

## Steve Harris Contributor

Steve Harris edited *HI-FI News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

# Listen up

**Steve Harris** warns it's not only rock music fans who need to take care of their ears in this era of headphones, and meets the jazz singer reaping the benefits of digital hearing aid technology

In 1976, The Who played 'the loudest concert ever' at The Valley football ground with a level of 126dBA at 30m from the stage. Rather horrifyingly, other bands have since smashed The Who's record and destroyed the hearing of many fans in the process. An Ottawa concert by Kiss in 2009 is said to have reached a reading of 136dB.

By then, though, the *Guinness Book Of World Records* had discontinued its 'loudest band' category rather than encourage further hearing damage, and The Who's Pete Townshend had funded the US non-profit HEAR [Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers].

### EAR TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

Among other musician casualties is jazz/rock guitarist Al Di Meola, who suffered catastrophic tinnitus and had to give up the electric guitar for several years. Herbie Hancock has been wearing hearing aids since 2006, and has been quoted as wishing he'd worn earplugs from the beginning of his career.

Dutch-born but now UK-based

singer Wilma Baan was once forced to give up music because of hearing impairment – but now, in her later years, has released two albums of songbook and jazz standards. *So Nice* (2021) and her current *Look At Me Now* were both empathetically produced

by Claire Martin OBE and engineered by Chris Traves, with superb arrangements by pianist Graham Harvey.

In the early 1980s, Wilma was working as a nurse by day and singing by night. She continued to perform whenever possible while her husband's oil company career took their growing family to Oman, Brunei, Borneo and Greece. But she'd begun to suffer hearing loss.

The crunch came one day, she says, when rehearsing with a trio: 'They said,

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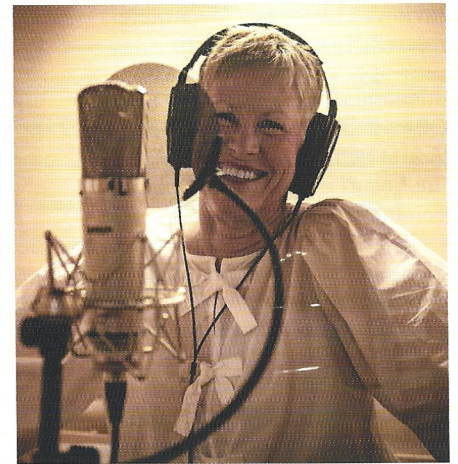
**ABOVE:** Herbie Hancock, who has been wearing hearing aids since 2006, pictured on stage in Freiburg in 2017 (left) and (right) the Dutch-born, but now UK-based, jazz singer Wilma Baan

'Sorry, but you are off pitch'. That was my traumatic moment. I thought, right! Okay! This is it, bye bye singing'.

Back in the Netherlands, Wilma learned that the analogue hearing aids of the day wouldn't help. She had to bide her time until 1996 when digital hearing aids, where the response of the device could be tailored to the hearing of the user, became available in Europe.

'And I was, you know, I don't care what they look like, I will just buy a pair! It started with what they called in-ear, like a blob of chewing gum, completely auricle-filling. They were monstrosities really. They completely close off your ear.'

Smaller versions followed, the receiver-in-canal (RIC) and completely-in-canal (CIC) types, still closing off every natural sound. 'That took getting used to. But then, in 2000-something, there came these lovely open fits. You have the technology behind your ear, but you have this little tube leading into your ear. Basically, nobody sees that.'



Importantly, the tube does not fully block the ear canal, so you still receive natural sounds as well as the amplified sound from the tube. 'I was a bit worried when I decided that I wanted to make an old dream come true and record an album', admits Wilma. 'I thought, in order to record I need to wear headphones, and I almost panicked! Because when you close off the microphones that I use you will immediately get feedback, the dreaded whistle!'

### KEEP IT DOWN

Chris Traves solved this issue by giving Wilma the open-back HD 660S from Sennheiser. Monitoring on stage needs care too and ideally, Wilma would like a system that streamed the signal to her hearing aids by Bluetooth, the same way she connects to her phone.

Wilma's story is an inspiration, but perhaps also a warning. You don't need to be an old-style headbanger, or a fan of ridiculously loud concerts like those that took place in the 1970s, to suffer hearing impairment. Today, loud sounds from headphones and earbuds are damaging the hearing of a whole generation. ☹