

# Safety Tips #41

## By Ben Hochberg

### ABATE of Colorado

## “Can You Hear Me Now?”

Is it a good idea to listen to music or talk radio while you are riding? How about using an intercom so you can talk to your passenger or to another rider on another bike? And how about cell phone usage when you're riding – answering calls, or even placing calls? Does it sound like an enjoyable experience? Or does it sound like a bad idea because it's dangerous? Is it somehow different than driving a car while listening to the radio/disc/mp3 player/whatever, or talking to a passenger in the same car? Are these distractions, or are they enhancements, or both?

If you are tempted to (or already do) use an entertainment device while riding, does your bike have a stereo system on it, or would you use headphones or ear buds? If you want to use a cell phone, would it be with a hands-free system? Products are available that make all these things possible. The questions are, 1 – is it safe? 2 – is it legal? And, 3 – is there equipment available that can be set up so you feel safe and comfortable using it while riding?

**Is it safe?** Any distraction while riding must be considered a detriment to safety. But, one might say, what about the radios and CD players in cars these days? What about (hands-free) cell phones in cars? And can't soothing music or talk actually make a driver/rider more relaxed and therefore more alert and less fatigued on a long ride? These are good questions. As with most things having to do with motorcycling it is up to us, the riders, to make responsible decisions about our behavior. We have to decide for ourselves, and make the right choices, or someone else is going to make those decisions for us! Personally, while I am generally all in favor of being totally distraction-free when riding, I have listened to music while I have ridden, particularly on long trips on boring stretches of interstate highway; and sometimes I have listened to the news and weather while commuting to work. What's best for me may not work for you, and vice-versa. Do what works for you as long as you are safe, comfortable, and of course... legal. Also, take into account that riding a bike is much more demanding in terms of skill, coordination and balance than driving a car.

**Is it legal?** Bikes which have a stereo system with its own speakers, mounted in the fairing or on the handlebars, are (obviously) legal. Lots of touring bikes have

them. Following is the Colorado Revised Statute on use of earphones while driving:

**42-4-1411. Use of earphones while driving.**

(1) (a) No person shall operate a motor vehicle while wearing earphones.

(b) For purposes of this subsection (1), "earphones" includes any headset, radio, tape player, or other similar device which provides the listener

with radio programs, music, or other recorded information through a device attached to the

head and which covers all of or a portion of the ears. "Earphones" does not include speakers or

other listening devices which are built into protective headgear.

(2) Any person who violates this section commits a class B traffic infraction.

So headphones are out. So are ear buds. All that is legal in Colorado (other than a speaker system affixed to the bike itself) would be a helmet with its own built-in speakers. There aren't many of those on the market, but there are speakers specially made for affixing inside a helmet.

**What equipment is available for safe, legal, and comfortable use?**

Here's a problem I have with those set-ups: there is already a lot of ambient noise when riding a bike. I already have some hearing loss. If one uses speakers, they have to be turned up loud enough to be heard clearly over the other noise. So now our ears are getting a double dose of loud sound! And THAT can be very fatiguing!

There are ear buds that shut out outside noise and deliver sounds directly to your ear canal; that method enables lower volumes and added clarity; but they are not legal to use in Colorado while operating a motor vehicle.

There are even little boom microphones with noise-canceling technology that would enable intercom or phone calls to be accomplished which are made for attaching to helmets. You've probably seen them on police motor officers' helmets, or on the helmets of touring riders. Hmm... police motor officer helmets, with speakers and microphones built in! I guess *if I wanted to put up with very loud sounds* in my helmet this might be the way to go. So I looked into it. The one company I knew of does not make anything for the civilian market and was vague about why their products are not what I wanted information about. I did some more research and there really are very few solutions to this. Maybe this is because companies don't want to be associated with products that are used illegally or don't want to be associated with contributing to raising the level of perceived risk in riding. To be fair, there are some systems available that combine rider-to-passenger, bike-to-bike, music, and cell phone options. They're kind of pricey and a little more complicated (with all that gear and wiring necessary to do all those things) than I want to deal with.

My conclusions: The only systems that are legal in Colorado are sound systems that are affixed to the bike that have their own speakers, or systems that use helmet speakers. I have tried helmet speakers but found the overall noise level to be way too high to be enjoyable, by necessity, as well as certainly damaging to my hearing. Ear buds or headphones are not legal. So cell phone usage is not an option. For me, the only legal, safe choice is to have a sound system installed on my bike. Between the cost of parts and labor, I think I'll pass on that option! I guess I'll just listen to the music my engine makes, and be more aware of the sounds of the environment and traffic while I'm at it. No need to feel sorry for me - I'll be having fun!