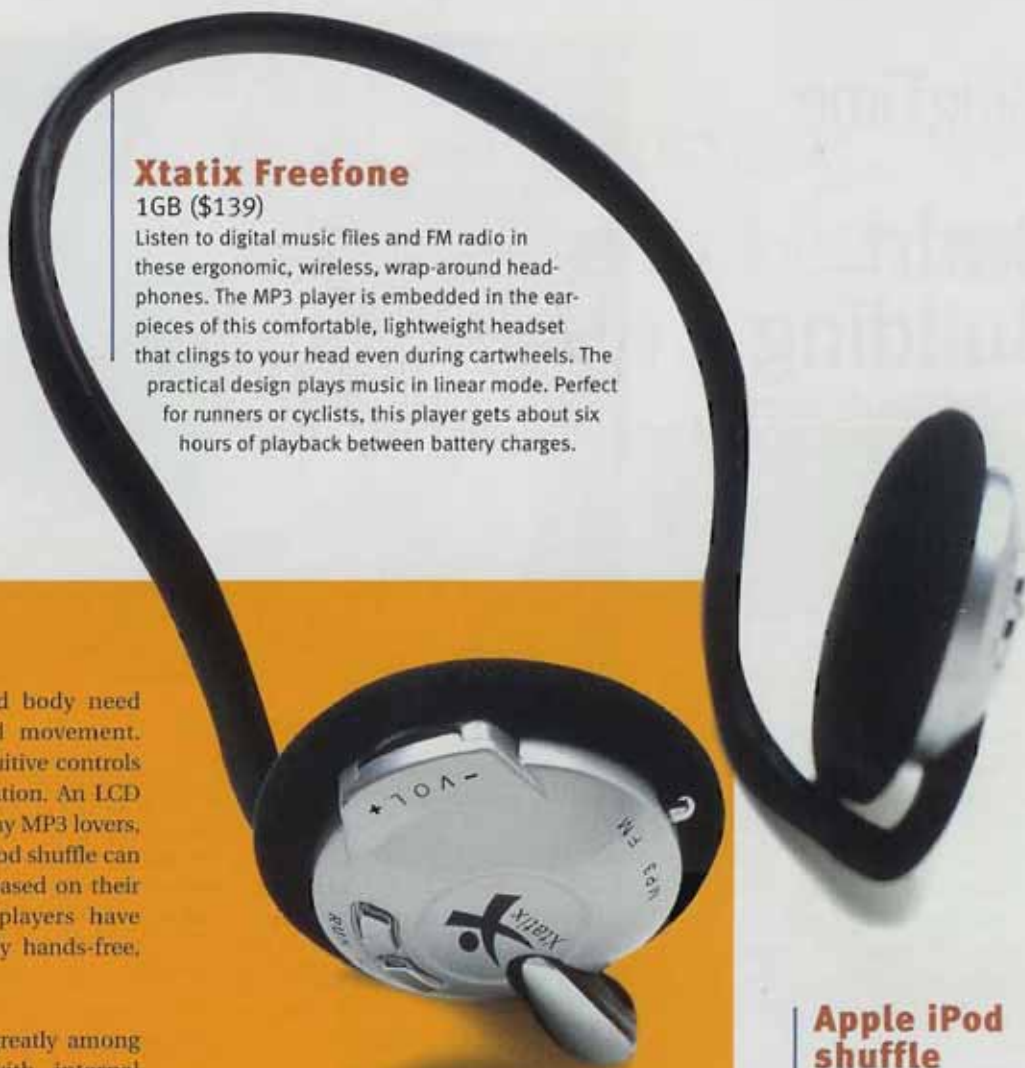


Xtatix Freefone

1GB (\$139)

Listen to digital music files and FM radio in these ergonomic, wireless, wrap-around headphones. The MP3 player is embedded in the earpieces of this comfortable, lightweight headset that clings to your head even during cartwheels. The practical design plays music in linear mode. Perfect for runners or cyclists, this player gets about six hours of playback between battery charges.



itself, as your mind and body need unobstructed focus and movement. Look for players with intuitive controls and easy interface navigation. An LCD screen is essential for many MP3 lovers, but even the screenless iPod shuffle can play songs in sequence based on their download order. Most players have shuffle mode for virtually hands-free, random-tune listening.

:: BATTERY LIFE varies greatly among models. Some units with internal rechargeable batteries get less than five hours of play based on feature settings, while flash players using alkaline AA and AAA batteries can get from 40–70 hours of play per battery. Popping in alkaline batteries, though costly over time, allows for continuous player power and doesn't require electrical socket access for recharge. Units juiced by removable lithium-ion batteries require fewer battery purchases, but replacements — required about every 300–500 charge cycles (which span about two years) — are expensive. MP3 models with built-in rechargeable batteries require you to ship your player back to its manufacturer for servicing when the battery won't recharge.

:: MUSIC SOURCE AND FORMAT VERSATILITY — in addition to hardware and software compatibility and unit

upgradability — is another important consideration. Some models don't support digital-rights managed (DRM) WMA files, and some players don't work with some online music sources. Although iPods have exclusive access to the endless world of copy-protected AAC-formatted iTunes, the Apple models won't play other online music store songs, or any WMA files. The new Sony player uses ATRAC, a propriety format, and also plays non-DRM, CD-ripped AAC and WMA files.

Chris Mann is a writer living in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Apple iPod shuffle

1GB (\$79)

Don't let its new über-cool and compact aluminum design and half-ounce weight fool you — the shuffle is a serious sound machine. Touting unrivaled sound, a built-in clip for on-the-go wearing, and up to 12 hours of playback per recharge, the world's smallest MP3 plays up to 240 iTunes either in random shuffle mode or sequentially via downloaded play lists. Comes with a shuffle dock.



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