solo guitarist was performing and was surprised to see the readings were around 95. The between-set music was around 80 decibels. So, judging from my informal experiment I would think that hearing protection should be used a hell of lot more than it is.

I test drove a few hearing protection devices in real world situations to see how I liked them. This is a non-scientific review based on my real-world experiences with the products and info that I gathered from the websites and packages. The easiest place to find most of these ear plugs is Amazon, but company websites are provided if available. A noise reduction rating (NRR) indicates the level of sound that earplugs block. These values reflect the level of noise protection available for each device when worn alone. This rating applies to earplugs and provides users of these devices an important analytical tool when comparison shopping.

Brand: ALPINE PARTY PLUG

General Comments: Comes with an insertion tool to make it easier. I found these to be one of the better brands that I received.

Comfort: A

Ease of use: B+

Storage: Two different plastic cases — one box, one keychain

Sound Clarity: B+

NRR: 16.5-21.5dB

Material: Special Alpine Thermo Shape hypoallergenic materials

Other: I recommend getting a different case for them if you intend to carry them with you all the time.

Overall Rating: B+

Average Price: \$16

Website: alpinehearingprotection.com

Brand: CRESCENDO

General Comments: Two pairs of earplugs included. I found them a little harder to insert and remove, and they're probably better for folks with smaller hands and ears. They have specific ear protection available for guitarists, drummers, DJs, vocalists, woodwinds and concertgoers.

Comfort: B+

Ease of use: C

Storage: Aluminum carrying

Sound Clarity: B+

NRR: 7-16 dB

Material: Medical grade materials

Other: Optional neck cord and insertion tool available separately

Overall Rating: B

Average Price: \$19

Website: dynamic-ear.com

Brand: DECIBULLZ

General Comments: These require a little DIY molding of the ear protection to custom fit your ears.

Heat the Decibullz thermoplastic molds in boiling water, let them cool for a bit, and shape them to your ears. These are probably best suited for musicians.

Comfort: A

Ease of use: B

Storage: Cloth bag

Sound Clarity: A

NRR: 31dB

Material: Eartips are made of a thermoplastic elastomer.

Other: Includes two Decibullz Thermoplastic Custom Molds, Three Sets of Triple Flange Tips S, M, L, One Set of Max Protect MEDIUM Foam Tips, Earplug Carrying Pouch. Various colors available-Black, Blue, Orange, Pink, Red.

Overall Rating:A-

Average Price: \$26

Website: decibullz.com

Brand: DOWNBEATS

General Comments: I found them a little hard to insert and remove. They're probably better for folks with smaller hands and ears.

Comfort: B-

Ease of use: C

Storage: Aluminum case with clip

Sound Clarity: B-

NRR: 18

Material: Soft silicone

Other: Clear, low profile ear plugs

Overall Rating: B-

Average Price: \$14

Website: downbeats.com

Brand: DUBS

General Comments: My band mate and my girlfriend both have Dubs and love them. Sleek design that fits flush to the ear and is easy to handle.

Comfort: B-

Ease of use: A-

Storage: Plastic Box; I recommend getting a different case for them if you intend to carry them with you all the time.

Sound Clarity: A

NRR: 12dB

Material: ABS, polymer foams and silicone

Other: Available in four colors: Teal, Blue, Pink and White.

Overall Rating: B+

Average Price: \$20

Website: getdubs.com

Brand: EAR PEACE

General Comments: medium and high protection filters included

Comfort: B

Ease of use: C; I found them a little harder to insert and remove. They're probably better for folks with smaller hands and ears.

Storage: Three chamber, milled aluminum case

Sound Clarity: B-

NRR:11-14dB

Material: Soft, medical grade silicone/polyurethane foam plugs-hypoallergenic

Other: Available in multiple skins tone

Overall Rating: B-

Average Price: \$22

Website: earpeace.com

Brand: ETYMOTIC ER20XS

General Comments: I found these to be one of the better brands that I received

Comfort: A

Ease of use: A

Storage: Clamshell Case-I recommend getting a different case for them if you intend to carry them with you all the time.

Sound Clarity: A

NRR: 13dB

Material: Eartips are made of a thermoplastic elastomer

Other: Comes with a cord that attaches to the plugs, not a fan of the clamshell case

Overall Rating: A

Average Price: \$20

Website: www.etymotic.com

Brand: KILLNOISE

General Comments: These are simple ear plugs, pouch can easily slip into your back pocket or hook on keychain, could be a little stiffer to make insertion into ears easier, but overall they are pretty comfortable.

Comfort: B+

Ease of use: B+

Storage: Storage Pouch (colors available)

Sound Clarity: B+

NRR: 9dB

Material: "The special material in these ear plugs is made in Sweden. It's hypo-allergenic, recyclable and CE-certified, and is also soft and gentle for maximum comfort, even over long periods."

Other: Translucent for inconspicuous wear in public

Overall Rating: B+

Average Price: \$14

Website: killnoise.com

Brand: LIVE MUSIC/HEAR SAFE

General Comments: Two pairs of earplugs included; I found them a little harder to insert and remove. They're probably better for folks with smaller hands and ears. Use the included cord!

Comfort: B+

Ease of use: C

Storage: Aluminum carrying case with cord inside

Sound Clarity: B

NRR: 23-29 dB

Material: Natural Soft Silicone

Other: Backed by a Lifetime No-Hassle Replacement Guarantee

Overall Rating: B

Average Price: \$29

Website: Amazon

Brand: NO NOISE

General Comments: These were comfortable and clear, but could be a little stiffer to make insertion easier. Features a zirconium oxide ceramic sound filter

Comfort: A-

Ease of use: B+

Storage: Aluminum Tube Key Chain Case

Sound Clarity: A

NRR: SNR 20dB

Material: Silicone free-hypoallergenic

Other: Comes in purple

Overall Rating: A-

Average Price: \$29

Website: nonoise-earplugs.com (Note: these were sent to me by Twisted Throttle out of Exeter, RI | twistedthrottle.com)

Brand: WOOWEXX

General Comments: I found them a little harder to insert and remove. They're probably better for folks with smaller hands and ears. Use the included cord!

Comfort: B+
Ease of use: B-
Storage: Aluminum Tube Key Chain Case
Sound Clarity: B+
NRR: 20-28 dB
Material: Soft silicone
Other: Two pairs included, 20 dB filter, as well as 28 dB filter
Overall Rating: B
Average Price: \$18
Website: woowexx.com

Here are a few tips once you get ear protection. Keep them with you all the time. The best place to keep them is on your key chain. If the ear plugs do not come with a container that clips on a key ring, then just go to Dollar Tree and get one of the aluminum pill containers. You may initially struggle to get them into your ears, but once you figure it out it's easy. To properly insert them, you have to reach over your head with the opposite hand to the ear and lift your ear to straighten the canal. It makes the insertion easier. I suggest that you don't take your ear plugs out and put them in repeatedly. I find it is best just to leave them in all night. Your ear canals will thank you. If the ear plugs come with a cord that connects the two together, use it! I got a couple of them stuck in my ear and they were a bugger to get out. The cord makes it easy to pull them out and keep track of them. Finally, don't worry if anyone thinks that you are uncool; let THEM go deaf!

That's it for now. Thanks for reading. JohnFuzek.com