



NOW HEAR THIS

by John Mitchum

1 **W**hat do former president Bill Clinton and rock musician Pete Townshend have in common? Both men have hearing damage from exposure to loud music, and both now wear hearing aids as a consequence. As a teenager, Clinton played saxophone in a band. Townshend, who has the more severe hearing loss, was a guitarist for a band called the Who. He is one of the first rock musicians to call the public's attention to the problem of hearing loss from exposure to loud music.

2 Temporary hearing loss can happen after only 15 minutes of listening to loud music. One early warning sign is when your ears begin to feel warm while you listen to music at a rock concert or through headphones.

3 "What happens is the hair cells [in the inner ear] are damaged, but they're not dead," says physician and ear specialist Dr. Sam Levine. According to Dr. Levine, if you avoid further exposure to loud noise, it's possible to recondition the cells somewhat. However, he adds, "Eventually, over a long period of time, hair cells are permanently damaged." And this is no small problem.

4 When tiny hair cells in the cochlea (CO-klee-uh), a coiled tube in the inner ear, are damaged or destroyed, an abnormal sound is sometimes produced in a person's head. This sensation of a ringing in the ears is called tinnitus (tin-IH-tuss). Tinnitus can also consist of hissing, clicking, or buzzing sounds that can be heard only by the person affected with the condition.

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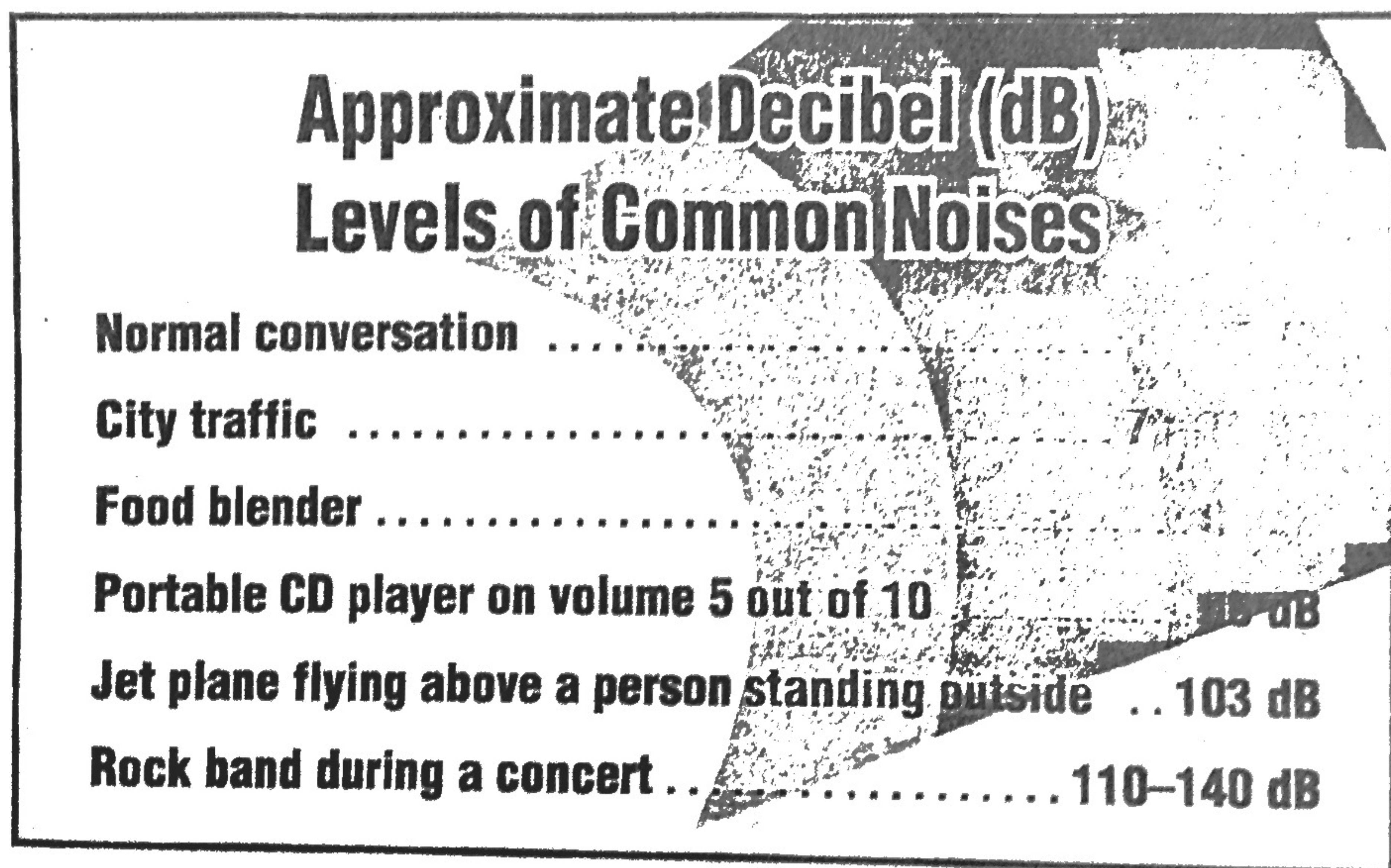
Today's Teen

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What sound level is dangerous? According to Dr. Levine, regular exposure to noise in excess of 85 decibels is considered dangerous. A decibel is the unit of measurement for sound. Most people don't carry around the scientific equipment that measures decibels, though. The chart on this page offers a comparison of decibel levels to certain sounds. Here's another gauge you can use. If you're at a rock concert and the music is so loud that you have to shout to make yourself heard, you're at risk for hearing loss. That's when wearing protective devices such as earplugs becomes critical.

The facts are pretty frightening. But are rock bands turning down the volume? Most aren't. "Rock music is supposed to be loud," says drummer Andrew Sather. "I wouldn't have it any other way. And neither would the real fans of rock."

Continued exposure to loud music and the failure to wear earplugs can lead to deafness, according to Dr. Levine. He states, "There's no cure for tinnitus or hearing loss. Your ears are trying to tell you something. That ringing is the scream of your hair cells dying. Each time that happens, more and more damage is done."



Giving speeches at schools was something musician David Todman never pictured himself doing. He thought his life would always be devoted to music. But hearing loss changed all that. The following is his story in his own words.

I Learned the Hard Rock Way

1 I always thought that hearing loss was something that affects other people—and not only other people, but much older other people.

My notes about what I am reading

2 I was a guitarist in a rock band for nearly nine years, and before that I attended every rock concert that came to town. If someone had suggested that I wear earplugs while playing or listening to music, I would have laughed. What was the point of listening to music if you couldn't enjoy it at full volume?

3 When I first began playing in a band, I noticed that my ears would ring after a concert and in normal conversations people's voices would sound muffled. But my hearing would return to normal in a day or two, so I didn't think there was any problem. I now know that people can lose their hearing gradually. My doctor explained that repeated exposure, week after week, causes permanent damage. I didn't realize that I had a problem until it was too late.

4 High-pitched sounds were the first ones I had trouble hearing. Different words—for example, *hill*, *fill*, and *sill*—sounded the same to me.

5 Sometimes my ears produce a low, dull sound, something between the hum of an organ and the purr of a car motor. At other times the sound is a ringing or a faint, high squealing. Still other times the sound is like the whooshing inside a seashell. The sounds can get so bad sometimes that I can't function. I become completely immobilized, often for hours at a time.

6 I'm now so concerned about the dangers of listening to loud music that I speak about the subject to students in middle schools and high schools. I tell students about a study in which researchers found that about 17 percent of middle school and high school students have some degree of hearing damage or loss and that the most significant hearing loss was detected in students who attend rock concerts frequently.

7 It wasn't until my hearing loss was diagnosed by my doctor that I learned how delicate people's ears are. So please take my advice: protect your ears. Don't go to loud rock concerts, or if you do go, use earplugs. It might not seem cool to wear earplugs, but let me tell you, hearing loss is definitely not cool. And, by the way, stuffing cotton in your ears won't do much good. That will reduce sound by only seven decibels.

8 Earplugs are not for wimps. Three of the four members of the band Metallica wear earplugs. If you play in a band, you'll still be able to hear yourself and the other instruments when you wear hearing-protection devices. Actually, you may hear more clearly once distracting noise is curtailed or even completely blocked out. Musicians' earplugs are comfortable and easy to insert, and they filter sound better than disposable plugs.



9 Music once meant everything to me. It was the center of my life and is still important. But preserving my hearing means more. After all, what good is great music if you can't hear it?

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