

>> Choosing headphones

THE WHY, HOW & WHAT...

The recent popularity of headphones (especially 'fancy' headphones) can be attributed to a few key factors.

Flash back to 2012 and the gaining momentum of the smartphone wars. Samsung's Galaxy S3 was fighting for its life against the new iPhone 5, and everyone was now constantly online.

Music streaming services such as Spotify had grown roots and, of course, a pair of Beats by Dre were the 'thing' to have.

This trifecta of tech events inspired a new generation of listeners to ditch the 'included in-ears' that came with their swanky new phones in favour of something a little more fashionable.

Fashion, it seems, was the ultimate catalyst for this big bang and while it did gross every headphone manufacturer with a colourful headband or skull icon some quick cash, it also taught the hordes of unsuspecting trendoids a valuable lesson: not all headphones are created equal.

So, if you were one of the masses waving your flag at the fashion parade only to have your ears assaulted by thin, crackling bass and screaming treble, let me explain a few rules.

Always ask these simple questions: why, how and what? And ask them when you buy anything, let alone a tech purchase.

So, why do you need headphones? Well, let's start with me. I need headphones for both work and play.

To paraphrase my article from last year, work involves a lot of music composition in an untreated room. So, I need to hear the music from a highly critical source, without any interference from the dynamics of said untreated room (or my neighbour's dogs).

Thus I want headphones with an impartial sound signature that isolates me from outside noises and interference. The answer: A pair of reference headphones with a relatively tight over-ear design and, preferably, a noise-cancelling function.

What I didn't mention last year are my 'play' headphones. My playtime usually involves some sort of physical outdoor activity.

The reason why I need and want headphones for this is because music is a constant companion that inspires me to push that little bit harder and makes the overall experience that little bit more enjoyable.

Therefore I need headphones with an engaging sound signature that plays music efficiently through a small audio source, doesn't get in my way or fall off/out of my ears, and that allows me to both hear my phone and answer important calls.

At this point it's fair to assume that my small audio source is my phone. The answer: a pair of light, tight, in-ear headphones with a fun sound





signature, low impedance, a tangle-free cable and a microphone.

My last example comes from a rapidly growing sector of the tech world and something I didn't fully experience until this year — E-Sports. I went to the Rage Expo this year, where I witnessed hundreds of gamers sitting for three days solid, playing networked games.

It's a real thing these days, people! In fact, E-Sports has a higher viewership — both in actual attendance, and from the number of people who watch it via broadcast or online — than a lot of actual popular sports.

The prize money for the winners of these events is also very attractive, making it a legitimately viable career choice for youngsters these days.

Long story short: these events are...loud! Gamers need to hear both the game's sound as well as their teammates, who are constantly discussing strategy. They also need to be able to hear themselves as they kick, scream, slash, shoot, fly and contribute to the strategy discussion.

What they need then is something that firstly blocks out as much of the surrounding mayhem as it can. They also need something loud and clear enough to be able to hear their teammates, while also being as loud and clear themselves.

The answer: a pair of tight over-ear, closed-back headphones — preferably with a noise cancelling function, a strong midrange delivery

and a good-quality microphone.

In closing, let me just touch lightly on the new Apple trend. We've probably all heard by now that the new iPhone 7 comes *sans* headphone jack, which more than likely means that Apple will be dropping it from all their devices in the near future, depending on how much backlash they get.

What this means is that Apple users will probably only be left with two options: wireless or Lightning port connection. It's not all doom and gloom, though: the Lightning connection offers lossless 48 kHz digital audio output from Apple devices and avoids typical analogue signal interferences.

Also, I'm sure a lot of headphone manufacturers will start offering both Lightning and standard 3,5 mm cables to go with their products.

I hope this has helped a bit. The rest is up to you. Try before you buy and...don't worry too much that your nice sounding new headphones don't have the same 'Angel of Death' or 'Kitty cat' icon bravely emblazoned on the ear cups that you saw your favourite celeb wearing.

If that's your thing, you just read the wrong article.

Justin Beachcroft-Shaw.

