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Hearing protection that both cuts and cancels shop noise

Noise-canceling headphones have been all the rage among the traveling public in the past few years. These headphones "hear" environmental noise (such as the constant drone of an aircraft interior) and generate a frequency identical to it, but with the sound waves inverted so they cancel out the drone. That allows you to hear what's coming through the headphones more clearly and without having to crank the volume to overcome the room noise. Now the same technology has come to the woodworking shop in the form of NoiseBuster Safety Earmuffs.



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Intrigued by the concept, I headed straight for the shop the day the muffs arrived. I went directly to my portable planer, slipped the NoiseBusters over my ears and fired up that noisy machine. With their power switch off, they worked about as well as other muff-style hearing protection I've used, but didn't cut the sound as well as my usual in-ear plugs. Then I pushed the dust-sealed power switch on one ear cup and instantly the planer noise dropped by half. Impressive. NoiseBusters seem to reduce low frequencies better than the high ones, and when I used them before firing up my riding lawn mower (a much lower frequency than the planer), I had to double check to make sure the mower actually started.

I have another set of hearing-protection muffs with a radio built in, and I often wear those when I want to catch a ball game without losing shop time, although they can get heavy. No radio on the lighter-weight NoiseBusters, but a stereo headphone jack allows you to plug in a portable radio or MP3 player. On a job site, you could plug in a two-way radio and protect your ears without missing any calls. A buddy took my NoiseBusters to a NASCAR race and plugged a scanner into the jack. He eavesdropped on the conversations between the pit crews and drivers while shutting out most of the track noise.

The manufacturer says you'll get about 65 hours of use out of the single AA battery that power NoiseBusters. That's probably about right, but I left mine on by accident a few times because the power indicator LED isn't very bright and it hides behind the headband. And NoiseBusters don't come cheap—they cost about as much as a cordless drill. But 20 years from now, I'll still have most of my hearing and that drill will be nothing more than a memory.

—Tested by *Dave Campbell*



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