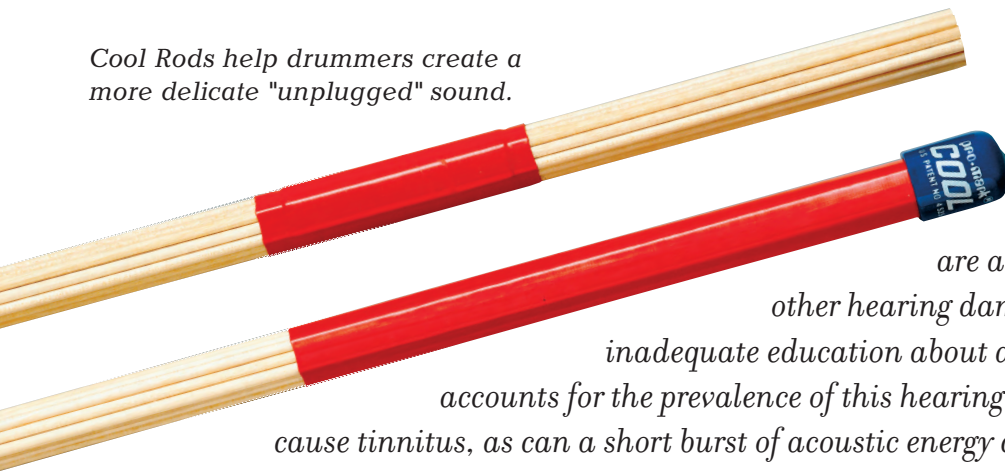


Cool Rods help drummers create a more delicate "unplugged" sound.



Tinnitus is a big part of the music world. Performers, audio engineers and listeners of all types of music are at risk for noise-induced tinnitus and other hearing damage. According to industry experts, inadequate education about developing noise-induced tinnitus accounts for the prevalence of this hearing problem. Years of noise exposure can cause tinnitus, as can a short burst of acoustic energy consisting of either a single impulse or a series of impulses. In fact, a recent study of 900 musicians across all genres found that more than 60 percent report at least occasional tinnitus (Santucci et Morlet, 2007).

Musicians Tackle Tinnitus

By JENNIFER DUPRIEST, ATA DIRECTOR OF ADVOCACY & PUBLIC POLICY

Pliny the Elder coined the term "tinnitus" in the first century. Later, in the 1700s, Beethoven was the first widely known musician to report having the condition. However, the scientific community has been researching the problem for only the past few decades. Proper diagnosis and treatment options have emerged even more recently. One of the latest developments regarding tinnitus is widespread education on the dangers of developing tinnitus, particularly within at-risk groups, such as musicians.

Common misconceptions about tinnitus

Many musicians think of tinnitus as a dirty word. They are reticent to publicly admit that years of noise exposure has damaged their auditory systems. Some worry that their public would see them as disabled or less dynamic and stop listening to their music. Joe Luoma, professional drummer, tinnitus sufferer and long-time ATA member, says, "All musicians have a problem with tinnitus." So, why aren't more musicians educating others about this condition? "I know there is one concern why some musicians don't want

to go on record reporting that they have tinnitus," Joe explains. "It's because of the possibility of lawsuits." For example, someone who developed tinnitus after going to a concert could easily attribute the problem to the musician's music. Accusations like, "Well, I have tinnitus and I'm convinced that your music gave it to me," are a serious concern. There are people who, troubled by their tinnitus, may resort to litigation in search of some sort of justice. But the strain of going through a legal process may simply add more stress to their lives. This is another important reason why education and prevention are essential for all those involved in any capacity with music.

Another common misconception is that music created with loud guitars and pounding

drums, like rock 'n' roll or heavy metal, is the only type that puts people at risk for tinnitus. In truth, classical, jazz and blues players also develop tinnitus. Some suggest that string players are especially at risk for noise-induced tinnitus because they sit right in front of the horn section, generally the loudest in an



Liberty DeVitto demonstrates at a drum clinic during his recent trip to China.

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orchestra. Both saxophones and trumpets, at peak levels, can emit sound pressure levels that measure up to 113 decibels (dBA) from about 10 feet away. Likewise, a French horn can emit 107 dBA and a trombone up to 109 dBA when measured from the same distance. The seemingly innocent piccolo has been known to produce peak sound levels of 120 dBA, equivalent to the sound pressure of a jackhammer at 30 feet. While piccolos and jackhammers produce two totally different sounds, they can cause the very same problem: tinnitus.

Composer Brent Michael Davids of Carnegie Hall fame, recently composed a string quartet entitled "Tinnitus Quartet." His objective was to help audiences understand how tinnitus affects him every day. Performing this piece of music seemed a natural way to do it. Throughout Davids' 18-minute composition, members of the quartet take turns playing a high A, the tone of his tinnitus.

Aspiring young musicians

Many professional musicians begin their love affair with music at a young age. Liberty DeVitto, long-time drummer for popular artist Billy Joel and many others, has tinnitus and hearing damage as a result of his long and illustrious career. He created his first music by banging on his mother's pots and pans. His first real drum soon followed. "I have a picture of me under the Christmas tree," says Liberty, "when I was a little over a year old, banging on a drum." By the age of 12, Liberty was playing drums regularly.

"My left ear is worse than my right," Liberty explains. "The left side is the *high-hat* [double cymbals side], which I'm constantly smacking. That's what I think did the most damage." He now wishes someone would have told him at the beginning of his career



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Al DiMeola continues writing music despite a severe case of tinnitus, but takes care to protect himself from further noise-induced ear trauma.

about the risk of noise-induced hearing loss and tinnitus. But back then, nobody seemed aware of the danger. When asked if anyone ever told him to wear hearing protection, Liberty said, "No. There was nothing about hearing protection being discussed in conjunction with playing the drums or any other instrument."

Though Liberty has constant tinnitus, he continues performing with his current band, "NYC Hit Squad." He also volunteers at clinics worldwide that put instruments in the hands of children whose schools have cut music programs or do not provide music education at all.

Developing and worsening tinnitus

Jazz guitar legend Al Di Meola is further living proof that no one is invincible when it comes to noise exposure. Al is concerned about music lovers as well as musicians. "We've got the whole next generation – the kids of today – who think they're going to live forever," says Al. "They just don't want to hear, 'turn down that iPod.' These kids aren't going to need hearing aids at 60 or 70. They're going to need them at 40," Al warns.

Al suffers from severe tinnitus himself, but that hasn't stopped him from playing music venues *continued on page 24*

Musicians Tackle Tinnitus

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all over the world for nearly three decades. His music is extraordinarily eclectic; he has played with artists as diverse as Chick Corea, Carlos Santana, Luciano Pavarotti and Jimmy Page. Al began playing guitar at a young age. "I think a lot of it came naturally. I made a vow to myself at the age of 8 that this would be what I did for the rest of my life," he remembers. Al kept his promise to himself and has become, many believe, the greatest guitar player in the world.

Yet even before committing himself to a life of music, Al had his first experience with tinnitus. Only 7 years old at the time, his first bout was the result of head trauma associated with an accident. "I remember having tinnitus my whole life and I was just too young to explain it, but when I think back, it makes total sense."

Al thinks his debut with Chick Corea in 1974 probably worsened his existing tinnitus. "When I started out with Chick Corea, the amplifier speaker was a foot away from the piano Chick was playing and I was standing right next to him. When he would hit those high percussive piano keys, it would almost knock me over. That's damage for life, right there. And I've been doing this for 30 years." Though Al suffers with tinnitus, he has kept his promise to himself; he continues making music and touring throughout the world. But now he takes care to not further damage his hearing.

Protection and prevention

If you're the kind of music lover I am, *nothing* can prevent you from listening to your favorites. In fact, listening to music at proper volumes can be a form of sound therapy; it even alleviates some people's tinnitus. However, it is important to listen to music at safe sound levels, whether you're listening to your MP3 player, driving or riding in a car, ballroom dancing or attending a live performance. If you are in a situation where you cannot control the volume, it is critical that you use hearing protection.

Musicians and music lovers alike can protect their hearing with special musician's earplugs. See Dr. Neil Cherian's article, "Musicians and Tinnitus," in the March 2007 issue of *Tinnitus Today*. Dr. Cherian covered many ways that musicians and music lovers can help mitigate sound pressure (decibel) levels without compromising sound quality.

If you are a drummer, protection and prevention also come in the form of a line of quiet drumsticks developed by Joe Luoma. While the notion of *quiet drum-*

sticks may sound like an oxymoron, bands around the world use them. "Eric Clapton's unplugged album made them famous in 1992," says Joe. "Since then, it seems every unplugged act has to have them." As a drummer, Joe understands the extreme noise levels drummers face, since typically they play surrounded by their loud instruments. A company called Pro-Mark® makes and markets five varieties of quiet drumsticks, which bear the names "Hot Rods," "Thunder Rods," "Lightning Rods," "Cool Rods" and "Kick Rods."

ATA – everyone's advocate

The American Tinnitus Association is committed to helping educate all musicians, present and future, about protecting themselves from the dangers of noise-induced tinnitus. If you are a musician, sound engineer or music lover, ATA has information about available products that help protect against the dangers of noise exposure. You can help advance a cure for your own tinnitus or that of a loved one or a favorite musician, by making a contribution to ATA, whether it's volunteering your time

as an advocate or making a monetary contribution to research. No doubt, musicians with or without tinnitus will continue making music. Someday, aided by the research support and vision of ATA, we will find a cure for all who suffer from tinnitus and rid the world of this malady forever. Stay tuned – but use your earplugs. As Liberty DeVitto says, "Save your hearing for a later date – you're going to want it!" ☺☺☺



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*"Save your hearing
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you're going to want it!"*

— Liberty DeVitto