

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO

RUN WITH MUSIC

BY KIERAN ALGER



FROM MOTIVATIONAL TUNES FOR CHASING PRs TO DISTRACTING podcasts on more leisurely plods, music's run-boosting powers are well documented.

Researchers have found that the right backing tracks can delay fatigue, boost mental toughness, distract you from discomfort, elevate your mood, reduce perceived effort, and even support recovery. Music's impact can be so profound that one of the world's leading experts on the psychology of exercise music, Professor Costas Karageorghis at Brunel University London, described it as "a type of legal performance-enhancing drug."

Soundtracking your runs has benefits beyond race-day performance, too. Matching your playlist's beats per minute (BPM) to your cadence (how often your foot strikes the ground) or target heart rate can help improve your running form and manage your training intensity. For example, choose mellow tunes for easy days and go upbeat for intervals. Also, try matching song duration to your intervals and recoveries, which can help you take your mind off your watch.

Track choice is important, says Professor Andy Lane, a sport psychologist at the University of Wolverhampton in England. "Music is very personal, so it's good to have principles that go into selecting music," Lane says. During a marathon, for example, he suggests choosing music with positive meaning for an added boost when you need it most. "Pick the music you like and music that connects with positive emotions," he says. "And save it for when you think you're going to need them."

But it's not just what we listen to that can boost our runs, it's how we listen to it. Thanks to the latest gear, apps, and streaming services, it's easier than ever to take your music with you. If you're not sure where to begin—or you're just looking to upgrade your current setup—here are my tested and proven top headphones and running watches, plus a few apps, to add some rhythm to your run.

THE EXPERT



◀ Forty-three-time marathon finisher and cofounder of The Run Testers, a YouTube running gear reviews channel, Kieran Alger has been testing the latest running gear for more than a decade. A minor running tech obsessive, he is also "experienced" (okay, old) enough to remember life before Strava, Spotify, and smartphones.



TUNE IN TO GO THE DISTANCE

Headphone technology has moved on from the days of fighting flapping wires. Bluetooth brought us cable-free headphones, such as lightweight truly wireless buds, designed to fit securely in your ear. Models with wing tips help provide a stay-put fit, whereas full ear-hook designs guarantee your headphones won't hit the ground. Bone-conduction styles have "speakers" that sit against your cheekbones and essentially vibrate your bones, transmitting sound to the inner ear and leaving your ear canals open to also hear the world outside. For runners, lock-tight fit and long-haul comfort are top priority, followed by battery life and sweat-proof durability. Features like active noise cancellation (ANC), safety awareness modes that use microphones to filter in ambient noise, customizable sound, and Find My Buds trackers are readily available.

1 MOST SECURE BUDS / BEATS FIT PRO, \$200

The Fit Pro's rock-solid fit is the best I've tested, thanks to wing tips that hold firm even when you're heel-crashing down the steepest descents. They kick out rich, punchy sound and offer ANC, a transparency awareness mode, and an impressive 30-hour case-plus-buds battery life. There's no custom equalization (EQ), but they're easily the best run-friendly headphones in the Beats lineup.

2 FULLY FEATURED / JAYBIRD VISTA 2, \$150

With a 24-hour total run time and an hour of juice from a five-minute rapid charge, the Vista 2 is for long-haulers and run streakers short on charging time. Softer wing tips deliver a shake-proof fit sans irritating pressure. The sound is rich, full of bass, and fully customizable. ANC, transparency mode, beefed-up durability, and location tracking complete a comprehensive box of extras.

3 BEST EAR-HOOK BUDS / DÖTTIR IN-EAR ANC HEADPHONES, \$150

Designed to handle the rigors of CrossFit workouts, the 9.3-gram Döttir combine the brilliant stay-put fit of ear-hook buds with easy-to-use controls, excellent sound, ANC, and an ultra-run-friendly battery life that really stands out with 12 hours run time on the buds and 60 hours in the case. Plus, an unrivaled 12 ear-tip options help you find the most secure fit.

4 BEST VALUE / JABRA ELITE 4 ACTIVE, \$120

The Elite 4's wing tip-free design doesn't lock as firmly in your ears as other pairs, particularly when you tap the on-bud controls while moving. However, they're as light and compact as running headphones get. The waterproof buds punch well above their cost with capable sound, great top volume, custom EQ, and a seven-hour battery. Plus, they deliver decent ANC and hear-through modes.

5 BEST BONE CONDUCTION / SHOKZ OPENRUN PRO, \$180

These bone conductors leave your ears open for boosted road safety and staying half tuned-in to the crowd buzz of big city races. Just don't expect banging top volumes, big bass, or crystal podcast clarity. At 29 grams, they're light, and the titanium neckband means there's no risk of them hitting the asphalt. This Pro edition withstands moisture and dust and packs a 10-hour battery life.

6 RUN-WORK ALLROUNDERS / NOTHING EAR (1), \$99

A rival to Apple's AirPods that start at \$129, these buds mix all-day styling with an ultralight fit that's ideal for jumping off Zoom calls and straight into your runs. The ANC, transparency mode, sound quality, and customization aren't quite on par with Jaybird or Jabra, but the 34-hour total run time tops the AirPods Pro. You'll struggle to find a better multiuse option under \$100.

Run 'appy

Music streamers like Spotify, Apple Music, and Deezer are the obvious go-tos for soundtracking your runs. But why stop at tunes alone? Here are four alternative apps that elevate your audio.



ROCKMYRUN / \$7.99 PER MONTH

This clever tracking app mixes your favorite tracks into run-boosting playlists. It automatically shifts the tempo of the song that's playing to sync with your heart rate and cadence. You can also set the BPM prerun to match your running needs.



FIT RADIO / FROM \$7.99 PER MONTH

Fit Radio serves up DJ-created mixes to match your workouts, with playlists geared toward cadence and specific mile pace. Plus, dive into audio-guided runs and workout programs.



RUNNING STORIES / FREE

This storytelling app uses your real-time run data to make you the star of your very own augmented audiobook. Experience a special agent extraction or listen to a sitcom where your body's internal organs are the stars.



RUNCADENCE / FREE

Concentrating on cadence is an excellent way to work on running form. This iOS-only app helps you test your current BPM and set a target, then pulses a beat to follow as you run.

Courtesy (apps)

Go Phone-Free With a Music-Ready Smartwatch



Listening to music on runs used to mean strapping something to your arm, be it an iPod (we know, old school) or your phone. Now, your running watch can play DJ. Advanced GPS watches pair with Bluetooth headphones and have onboard memory and sometimes streaming capabilities, so the controls are at your fingertips. But be warned this tends to burn your battery life, fast. Still interested? Here are three of the best.

FOR ULTRA RUNNERS / COROS VERTIX 2, \$699

→ The big, rugged Vertix 2 doesn't just pack a 32-gigabyte storage and support offline playback for your favorite power songs and motivational podcasts. It also has the battery life to back it up. It boasts an ultra-friendly 30-hour run time with GPS, music, and heart-rate tracking all firing.

FOR WEARING EVERYWHERE / APPLE WATCH SERIES 7 GPS 41mm Aluminum Case, \$399

→ The best running smartwatch for third-party running apps, heart rate, and GPS accuracy, the Apple Watch 7 also offers the broadest phone-free music skills. All models, even this entry-level one, include storage for up to 500 songs from Spotify, Amazon Music, and Deezer, and enough juice to conquer the marathon or a week of 45-minute easies if that's more your thing.

FOR DAILY RUNNERS / GARMIN FORERUNNER 255 MUSIC, \$400

→ A Goldilocks watch, the Forerunner 255 Music hits the sweet spot with its training and recovery features, 30-hour GPS battery life, and price. This new model includes storage for up to 500 songs from Spotify, Amazon Music, and Deezer, and enough juice to conquer the marathon or a week of 45-minute easies if that's more your thing.