



Don't Expose Yourself - to excessive NOISE

The guitarist of a classic rock band is the latest to crusade against hearing loss and the use of iPods and earphones. On 29 December 2005 Pete Townshend, of The Who, issued a statement via his Website warning earphone users about hearing loss.

Here are extracts from Townshend's statement. "In the seventies I discovered I had badly damaged my hearing. I stopped touring with the Who a few years later. Hearing problems were my chief concern at that time. In 1989 I found that if I was careful on stage, and used smaller guitar rigs, my hearing didn't get any worse during a tour. A lot of fans complained my sound was not what it used to be, but there was no way I could back to massive six foot high amplifier rigs. Another grand tour is now promised in 2006. This is a tour that rather depends on me writing new songs. This process has taken a long time. Many people may wonder why such a simple thing as recording a demo should take so long. I've spoken about the problem of cracking the right kind of material for the Who - but there is something else going on. I have hearing trouble.

I think I am lucky, my case is not typical. I stopped touring and rock recording early enough to prevent the damage advancing too fast. I've often said that although the Who have a reputation for being loud, as a live band we were usually only as loud as everyone else. We were, with Pink Floyd, simply one of the first UK bands to develop effective PA systems. People often confused the size of the rigs we started to use with loudness, not improved quality. By the way, this is not exclusively a British disease: the main leap in volume at live shows started in San Francisco with Bill Graham and the Grateful Dead.

But today, this very morning, after a night in the studio trying to crack a difficult song demo, I wake up realizing again - reminding myself, and feeling the need to remind the world - that my own particular kind of damage was caused by using earphones in the recording studio, not playing loud on stage. My ears are ringing, loudly. This rarely happens after a live show, unless the Who play a small club. This is a peculiar hazard of the recording studio.

The point I'm making is that it is not live sound that causes hearing damage. In a studio there are often accidental buzzes, shrieks and poor connections that cause temporary high level sounds. Playing drums with earphones on is probably a form of insanity I think, all those gunshots, so much louder than a real gunshot, but how else can a drummer hear the other musicians? When I work solo now I often avoid using a drummer, simply to keep the overall sound levels lower. Also, one might have to work for several hours to perfect a studio performance. As the work progresses, the ears shut down and one needs a higher volume. If you stop to rest

your ears (and you need to do so for at least 36 hours to do any good) you lose the current performance.

I have unwittingly helped to invent and refine a type of music that makes its principal proponents deaf. It takes time, but it happens. The rewards are great - money, fame, adulation and a real sense of self-worth and achievement. But music is a calling for life. You can write it when you're deaf, but you can't hear it or perform it.

Last night, I was working with a piece of music that depended on me finding a correlation between the harmonic clusters in a piece composed using a computer - rather electronic in nature - and the overtones of a normal acoustic piano. With my hearing rolling off severely now at around three or four kilohertz, I don't have much luck with high harmonics or piano overtones (I can still hear speech OK). Needless to say, I didn't finish what I started.

Hearing loss is a terrible thing because it cannot be repaired. If you use an iPod or anything like it, or your child uses one, you MAY be OK. It may only be studio earphones that cause bad damage. I only have long experience of the studio side of things (though I've listened to music for pleasure on earphones for years, long before the Walkman was introduced). But my intuition tells me there is terrible trouble ahead. The computer is now central to our world. If downloading has a real downside it may not be the fact that musicians will get their music stolen - in truth, they appear quite ready to give it away for nothing. The downside may be that on our computers - for privacy, for respect to family and co-workers, and for convenience - we use earphones at almost every stage of interaction with sound.

I am forced to continue to take my time in the recording studio. Those 36 hour hearing rests are infuriating now that a tour is announced, frustrating and agonizing, but compulsory.”

In addition to Townshend, in recent months, various other people have warned that earbud-style headphones could cause serious, permanent hearing loss, and there has been extensive international media coverage of the findings of a National Acoustic Laboratories study. On 8 January 2006 Health.telegraph reported Pete Townshend's statement, in an article that led with "Listening to loud music on your iPod can permanently damage your hearing". It reported that experts agree listening to music that is too loud for too long can permanently damage your hearing. More than three million personal stereos, including iPods, are sold in Britain each year. Experts advise limiting their use to one hour a day and taking regular breaks to give the ears a rest, yet research by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), which launched its "Don't lose the music" campaign three years ago, reveals that 39 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds fail to heed that advice. Such bad habits, says the RNID, store up problems for the future.

When iPods are turned to full volume, the sound can reach 104 decibels. This is an example of how, in some ways, technological advances have made things worse for our ears. Before the Eighties, music became distorted above certain volumes. But the latest digital sound systems allow music to be played much louder, without affecting sound quality. Film soundtracks, music in nightclubs, pop concerts, and

even aerobics classes often exceed the danger volume to a hazardous extent. At the cinema, sound levels of 110dB have been recorded. Compare that with loud shouting (80dB) and the fact that the pain threshold for sound is 140dB and it is clear that we live in a painfully noisy age.

In The Canberra Times of 29 January 2005, a columnist wrote of how she loved iPods. "On our recent extremely lengthy car trip the consolidated iPods kept a car full of writhing boys happy for 14 hours". She also stated that when she gets behind the wheel of a car she turns "the radio up really, really loud. So loud that I have to constantly check my rear vision to make sure I'm not missing a siren. So loud that any child trying to talk to me can easily be drowned out. So loud that I can't hear the car phone tinkling away." This is just another example of the lack of awareness of the potential problems of noise exposure.

