



THE PLAIN DEALER

Tune out the outside world with \$69 headphones

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Often, the big-boy toys that come into my world for a few weeks' worth of use carry big price tags. I know that readers can't afford everything that I write about, but I also know that they don't need any advice from me on what to shop for down at the Dollar Store.

It's always nice, then, when a product with a moderate price makes an appearance. Those items provide a little contrast from the \$80,000 speaker systems that I sometimes get to hear (if not take home).

The NoiseBuster headphone system from Pro Tech Communications is one of those nice, moderately priced items. While it might not get the attention that the higher-priced, big-name noise-canceling headphones get, it does perform in a league above its \$69 price.

If you've never had it demonstrated for you, the idea of active noise-canceling circuitry might sound a little suspicious and carnivalesque, much like the tourist attraction in my hometown that offered to show paying customers how a stream of water could defy gravity and run uphill. Yeah, sure.

Designers place a microphone inside and outside the ear cup of the headphone to measure the outside noise as it reaches the ear. Noise-canceling circuitry creates a sound wave that is the direct opposite of the external sound and sends that into the ear cup. The result is that the external noise is dramatically lowered.

In the early '90s, noise-canceling headphones were developed for airline travelers to reduce the hum of the aircraft engines. In addition to reducing the outside influence on music or other entertainment soundtracks, noise-canceling headphones became popular for travelers who just listened to nothing at all.

One side benefit of noise-canceling headphones is that listeners can play their music at lower volumes than without the circuitry. When outside noise interferes with music on standard headphones, the tendency is to just crank the volume up to drown out the bad stuff. Higher volumes are more likely to create distortion and increase listener fatigue.

The NoiseBuster brand dates to 1994. The newest version comes with a 4-foot cable that terminates in a stereo miniplug - the type of connection used on a portable CD, tape or MP3 player. (The stereo mini is not the size plug used with most full-size home stereo systems. You would need to buy an adapter for that use.) The NoiseBuster also comes with a two-prong adapter that can be used on some airline sound systems.

The headphones have leatherlike cups to seal the sound chamber. The noise-canceling circuitry requires one AAA battery (supplied), which is supposed to provide 40 hours of performance

before replacing. The headphones fold into a 6-by-3.5-by-2.5-inch shape that can be stored in a carrying pouch that is provided.

I haven't found it necessary yet to take an airplane to work, even though I live a couple of miles from Hopkins and work a mile from Burke, so I can't report on the NoiseBuster's airline performance. Most of my listening has been done at home late at night when there wasn't much noise to cancel and in The Plain Dealer's newsroom, where there is considerably more noise.

At work, the difference between having the noise-canceling circuitry turned on and listening with it off is dramatic. The headphones do work with the circuitry turned off, but the high-end frequencies are not as sharp. Click on the circuitry, and suddenly the outside world gets knocked down a peg. The music is brighter, the low frequencies kick more, and the vocals are more distinct.

That's not to say that these headphones provide a "Get Smart" Cone of Silence. If someone stands behind you and yells across the room - and that happens more often than I would like in the newsroom - you still will hear the yell. I guess a complete cocoon would be too much to expect, and the sound leakage might come in handy if the fire alarm sounds.

About a year ago, I tried and wrote about the Bose Quiet Comfort noise-canceling headphones, which sell for \$299. I don't have them around to compare performance, but I will say that the NoiseBuster provides a remarkably good performance for about one-fourth of the Bose system's price.

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For your information

What: NoiseBuster noise-canceling headphones

Frequency range: 20 to 20,000 Hertz.

Noise-cancellation range: 40 to 1,2000 Hertz, maximum 18 decibels at 100 to 200 Hertz.

Price: \$69

Information and to purchase: www.protechcommunications.com or 1-800-468-8371

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