

# Ultimate Ears super.fi 5Pro Earphones

Steve Sussmann



I HAVE ALWAYS HAD A HARD time with earphones. They never fit right, leak sound, fall out – to the point that I thought my ears were deformed. Back when I had a portable minidisk recorder, I had some lovely Sony noise-canceling earphones, but when I used them I had to wear a headband to hold them in place. When I bought my first iPod, in 2001, I quickly realized that the “disposa-buds” provided by Apple weren’t going to do the trick. Twenty-five years in the music business had made me, on the one hand, over-tolerant of bad sounding demos, but on the other, wildly intolerant of bad-sounding masters.

But let me give you a little history of how I got here. To compliment the iPod, I discovered the Bang & Olufsen earphones, whose design rivaled the iPod’s in thoughtfulness, style, and simplicity. They hung over the ear – any size ear, and the earphone swiveled in or out to accommodate listening preferences. The sound was rich smooth, warm, and ... unfulfilling. There was no bass, at least the way I think of bass. My office at Sony had four speakers, and people quite far down the hall knew when I was playing something loud.

I went online, and one link led to another, until I learned about Etymotic Research, an Illinois-based

company prominent in hearing aid research which also make in-ear phones. Their ER 4 series was their top-of-the-line model at that point, and from what I hear, other sophisticated ears think they are still the top earphones in the market. I bought a pair of ER 4Ps (etymotic.com), which currently cost \$330.00, and suddenly I heard things I had never heard before in any listening experience – for one thing, that bass. But also fingers *moving* on a bass string, the in-take of breath before an extended vocal run. The ER 4Ps’ balance is superb. The only problem was the cord, which was so long I tripped over it. I found, again online, the miraculous Dr. Xin Feng, who was able to shorten the cord, and by moving the location of the drivers, actually make the sound smoother. Xin Feng has a line of headphone amps, and you earphone-phreaks should check out Xin’s latest iteration of his SuperMacro 3 amplifier ([www.fixup.net](http://www.fixup.net)) but beware, if you don’t know about rolling op-amps and buffer sockets, this site will be a foreign language to you. The ER 4Ps were sounding so good that my (not that) old beloved B&O’s now sounded flat and thin.

What was the name of that Thomas Wolfe book: “You Can’t Go Home Again”?

So the rev-ed up ER 4Ps were my ‘phones of choice for a long time, until earlier this year, when a new job in a new industry put me in charge of our company’s NASCAR program. I was a blue state guy in a red state sport, so I had to learn fast. I bought myself a scanner from Racing Electronics, and, at the last Daytona 500, I bought their best non-custom in-ear earphones for about \$120. At the same time, however, I wanted what the pros had, custom ear molds for my phones. It is **LOUD** at the track – especially a track like Bristol, Tennessee, which is an enclosed oval bowl. In Atlanta, I had my impressions made, and a few weeks later I had my first set of custom ear molds.

The only problem was that they were mono. Racing scanners, like my Uniden SC230, only output mono sound. The people at Racing Electronics are all about service, however, so I called up their South Jersey office and asked if, since they had my impressions, they could make me stereo ‘phones. Unhappily, the answer was that they didn’t provide that service, though now they do ([www.racingelectronics.com](http://www.racingelectronics.com)).

Then I had a thought. After my success with the ER-4Ps, I bought a pair of ER 6s to compare them to. They are not the same, but they still sound great, and they’re

half the price of their bigger sibling. So I called Racing Electronics again and asked if I sent them my ER 6s, if they could use my ear impressions to make new tips for them, effectively giving me custom ear molds. They offered to try, and a week later, I received a beautifully made pair of pure white ear molds that sounded almost as good as my ER 4Ps, and blocked outside sound better, too.

There was one downside to all this: R.E.'s earphones are made of silicone, so they grip my ear in a way I find painful. Plus, because they did such an effective job of blocking outside sounds, I had to pull them out if someone was talking to me, and reinsert them to listen. This motion chafed my ear canal. I found my ears stinging. If I was on a flight, where I wanted to listen undisturbed for several hours, they were fine, but for short spurts, as at a track, they were problematic.

I had read in some men's magazine about the Ultimate Ears UE-10 Pros, the pricey, top-of-the-line professional custom three-driver (!) earphones. I decided I really did need to go all the way and splurge on a set. I had new impressions made by my local audiologist, and sent them off to Ultimate Ears. Less than two weeks later, my milky iPod-white earphones arrived. The big difference between these and my other custom models was that these were made of hard plastic instead of silicone. As a result, they went in and out much more smoothly, feeling almost "invisible." (Or is that "inaudible"?) They had the added bonus of not grabbing earwax, as my ER 4Ps and Racing Electronics' phones did (I joked that my ideal earphone would be white on the outside and orange in the ear canal segment, the better to disguise this unattractive occupational hazard of using earphones).

And the sound was spectacular. Clear and defined, but warmer than any other earphones I had owned. Whether I was listening to remixes of Bananarama, Tierney Sutton channeling Bill Evans, The Clash ("Armageddon Time" being a particular favorite for showing off the bass depth and richness), or any of the

other 9600 songs on my iPod, they sounded *true*. Sound and comfort made these well worth the price.

Which brings me, after a thousand words and more years that I like to admit, to the subject of this review, Ultimate Ears' dual-driver super.fi 5Pro (MSRP: \$249.99). These sound at *least* as good as the ER 4Ps, and cost \$80 less. They are not the UE-10's, however, which are to me the current standard of earphone excellence in sound, style and comfort. However, for someone who aspires to those wonderful 10's, but doesn't have the fat wallet they require, these are a *terrific* second choice. What's the sonic difference? I find the super.fi 5Pro's sound slightly (though barely) harsher. I also think that they sound better than the ER 6s. Had I never experienced the 10's, I would have been unbelievably satisfied with the sound of the

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### The 5Pro earphones from Ultimate Ears is a terrific way to up-grade iPods and other carry-along systems.

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super.fi 5Pro.

The package for these phones (one of those plastic clamshells that defies easy opening) comes with a helpful 24-page instruction booklet; two cases, with one a beautiful rubber and metal hard case and a tiny leather pouch; an ear-wax cleaning tool; a sound attenuator, and a 1/4-inch, gold-plated adapter jack. I wish my UE 10's fit in the metal and rubber case!

Less than completely satisfying is the comfort of the silicone tips. A variety of sizes and flanges come with these headphones. After quite a bit of experimentation, I found the smallest size best for my ears, but still the silicone grabbed my skin. I have heard of professional audio engineers who use silicone custom earphones who actually form a blister or callous in their ears from the constant in-and-out motion. The super.fi 5Pros also come with some foam tips, which work better, because you squeeze them to compress them, place them in your ears, and then they expand to block out external sounds. But they also don't seem as deep to me as the silicone tips, so either option has a little compromise. I keep wanting to push the foam in more to get richer sound. It would be interesting to see if Ultimate Ears could develop a set of plastic tips, which would go in more smoothly than the silicone tips. For some reason, the ER 6s are much more comfortable for me. Maybe it is the kind of silicone or the shape of the tips, but I definitely could keep my ER 6's in longer without discomfort.

If you have not experienced this kind of discomfort with silicone tips, and you are looking for a tremendous audio experience at a reasonable price, I cannot think of a better headphone than the Ultimate Ears super.fi 5Pro. Just one word of caution: Don't listen to the UE 10's first. They will spoil you for anything else, even earphones as good as these.

## NOTES

**Ultimate Ears Super.fi 5Pro Earphones, \$249.99.** Ultimate Ears, 5 Jenner St., Suite 100, Irvine, CA 92618, customer service 800/589-6531 or [customerservice@ultimateears.com](mailto:customerservice@ultimateears.com); custom sales 800/589-6531 or [customsales@ultimateears.com](mailto:customsales@ultimateears.com); web site [www.ultimateears.com](http://www.ultimateears.com).

### Associated Equipment

Apple iPod 4GB nano, Simpl S1 headphone amp, Ultimate Ears UE 10 custom molded 3-driver earphones, Etymotic Research ER 4P earphones (modified by Dr. Xin Feng), Etymotic Research ER 6 earphones with custom molded tips by Racing Electronics.

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