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Making waves, but hearing only music

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VCU workers invent technology that allows you to listen as you lap.

Sheldon Retchin has been swimming for 30 years. For most of that time, he's hated it.

"Booorr-ring," he says, but the chief executive of the Virginia Commonwealth University Health System has kept up his milelong daily dips because of the healthy results.

Swimming is "pretty close to but a little bit better than torture," he said, and aside from the sounds of splashing water, "it's just total silence."

Or is it? For years, Retchin tried gadgetry meant to play music while swimming. None of the products worked to his satisfaction.

But thanks to the digital-music era and the human skeletal system, Retchin has found his device.

He's the co-inventor of it, too.

Searching for a better way to listen to music while swimming, Retchin tracked down VCU biomedical engineer Marty Lenhardt, who had expertise on how sound frequencies pass through bones. They developed a concept and filed for a patent in 2003, which is still pending.

The pair eventually licensed the bone-conduction technology to Livermore, Calif.-based Finis Inc. The company launched the SwiMP3 in 2004. It connects "headphones" to the jaw or cheekbones instead of into the ear, to pump The Rolling Stones or Gnarl's Barkley through your skull.

It sounds quite possibly dangerous, but Retchin says bone-conduction technology is absolutely safe and the sound is crystal clear.

Several competing products play music underwater, many with wires that link the player - usually attached to the arm - to water-resistant headphones.

An iPod or other music player inside a waterproof case with water-resistant headphones work fine for snorkeling or dabbling around in the pool, said Brent Rutemiller, publisher of Swimming World magazine.

"Each manufacturer feels that their product is a very viable product, [but] the real question is the utility and application of it and what you want to do," Rutemiller said.

"For actually swimming for a good 40 minutes in multiple strokes and various changing positions, the SwiMP3 set a new standard," said Rutemiller, who uses one of the players.

The player works best, Retchin said, when using earplugs. "You are immersed in stereo sound."

The 128-megabyte SwiMP3 will hold about 32 songs, nowhere near as many as a \$199, 2-gigabyte iPod nano. WalMart.com offers the SwiMP3 for \$154.44 at WalMart.com. The gadget retails for \$199.99 on its manufacturer's Web site, Finisinc.com.

And remember, to get tunes to any digital music player, you must have a computer.

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