

ELECTRONIC REVIEW



MD Product Shootout!

DRUMMER HEADPHONES

One of the most important—yet generally overlooked—pieces of gear for a drummer to own is a nice set of headphones. Whether you use them when practicing to a metronome, playing along to your favorite CDs, recording tracks for your band's next record, or jamming out on a set of electronic drums, it's crucial to have a set that not only offers great sound quality, but also provides a decent amount of isolation so you don't have to crank the volume too loud. You also want something that feels comfortable on your head, especially after several hours of use. What follows is a comparative look at a handful of drummer headphones that'll help you find just the right pair to suit your needs.



GK MUSIC ULTRAPHONES

THE ORIGINAL DRUMMER'S HEADPHONES

Steve Miller Band drummer Gordy Knutson's company, GK Music, has been building hearing-protection stereo headphones designed specifically for musicians since 1995. Combining a 29 dB-reducing, shooting range-style earmuff with a set of Sony 7506 professional studio monitor headphones, these cans offer a respectable listening experience (they sound a little flat when compared to some of the others) coupled with a lot of acoustic isolation, which allows even the hardest-hitting drummers to be able to listen to their headphone mix at a safe level. These aren't the most comfortable (they squeeze around your ears pretty tightly) or inconspicuous (you'll look like a runway air-traffic controller when you wear them), but they offer some of the best hearing protection you can find. They also come with a zippered carrying case.

Notable UltraPhone users: Shawn Pelton, Steve Smith, Andres Forero. Price: \$229.95 • www.gk-music.com



STUDIO DRUMMER'S CHOICE

DIRECT SOUND EXTREME ISOLATION EX-29

Like the UltraPhone, Extreme Isolation headphones were designed by a drummer who wanted to achieve the most isolation possible. Also sporting 29 dB of sound reduction and around-the-ear isolation, these professional-grade headphones are quickly becoming a favorite among many top touring and studio drummers. The basic design of the Extreme Isolations is sleeker than the UltraPhones—they have a flatter profile with slightly rectangular earcups—and they fold up nicely for easy transport. The EX-29s have an even but warm sound (they aren't as clean and ultra-realistic as some of the others we reviewed), and they block out a lot of outside noise, which allows you to keep your monitor levels much lower than you'd expect.

Notable EX-29 users: Jim Riley, Nir Z, Shawn Drover, Daniel Erlandsson. Price: \$169 • www.extremehdphones.com



RICH AND REALISTIC SOUND

ULTRASONIC HFI-580

The HFI-580s are the most impressive-sounding of our review group. Utilizing the company's trademarked S-Logic Plus surround sound and ULE metal-shielding technology, these headphones offer an incredible, hyper-realistic listening experience. The bass response is very tight and punchy, while the high frequencies sparkle and sheen with crystal clarity. For home-studio owners, these headphones would work great for mixing, as they expose every detail in your recordings. The HFI-580s also fold up easily and are very comfortable to wear. We especially enjoyed how their earcups don't press the ears into the head; rather, they fully encircle them. Sound reduction wasn't as extreme as it was with the UltraPhones or EX-29s, but there's plenty of isolation (up to 40%) to protect your hearing while you play. These are for discerning ears.

Price: \$199 • www.ultrasone.com



VIC FIRTH SH1

AFFORDABLE AND EFFECTIVE

Vic Firth's SH1s are a great, cost-effective alternative to the others in this shootout. While the SH1s were the least hi-fi sounding of our review group, these shooting range-style headphones provide 24 dB of sound reduction, which proved to be more than enough to prevent hearing damage during loud practice sessions. The coiled cord can become a little bothersome if you have to stretch it to reach your headphone amp or CD/MP3 player. And you might not like the way these muffs push your ears tightly against the side of your head. But if you're strapped for cash and you've had to rely on your iPod earbuds for click/playalong practice, a pair of these would be a big improvement.

Notable SH1 user: Rod Morgenstein.

Price: \$101 • www.vicfirth.com



IDEAL FOR E-DRUMMERS

YAMAHA RH10MS

Yamaha's RH10MS headphones are like the Ultrasone HFI-580's little brother, in that they're a little smaller and not quite as pristine sounding. But they're still super comfortable and solidly built, and the sound quality is very good. In fact, these cans feature Ultrasone's S-Logic surround-sound technology (not the higher-end S-Logic Plus found in the HFI-580s). Isolation-wise, these are a little less effective than the others. But the earcups completely surround the ears without squeezing them too much. And they create a nice seal around the ears, which will prevent your click track or monitor mix from bleeding into overhead mics when recording. Because of their smaller size and lighter weight, these headphones would be great for extended use, like when you're practicing for hours on a set of electronic drums or refining a drum mix on your laptop. They also fold up very nicely and come with an embroidered velour pouch.

Price: \$159.99 • www.yamaha.com