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# Weekend

## IN YOUR EAR



ALSO: DAYLIFE/Back to the gardens. 63



# WALKMANIA

**O** K, WHICH one of mankind's many inventions most epitomizes the spirit of spring?

Is it the bicycle?

The convertible?

The lawnmower?

My vote is with the Walkman.

Before the first purple crocuses have popped up, before the cherry blossoms are even thinking about budding, before the red

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tion, as working out to a beat is more bearable. Runners, weightlifters, stair-climbers—even swimmers—all swear by them.

After a long layoff, I took up running again last year when I discovered the TuneBelt, a washable polypropylene belt with a Velcro pouch that snugly holds a Walkman while minimizing annoying audio jiggle. Before that, I used an AM/FM tuner, and had been at the mercy of FM playlists and frequencies that crackled in and out as I ran up and down hills, under trees in Rock Creek Park. Suddenly I could program my own running soundtrack—something to look forward to when I didn't feel like getting out there.

Like many other runners, I made a mix tape of my favorite inspirational songs, varying it so there are peaks and valleys, surges of power and cruising time. The Medical and Sports Music Institute of America recommends songs between 80 to 120 beats per minute (BPM) for exercising on a stair-stepper machine, 120 BPM for health walking, 150 BPM for jogging a 10-minute mile and 180 for running a six-minute mile.

Walkman is also partly responsible for the boom in books on tape, says David Simone, owner of Babbling Books, which offers thousands of titles on tape at three Washington area locations.

"People always have stacks of books they never have time to read," Simone says, "and with the Walkman, they discovered they could use that 'in-between' time to catch up. So now people can use them a lot for commuting, on the bus or the Metro. In fact, our first ads said 'Rent a romance for the rush hour' and 'Rent a mystery for the Metro.'"

"They're also great for the drive to the beach," says Simone.

And who ever really reads those books they drag along to the beach?

"Instead of getting sand in your book and sun in your eyes, you pop in a tape, lean back and have someone read to you." Babbling Books carries both the abridged and complete versions of "Moby Dick," at 3 hours and 21 hours respectively. (Simone was expecting to have the cassette edition of Kitty Kelley's Nancy Reagan biography, read by the author, in stock by this Friday.)

Simone says his wife wears her Walkman when she's cooking. "But the great thing is that now she's actually willing to do the dishes because she can't tear herself away from her 'book,'" he says.

Many find a Walkman the antidote to any stressful or tedious or empty task, from walking to work to waiting in line. Saxitone's Bloom says he knows of a Virginia obstetrician who puts headphones on her patients during labor. And dentists frequently use them as an adjunct to Novocaine.

"If a patient doesn't like the sound of the drill, I keep a Walkman on hand—it seems to relax them considerably," says Dr. Arlen Leight, who recommends Earl Klugh and George Winston for patients. Leight says he's "constantly connected" to his Walkman (except, of course, when he's working on a patient), favoring such upbeat stuff as Madonna, Paula Abdul and Taylor Dayne.



Any other man stops and talks/  
But the Walking Man walks.

— James Taylor

Of course, every Walkman wearer has heard the Walkman hater's gripes:

It's antisocial. Dehumanizing. The Death

## Impersonal Stereos

**E**XCUSE ME, can we talk? I said, excuse me, can we talk? **EXCUSE ME!** Take those stupid things out of your ears!!!

Ahh. Now isn't that better?

I can tell from the vacant expression on your face that you rarely confront the world without your "personal stereo." When you wake up in the morning you insert the aural pacifier into your ears and tune in the radio. You pop a few cassettes in your backpack and leave for work. And then you sit next to me on the Metro, eager to share your music.

But I don't like your taste in music. Of course, it doesn't really matter since I can't tell exactly what it is you're listening to. All I hear is this trebly sound—shhh chucka shhh chucka shhh—like some South American percussion instrument made of a beer can and tiny ball bearings.

I admit it's some consolation that your hearing is slowly going, that by age 50 you won't be able to hear a baby's cry, a wisp of birdsong or a Concorde landing on your house. But right now, as your hearing gets gradually worse, all you do is turn up the volume. I get to hear more and more of what it is you're listening to, as the sound leaks out of your eyes, your nostrils and your mouth whenever you open it to sing along.

"Raaaaaxanne," you sing. "You don't have to turn on the rrrrr light. Walk the streets for money you don't care if it's wrong or if it is right."

But you're not really singing are you? You're just sort of muttering to yourself, the mindless disharmonic babble of

a possessed child. You probably don't even realize you're doing it. It's some kind of horrible reflex action, like sticking an electrode into a frog's leg. You sound awful to me. But to you, you are Sting or Whitney Houston or Plácido Domingo.

You think I shouldn't worry about this annoyance. You're not hurting anyone. And even if I can hear a little bit, so what? Well I'm worried that some time in the future, doctors, just as they've discovered the danger of passive smoke, will discover the danger of passive music. Because of you I'm going ever so incrementally deaf.



Oh, you sometimes argue, it's only certain types of headphones that are the problem, the kind that don't—in the hopeful words of the Metro drivers—limit sound to the individual wearer. But I want you in a diver's suit, the helmet screwed on tight and the base sealed up around your neck with spackle.

Future generations, on seeing photo after photo of people with thin, silver bands around their skulls, will wonder: "Weren't their ears fastened securely enough back then?"

At least I don't have to worry about there being that many of you in the future. Wrapped in your own little cocoon you are oblivious to the outside world, which means that chance romantic encounters—eyes meeting on the subway platform, a bit of small talk, the train pulling in, a blush, a laugh, then the full blossom of love—are out of the question.

"Excuse me, miss, did you drop this? I said excuse me, miss. **EXCUSE ME!!!** Oh forget it . . ."

— John F. Kelly



Paul Caffrey relaxes on a park bench with his headphones on.

BY CRAIG HERNDON

of Conversation. Not to mention dangerous.

There's no convincing these people that Walkman wearers aren't intent on blocking out the world, deliberately avoiding contact with nature and fellow humans. Walkman haters say it contributes to the alienating factor of the big bad city.

But, hey, there's plenty of unpleasantness out there to block out. And in the city, there's no clear border between music and noise. If anything, Walkman gets more of us

off our butts and outside more often. And if we see an attractive stranger approaching, we can slip the headphones off for awhile.

Of course, as soon as a new technology is invented, someone finds a way to abuse it. Most of us have seen people sporting headphones at concerts or in the movies. Or spotted someone carrying on a conversation with a Walkman going. And there are those who insist on singing along with the thing on. Out loud. And we all know what *that* sounds like.



I'm living in my own private Idaho/I'm living in my own private Idaho. — The B-52's

Sony probably doesn't know this, but I actually invented the Walkman 20 years ago, when I was 12 years old and cutting lawns for pocket money. With the rotary mower creating a soothing harmonic drone (and disguising my cracking voice) I would sing the latest 45s (remember those?) I had memorized from my transistor radio (and *those?*). I imagined how great it would be if I could have my record player with me while I worked.

Lucky for Sony I didn't have the technology to carry out my dreams. History, and my checking account balance, would be much different.

When I saw the first Walkman in a 15th Street electronics shop window in 1980, I bought it instantly, cost be damned. It was the invention of my dreams and it's never let me down: I've gone through easily a dozen sets, from expensive micro-models to near-disposable cheapos, to the current sturdy sports model I now favor.

Walkman was actually the brainchild of Akio Morita, chairman and CEO of Sony Corp. In 1979, he saw Sony founder Masuru Ibuka lugging along a cumbersome portable cassette player and bulky headphones for private listening on his airline flights. Intrigued, Morita challenged Sony's engineers, miniaturization experts, to shrink the idea down. The idea met resistance from Sony's engineering techno-whizzes, who thought a tape machine that didn't record, only played, was a step backward. But Morita, who built his reputation on being in touch with the man in the street, prevailed.

"At my home my children were always playing their stereos in their rooms, making my happy home a noisy one," says Morita. "In the car as well, they played the stereo loudly. But once they went outdoors, there were no machines to play their music. Of course I did see on the street some youngsters carrying big cassette systems on their shoulders, but these were very loud and heavy. So with these ideas in our heads, we thought that the creation of a small stereo cassette player with lightweight headphones had the potential to fill a yet unrecognized market need."

Morita took the prototype model along with him on a golf game, and pronounced it a winner. Soon Sony people were put to work finding a name for the product-in-development. The Tokyo office came up with "Walkman."

"At that time, I thought it was funny-sounding English," Morita says. "But our people told me that it was too late to change, because they had already put the project in motion and had ordered the packaging and promotional materials with the Walkman trademark on them. I had already given them a firm release date of July 1, 1979, for the Japanese market, and this date was rapidly approaching. Despite my reservations, we had no time to change the name, so Walkman it would be."

To promote the new gizmo, Sony hired students to wear and listen to their Walkman units on trains, campuses and around Tokyo's busy Ginza district. Walkman made a splash in Japan, but when the time came to take it to America, Sony Corp. of America balked at the name, deciding to call it "Sound-





Window-washer Gus Strats works to the strains of Dire Straits.

BY ANNE FORD DOYLE

dabout" for the U.S. market. The British had the same problems with the grammatical propriety of Walkman, and Sony U.K. created the name "Stowaway." But during his trips overseas, Morita found that the Walkman name was becoming popular with people whose native language was not English.

"Everybody understands 'Walk' and 'man,' so the combination was something that everyone could appreciate," Morita says.

This new way to playback was a shot in the arm for the recording industry.

"There's no question that when Sony celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Walkman, the record industry celebrated as much as the hardware guys," says Jay Berman, president of the Recording Industry Association of America. Berman, a runner, says he goes through three or four portable players a year, mostly keeping them fed with "my all time favorites—Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Band, Linda Ronstadt."

"A lot of tapes and CDs end up shared between the car and the Walkman," says Owen of Olsson's Records. While top-of-the-line tape sales are down in this area—a trend Owen attributes in part to record companies' raising the price of cassettes to make CDs look more attractive—sales of mid-line and budget cassettes, which Owen calls "Walkman fodder," are booming.

"And cassette singles—a format that exists largely because of the Walkman—are

really big at Kemp Mill and the Wiz," says Owen, whose portable CD player is eclectically stocked with everything from the Renaissance music of Josquin des Prez to a Rhino Records surf music compilation.



*Make your own kind of music/  
Even if nobody else sings along.*  
— Mama Cass

Whether it's your first or 50th Walkman purchase, Saxitone's Bloom recommends that all shoppers listen to and compare models in the store, as there is a wide sonic variation among the individual machines. Bloom recommends testing the three basic varieties of headphones. Earbuds, tiny round speakers which fit snugly into the ear, are near-invisible as they don't use a headband, but they don't fit every ear. The traditional banded headsets either completely enclose the ear or just sit gently over the opening. Some prefer the "turbo" style, a cross between the earbud and the traditional headset.

If you're buying a model with radio tuner, Bloom suggests testing it to see if it is powerful enough to pull in your favorite stations. "Before WHFS boosted their signal, a lot of people were coming in here looking for a tuner that could get the station," Bloom says.

Other useful features include auto-reverse, a particular boon to exercisers, who don't have to stop and remove the tape to flip it over; sports-oriented units with hard-

shell cases that access the buttons from the outside; and wired remote-control units. There are even more advanced features, such as quartz lock, which prevents jiggle and rumble when you and your Walkman are in motion.



*I can't hear you no more.*  
— Helen Reddy

Sony has produced more than 150 Walkman models since 1979, and continues to introduce about 20 new models a year, according to Sony vice president Viken.

"These don't always involve a technical innovation," Viken says. "The change is most often a styling update, as Walkman is a fashion accessory as much as a musical one."

Recent improvements have included "mega-bass," solar power, digital tuning and automatic station presets on FM-equipped models. And four years ago Sony introduced My First Sony, a line designed to seduce the preteen bloc into personal electronics addiction. (Actually, the chunky My First Walkman, with its sturdy, droppable red case, see-through back window and colorful cassettes, is totally cool for grown-ups, too.)

The big news is CD Walkman and DAT players. Last year, Sony announced the first portable digital audio tape player, the TCD-D3, that allows for CD-quality recording and playback. A Sony rep hints that the next trend, though it's "still a bit early to talk

## Tuned In, Turned On

**E**VER WONDERED what's going on in there? Me, too. So in the interest of research (and outright nosiness), I boldly stopped the first 10 Walkman wearers (that is, the first 10 who would kindly stop for me) at evening rush hour on downtown Connecticut Avenue, and pried their headphones off just long enough to ask the musical question: Whatcha got on?

1. Steve Swartz, 43, Adams-Morgan: "Love Warriors" by Tuck & Patti.
2. Anonymous, 40-ish, D.C.: Jimi Hendrix concert tape bootlegged from WPFW-FM broadcast.
3. Valerie Bayle, 23, D.C.: "She Drives Me Crazy" by Fine Young Canibals, on a homemade mix tape.
4. Lisa Gilliam, 28, Virginia: "Sabreen," Palestinian traditional music.
5. Wilfred Gonzalez, 29, Springfield: "Ella Me Dejó (She Left Me)" by Luis Enrique.
6. Cherae Bishop, 25, D.C.: "Happiness is a Warm Gun" by the Beatles.
7. Richard Sincere, 32, Arlington: "Evening" with Chris Core on WMAL-AM.
8. William Del Pino, 32, Kalorama: "Where the Streets Have No Name," Pet Shop Boys, on a homemade "best-of" compilation tape.
9. Shawna Ryan, 27, Bethesda: "All the Man That I Need" by Whitney Houston.
10. Wayne Drennen, 20, Mount Pleasant: "Escaping" by Margaret Urlich, from a new artists sampler CD.

— Joe Brown

about," will be portable stereos with wireless headphones.

But however cheap or luxe your Walkman, the basic idea remains essentially the same. Any Walkman, whoever makes it, whatever you call it, gets the same effect, putting you inside the music.

"I have this Barney Rubble Walkman that weighs about 50 pounds," jokes Washington events producer Betti Brown, who says she's still true to her first blue aluminum Sony model. "I always look enviously at people who have those feather-light models, but basically mine works just fine."



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