

# The Day the Music Died

By [STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM](#)

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MICHAEL BELLUSCI'S quotation in his high school yearbook was, "It ain't rock if it ain't loud." Growing up in Flushing, Queens, he played guitar and drums, idolized Jimi Hendrix and performed in cover bands. Later, he went on the road as Ringo in the musical "Beatlemania."

These days, if his left ear happens to be covered by a pillow, Mr. Bellusci, 47, hears the alarm clock as a faint *tick, tick, tick*, not a blaring BEEP, BEEP, BEEP. In cacophonous restaurants, he watches people's mouths so he can follow the conversation.

Years of high decibel noise and trauma from speaker feedback damaged his right ear. Mr. Bellusci, who plays ukulele, recorder, guitar and bass in an acoustic duo, now says, "If I could do it over again ..."

How many boomers are thinking the same thing.

As more members of the generation born after World War II enter their 60s, and the effects of age conspire with years of hearing abuse, a number find themselves jacking up the volume on their televisions, cringing at boisterous parties and shouting "What?" into their cellphones.

About one in six boomers have hearing loss, according to the Better Hearing Institute, a nonprofit educational group. The [AARP](#) has reported that there are more people age 45 to 64 with hearing loss (10 million) than there are people over 65 with hearing loss (9 million). And more people are losing their hearing earlier in life, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, one of the [National Institutes of Health](#).

Hearing loss from age (presbycusis) can begin before the Social Security years, but boomers are also likely candidates for noise-induced hearing loss, particularly the kind that results from continuous loud noise over an extended period of time (like a 115-decibel rock concert).

“They’re the first of that rock ‘n’ roll generation,” said Sharon Beamer, the associate director of audiology professional practices for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, “the first to really grow up with loud music, personal stereo systems.”

But factory noise, construction din or the roar of subways may also be to blame.

“None of us protected our ears at all,” said Pat Benatar, the rock singer and guitarist, who is on tour. Nowadays, Ms. Benatar, 54, also lends her celebrity to Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers (HEAR), one of several public service groups with campaigns to prevent hearing loss.

“I’m still a junkie,” she said. “I still want it so loud.” Yet noisy restaurants bother her. When her dishwasher is running, she said, “I can’t hear any conversation at all.”

In the grand scheme of things (sending the children to college, paying off the mortgage, menopause), the inability to hear the dialogue on a reasonably adjusted television is a minor nuisance. Nonetheless, boomers said the realization that their hearing is no longer sharp provokes anxiety about age, frailty, dependency and obsolescence.

“When my father didn’t hear well, I remember being annoyed at him,” said Don Henke, 57, who spent 33 years as a meat wholesaler around thunderous machinery.

“I regret that now,” Mr. Henke said. “I remember he would say ‘What did you say?’ and we would repeat it again. And he would say ‘What was that again?’ ” Eventually, Mr. Henke would tell him to forget it.

“That was such a terrible thing to do,” said Mr. Henke, who has difficulty hearing conversation in crowded places and who compensates by saying very little. “And

now I understand what he was going through and I hope that people don't do that to me. I've already warned my daughter not to do that to me."

Still, many of Mr. Henke's generation will not go gently into that beige abyss of no-frills gadgetry known as the hearing aid. National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders data from 2001 shows that just 149.6 of every 1,000 adults who have diminished hearing, whether from aging, disease or injury, use a hearing aid.

Yet that reluctance by boomers, who at about 78 million are a potential windfall market, has motivated sound technologists. Companies have not only developed devices to attract age-phobic, style-conscious boomers, but that also address hearing and language issues for everyone else.

But first they had to reinvent the hearing aid so it no longer looked like a chewed Circus Peanut or made wearers feel like they were hearing through a tin can. Rather, today's newest devices look like the progeny of iPods and Bluetooth.

One company, Oticon, learned about boomer anxiety when it conducted studies to determine why the people who needed hearing aids were not wearing them.



The stigma was a lot more deeply felt and strongly felt than we had allowed ourselves to believe," said Gordon Wilson, vice president for marketing at Oticon. "People really saw them as devices that would make them look old, that would make them look ugly, that would make them look decrepit."

"People would rather go around asking everybody to repeat themselves," he said.

Amy Arra, 49, of Naperville, Ill., was one such person. For years she ignored her hearing loss because she knew she would need a hearing aid. But when Ms. Arra returned to the work force after 14 years as a stay-at-home mother, she could no longer ignore her loss. "In meetings I wasn't catching everything," she

said. "It was very tiring." Finally, she visited an audiologist and was pleasantly surprised when she was not shown the chewed Circus Peanut, but a device called Audéo.

Audéo's manufacturer, Phonak, does not call it a hearing aid. In a nod to PDAs like BlackBerrys, it calls Audéo a PCA (Personal Communication Assistant). Shaped like a moth's wing and smaller than a guitar pick, it perches behind the ear and comes in 15 color combinations, like Pure Passion or Green With Envy.

Ms. Arra could have also considered the Bernafon SwissEar hearing aid, red with the white cross insignia of the Swiss flag. Or a Delta by Oticon in Shy Violet. "It was like shopping for sunglasses," said Ms. Arra, who bought two Audéos in Crème Brûlée (brownish blond) to match her hair. The device has a thin tube coiling toward the ear canal.

Even so, Ms. Arra was worried people would notice her Audéo. At a gathering, she said, "I was so self conscious and I thought everyone was staring." Turns out, no one spied it.

Such devices are akin to sexy underwear. "No one knows you're wearing it unless you want them to," said Mr. Wilson of Oticon.

The ads for these inventions play up the sexy angle, using models who could just as easily be selling Match.com subscriptions.

Hearing aids are not inexpensive, and the cost is rarely covered by insurance or Medicare for adults. Audéo is about \$3,000 to \$4,000 an ear, though as with all hearing aids, prices vary because they are determined by doctors, not manufacturers.

But some, like Oticon's Epoq, come with other benefits, and not just for those who strain to hear the waiter recite the specials. The Epoq, which was introduced in May, is the first hearing aid to have integrated wireless and Bluetooth connectivity, so it can stream a cellphone call or music and audio from a radio, computer or MP3 into the ears through a remote control-like device worn on the body. It is, in other words, a wireless hands-free headset.

And that may be just the beginning of sound enhancement breakthroughs. Sergei Kochkin, the executive director of the Better Hearing Institute, predicts that buildings will install wireless transmitters so a voice from many feet away can be streamed into the ears of listeners wearing such devices.

Lectures with enhanced sound and extraneous noise elimination can be piped in that way, and the device could also be equipped with language translation software, he said.

Outside of the hearing aid industry, there is also some progress toward making the soundscape more boomer-friendly.

Research conducted by IDC for Dolby Laboratories found that television volume issues (like extremely loud commercials) are a more significant concern for boomers than other age groups. Dolby Volume control technology, however, monitors and adjusts the perceived volume level played through a television's speakers and will eventually be incorporated into televisions.

Restaurant ambiance is also a peeve. The National Restaurant Association has not conducted research about noise levels, though a spokeswoman said there are so many more food establishments that diners have the opportunity to choose one that is gentler on the ears.

Good thing, as hearing loss has also been linked to short-term memory loss, fatigue, anxiety, depression, even lower income — on average, up to \$12,000 a year less than for their counterparts who use hearing aids, Dr. Kochkin said.

To protect hearing, professionals advise wearing ear plugs or muffs when exposed to noise louder than 85 decibels (a power mower is about 90 decibels) for an extended time. And, yes, if your iPod is loud enough for everyone in the elevator to know you own Jock Jams, turn it down.

Among boomers, though, there are those who have no anxiety about hearing loss. Jeff Davies, 62, a tennis photographer in Orlando, Fla., said that losing his hearing may not be all that bad.

“I think I’d quite enjoy it if I didn’t have to listen to ice cream trucks roaming the neighborhood and people screaming at their kids,” he said.

Then, Mr. Davies, who is from Yorkshire, England, reiterated the maxim about growing old gracefully.

“I certainly don’t want to die,” he added. “But anything short of that I can live with.”