

Tape Op Gear Reviews

Sony

MDR-NC5 noise canceling headphones

I bought a pair of *MDR-NC5s* for a recent airplane ride and they are the coolest thing in the world! You can use them with or without a Walkman or CD Walkman or whatever. They've got a built-in mic which phase-reverses the ambience to your ears, plus a filter which rolls off 300 Hz and below (gets rid of almost all airplane engine rumble as well as a lot of the subway rumble in NYC). They're not perfect, however. Because the low end is filtered out, it seems like you hear all this high end, but really you were hearing it anyway. Plus, there's some slightly odd stuff that happens with the music you're listening to, but I found that I can turn the volume down on my CD Walkman since with the noise-canceling feature turned on, it increases the volume and the bass response is better. They come in three varieties:

MDR-NC10 (in-ear tiny things) \$150

MDR-NC5 (open air-I have these) \$100

MDR-NC20 (full-size, total ear coverage) \$175

-Hillary Johnson, hillary@tapeop.com

Tape Op Magazine #26 - 2001

Sony

MDR-NC10 Noise Canceling Fontopia Ear-Bud Headphones Foam Earplugs

With all the traveling I do, I feel that airline flying without ear protection is akin to walking into a rock show without a set of earplugs. Obviously, I value my ears, so I'll do whatever is necessary to keep my hearing as healthy and acute as possible. If I fly without ear protection, I'll notice that my ears will ring for a few hours or so afterwards (most noticeably when I'm going to sleep in a quiet bedroom), much like what they'll do if I don't wear earplugs at an amplified music event. On a recent 14-hour, transpacific flight, I had the opportunity to try out a set of Bose Noise Canceling Headphones. Like their siblings made for helicopter and small plane pilots, these headphones use earcup-mounted microphones and a battery-powered signal processor to cancel out (via phase reversal) steady, ambient noise. Compared to a pair of foam earplugs, the Bose headset does a much better job of taking out the rumble and groan of the jet (the lows and mids), while the earplugs do a better job of filtering out the hiss and

shhhh of the engines (the highs). Strictly for the task of reducing the noise around you, it's a toss-up as to which type of noise reduction is more preferable.

The main advantage of the Bose headphones - and the reason you'd want to use them instead of earplugs - is that they're also high quality audio headphones, not just noise cancelers. You can listen to your CD player or to the in-flight entertainment with much higher fidelity and at lower volumes - and arrive at your destination with less ear fatigue. A secondary advantage of the Bose headphones over earplugs is that the headphones seem to cancel out sounds that are "constant" while leaving other sounds less affected. Therefore, you can hear the flight attendant talk to you or you can have a conversation with the person seated next to you. But then again, this feature becomes a disadvantage when you'd rather reduce the volume of the people around you. Another disadvantage is that the headphones are not as comfortable as earplugs when sleeping. Naturally, a true road-warrior equipped with Bose headphones would also travel with a pair of foam earplugs - and enjoy the benefits of both.

How does the Bose headset compare with standard, closed-ear headsets? With my old standby Sony MDR-V6 headphones, I find the ambient noise - especially the rumble and groan, which the ear cups don't seem to attenuate - too bothersome unless I listen at louder volumes than I'd normally prefer. I haven't heard the Bose headphones in a controlled environment, so I can't make a true assessment of their audio capability, but I can say they sound amazing sitting in an airplane! The reproduction of the midrange is especially smooth. At \$299, the Bose headset is not cheap. Also, the headset does not fold, so it takes up considerable volume in your carry-on. Two weeks after my first "road-test" of the Bose phones, I walked into an airport shop and saw a display showing Sony's version of the noise-canceling technology embodied in three different headset models. One is similar in form to the Bose: a non-folding traditional headset. Another is a slightly smaller, folding headset. [see above] What interested me was the third model, with a design similar to in-ear monitors: two sculpted rubber "plugs" with wires leading to a tiny control box. Small and portable, the *MDR-NC10* stuffs into a bag that's the size of an audio cassette.

On my 14-hour return flight, I compared the Sony headset back-to-back with the Bose headset. Noise canceling ability? Because the rubber earpieces of the Sony headset fit tightly into the outer ear canal, there is passive attenuation of higher frequencies. Even with the active noise canceling circuit off, much of the airplane "hiss" is cut out. You hear much more airplane hiss through the Bose over-the-ear phones whether or not the noise canceler is on or off. On the other hand, the Bose headset does a much better job of taking out the low-end "rumble" and the mid-range "groan". Bose wins here. Audio fidelity? The Sony *MDR-NC10* has a definite emphasis on the bass. Not my preference, as I feel that such a big bump in the bass adds too much mud. The Bose headset with its smooth midrange and clearer high end wins here too. Comfort? I found the Sony earbuds more comfortable for long periods of time. A month after the comparison flight, I've now flown with the Sony

earbuds on two other occasions, wearing them for the duration of each five-hour flight. The soft rubber (not foam) of the earbuds conforms to my ear cavities well... after a while, I forget that I'm wearing them.

Verdict? If you can afford the cost, size, and weight, go with Bose and you'll enjoy higher fidelity and better noise cancellation. On the other hand, at 1/3rd the cost with a much smaller travelling size, I'm quite happy with my Sony earbuds. -Andy Hong, www.kimcheerecords.com

Royer Labs Demonstration CD

Ostensibly this is a promotional device (only \$3.50, for shipping) for Royer ribbon mics, a product that we highly recommend here at *Tape Op*, but there's something that makes this CD a cut above. Sure, you may want to skip over an excerpt of "There She Goes" by Sixpence None the Richer or Jewel singing "Winter Wonderland," but there's ample audible proof that the R-121 sounds amazing on electric guitar on many of the following tracks. The "something special" though is the *Microphone comparisons with Steve Albini* at the end of the CD. Steve goes through and compares the R-121 to other mics (Coles 4038, SM57, etc) and provides us with his wonderful dry commentary. We love ya Steve! Truly one of our favorite CDs at the studio these days. (www.royerlabs.com) -LC

PPA

ID-One condenser microphone

Okay, you might have thought large-diaphragm condenser mics were getting cheap - but now PPA blows everything out of the water with the \$99.95 *ID-One*. Of course it's another one of those inexpensive Chinese-made, fixed cardioid-pattern mics, in fact the insides looked a lot like the bottom-of-the-line ADK mic. I thought it would be fun to give this little bugger the kind of workout that Ezra and I give all my mics, and I was initially unimpressed, but also surprised by a few things that it sounded good on. On a loud guitar amp, even with a 10 dB external pad (there isn't one on board), it generated enough internal crackle to be useless. On acoustic guitar the low end of this mic seemed out of control, making the signal very muddy. On spoken voice I swear I heard a sock over it and the lows were quite boomy again. By the time we got to a snare drum I wasn't expecting much, but damn, it sounded kinda cool with a thick thud on the bottom like off some heavy '70's record. On cymbals it was harsh and not too inviting. On piano, where we expected it to fail, it wasn't bad, and would work okay. When we tried it on a bass amp I was most surprised, as the over-hyped low end response made the amp sound really good, and it beat out the other (far more expensive) mics we were checking out. My verdict would be that the *ID-One* is a great deal for a small or home studio that needs more colors, and despite the sometimes painful low-end bump could probably serve well in more scenarios with a bit of EQ cutting in the bottom (there is a high pass switch but it is inexplicably mounted on the circuit board inside the mic - for the sake of this review we didn't turn it on as it was covered by the mic body). And it really did sound pretty good on bass guitar, especially for \$100! (www.pacificproaudio.com) -LC with Ezra Meredith