

Strike a pose with Oakley's 'eye-pod'

January 12 2006



Looking cool without succumbing to the ever-growing iPod empire is getting easier. While many MP3 fans might swear by the performance of Apple's digital music player, some might want to listen to their tunes without further inflating Steve Jobs' coffers. Oakley might have an answer.

The storied sunglasses manufacturer has come up with a product that will put its shade-wearers ahead of the fashion curve and keep them digitally entertained at the same time.

Released two months ago, the Thump 2 sunglasses include a built-in MP3 player that can go as big as 1 GB. The Thump 2 is Oakley's improvement on the original Thump sunglasses, which first gained notoriety in July when Boston Red Sox outfielder Manny Ramirez was seen playing the outfield with a pair on. Ramirez later claimed the MP3

player wasn't turned on.

In evaluating the Thump 2, the first thing one notices is the fashion and comfort of the sunglasses. Make no mistake, these live up to the Oakley tradition of progressive style. Modeled after Gascan, Oakley's most popular sunglass style, the Thump 2 cuts a figure somewhere between U2's Bono and the Terminator.

The ear buds extend from the bows of the sunglasses toward the ears. Unlike the original Thump, the ear-bud arms of the Thump 2 have multiple joints, which allows flexibility to find a comfortable position.

According to Colin Smith, developmental engineer at Oakley, the original Thump ear buds were only compatible with 83 percent of the population's head shape, which led to Oakley improving the structure.

Unfortunately, there is no way to wear the ear buds out of one's ears without eliciting confused stares from strangers.

For such an odd apparatus, the Thump 2 fits surprisingly well. They are somewhat wide, so they won't stay tightly on the average-sized head, but the ear buds hold the sunglasses on tightly when placed in one's ears. When using the buds, the Thump 2 doesn't move, even while running.

The sleek nature of the Thump 2 results in some imperfections. The self-containment of the MP3 player in the sunglasses necessarily means a lack of visual display, which puts the Thump 2 behind the iPod.

Additionally, the Thump 2 has only five buttons: volume up, volume down, play/pause, backwards and forwards. This makes it rather arduous to go through and find a specific song; essentially, you have a built-in iPod Shuffle.

The Thump 2 comes with one USB cord (unless you buy separate parts, it can only be charged by being plugged into a computer). Songs can be added by drag-and-drop, which may seem to iPod users like more work than they're used to.

The battery life is claimed to be six hours, half the life of the iPods Shuffle and Nano.

The sound quality is about what one would expect, and roughly equivalent to listening to an iPod through bud headphones.

Perhaps the biggest advantage Oakley has over the iPod is the lack of wires. The Thump 2 stays tight as long as the ear buds are in, even if the user is running or otherwise moving around. This provides a much easier and more comfortable exercise experience than any normal headphone wires can allow.

The Thump 2 comes in three hard-drive sizes, 256 MB, 512 MB and 1 GB. The models cost \$300, \$350 and \$450 respectively.

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