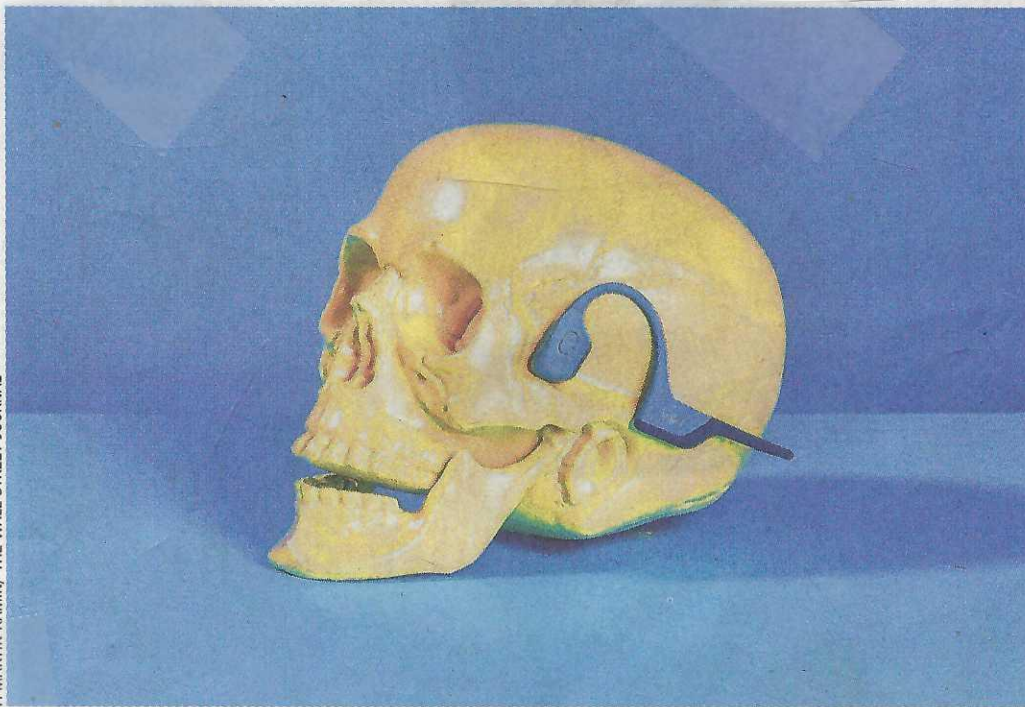


F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



**TRULY UNPLUGGED** The Shokz OpenRun Pro (\$180, *Shokz.com*) let you hear your surroundings

## Good Vibrations: Next-Generation Buds

The latest headphones don't even go inside your ears

**THERE ARE FEW** constants in headphone design. Even the word "headphone" can refer to a range of dissimilar gizmos, be they expensive over-ear noise cancellers or cheap wired earbuds. With practically all of these, you can take one thing for granted—they only work because they point their speak-

ers inside your ear.

Bone-conduction headphones are built differently, using tech developed for hearing aids. They rest above your ears, leaving your ear canal unencumbered, and vibrate against the part of your skull adjacent to your inner ear, responsible for what we hear. "While a typical [headphone]

sends sound waves through your ear canal...bone conduction merely tricks your brain into thinking this is occurring," said Dr. Hillary Snapp, chief of audiology at the University of Miami Ear Institute.

I learned about bone conduction from my 60-year-old father, who purchased a pair of AfterShokz OpenRuns

(*\$130, Shokz.com*) in 2018. The company, recently rebranded as Shokz, has iterated that headphone nine times since its first release, in 2011. Compared to earlier products with the technology—like 1979's Bone Fone, a radio meant to be draped around your neck like a statement necklace—the OpenRuns rely less on novelty to establish their appeal. Simply put, they actually work. The open-ear construction allows you to listen to music while hearing what's going on around you. But when my father first presented me with his pair, I found it rendered music muffled, even distorted.

This year, the company dropped an upgraded version of the headphones that adds two bass drivers, giving the sound profile an extra oomph it was sorely missing. This pair, called the OpenRun Pro, is among one of a few new releases from established players like H2O Audio and Philips that have made me less skeptical about the tech.

My father's devotion to his pair has never wavered. He says he wears them on Zoom calls, so that he can hear my mother asking him for the 10th time to take out the trash. And the 11th time.

—Daniel Modlin