

Satellite Radio Arrives: Can We Turn Down The Volume?

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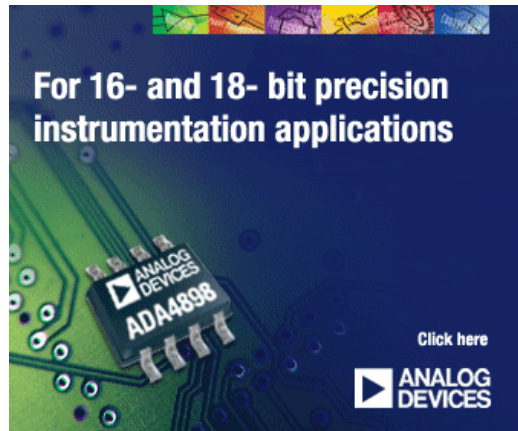
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My name is Mark David, and I'm a music-holic. This confession stems from the manic excitement I felt just reading about digital satellite radio in this issue's cover story. Talk about an outrageously sophisticated electronic infrastructure dedicated to enhancing our hedonistic listening options: Sirius Radio has spent nearly \$2 billion to give us 100 commercial-free, digital channels coast to coast (*see this issue, p. 43*).

But, tempering my euphoria, a press release about new digital hearing assistance technology got me thinking about the downside of this musical bacchanal. To take my confession a step further, I am addicted to loud music. Even though I've damaged my hearing via years of playing in rock bands, I can't help but turn up the volume, particularly when I'm in the car, which is the prime outlet for digital radio.


Ha-ha, I hear some of you saying! Addicted to loud music—good joke! But audiologists aren't laughing. In a recent paper presented at the American Auditory Society, Northeastern University researchers examined why some individuals continue to listen to loud music despite having tinnitus and/or noise-induced hearing loss as a direct result of their music-listening behaviors. Their research indicates it is possible for a person to have a dependency-like disorder underlying excessive listening to loud music. Preliminary findings point to the existence of a true dependency on loud music, which the authors call Loud Music Dependency Disorder (LMDD). "If LMDD is confirmed to exist in a significant number of individuals, we will be pressed to rethink treatment programs for prevention of noise-induced hearing loss," say the study's authors.

Of course, I make my confessions knowing I'm not alone in my addiction. Many of you are audiophiles and may also



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The advertisement features a dark blue background with a green circuit board. A central component is labeled 'ANALOG DEVICES ADA898'. At the top, there is a horizontal bar with colorful, abstract patterns. The text 'For 16- and 18- bit precision instrumentation applications' is prominently displayed in white. In the bottom right corner, there is a 'Click here' link and the Analog Devices logo.

be LMDD sufferers, compelled to crank it up every time you get in the car—and living with the consequences. Premature hearing loss is hitting baby boomers, gen-Xers, and even generation Y. From 1971 to 1990, hearing difficulties jumped 26% among those ages 45 to 64, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Among those 18 to 44, hearing difficulties rose 17%. A study of University of Tennessee freshmen found that 60% had hearing loss and 14% had hearing loss similar to the average 65-year-old.

True, the problem of noise in modern society isn't confined to electronic music. Everything from leafblowers to blowdryers crank out the decibels. But music is peculiar in that it is the one "noise" we intentionally and sometimes compulsively turn louder. Some personal stereo systems now include a pamphlet warning about the dangers of turning the volume too high. (OK, I guess you can add surroundsound movies to the "self-infliction" list. While rock concerts can reach 120 dB, a film like *Armageddon* can hit 118 dB, according to a *U.S. News* article on early hearing loss.)

But when it comes to self-exposure to dangerous decibels, there is no place like the car. If you haven't been to the Consumer Electronics Show lately, you'd be astounded by the outrageous AV showcase cars and the amount of floorspace devoted to outfitting "the cars that go boom." The *U.S. News* article describes "decibel drag racing" where car stereo enthusiasts try to outdo their competitors and have clocked their audio equipment at 155 dB or more. (A jet engine at 100 feet is 140 dB; 194 dB is "the loudest sound that can occur," according to the Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers group.)

Electronics may have created this problem, but they're also dealing with the fallout. Sales of hearing aids are booming. The Hearing Industries Association says that high-performance digital aids that analyze and respond to specific sounds make up the fastest growing segment of the hearing aid market.

Last month, Precision Inc. (www.precision-inc.com) announced its manufacture of a microcomponent for a new hearing assistance microtechnology from Able Planet (<http://able-planet.com>). The technology creates a direct wireless link between a hearing aid equipped with a T-coil (short for Telecoil) and an electronic device such as a phone or headset. The T-coil recreates, rather than simply amplifying, the audio signal inside the hearing aid, minimizing interference and feedback. The first to meet a "Hearing Aid Compatible" designation, the 1-mm Able Planet device fits into standard telephones or hands-free headsets.

The T-Coil is good news/bad news for those of us addicted to loud music, for the Able Planet technology is not just for phones. It's also designed for use with all types of headsets, including those for CD and MP3 players! Fellow LMDD-sufferers take note: soon we'll be able to put in our hearing aids and crank it up! Oh, help....

At our Web site, take this issue's Quick Poll on your tendency toward LMDD, and/or post your thoughts at the end of the online version of this article.

[See associated figure](#)