Episode Book

EPISODE #6258

How Loop Filters Noise for Focus and Conversation

PUBLISHED	24 October 2026 at 19:39 UTC
DURATION	28:16
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/loop-earplug-ratings-sound-65151/
HOSTS	Corn, Daniel, Herman, Dorothy, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	openai/gpt-6.1-sol
VOICES	chatterbox-regular+meorav (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.22
SOURCES	21 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	25 October 2026 at 06:19 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Loop turned passive hearing protection into a lifestyle product, but comparing its models requires parsing distinct acoustic jobs. This look at the lineup breaks down why the Engage, Experience, and Quiet plugs differ in performance, how Single Number Ratings and Noise Reduction Ratings vary legitimately, and why passive earplugs cannot separate foreground speech from background chatter. It examines the engineering tradeoffs between reducing sensory overwhelm and keeping conversations audible.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Can an earplug make conversation easier by letting you hear less? Daniel is here with the question behind that, and with a fairly justified suspicion of anything described as sensory wellbeing.



Daniel

Loop keeps coming up when we talk about noise sensitivity. I want to understand the company, but mostly what the current products actually do. I have ADHD, and background noise distracts and stresses me. If I'm choosing between these models, I want more than different colours and a bigger number.



Herman

The useful distinction is what you need to keep hearing. Loop has products for conversation, music, concentration and sleep, and those jobs pull the design in different directions. Maximum attenuation would make a very simple product range, but a worse conversation plug.



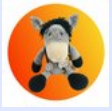
Corn

A meeting you can't hear has other advantages.



Daniel

That's the tension, though. I don't necessarily want everything gone. I want the background to stop demanding attention.



Herman

Noise sensitivity cuts across ADHD, autism and other sensory differences, without being identical in everyone. Background speech can keep recruiting attention when you're trying to work. Reducing that demand can change how exhausting an ordinary room feels. We're discussing an environmental tool, though, not a treatment for ADHD.



Corn

Before Herman starts fitting the entire population, I want the distinction between a plausible benefit and something Loop has actually demonstrated.



Herman

There isn't an established peer-reviewed clinical trial showing Loop treats noise sensitivity in ADHD or autism. The support is personal experience and broader discussion of sensory accommodations. That leaves plenty of room for a useful product. It doesn't establish a clinical effect, or mean every noise-sensitive person will like wearing it.



Daniel

Does the company understand that distinction, or is it still mainly selling concert protection?



Herman

It understands the new market very clearly. Dimitri O told Forbes that many customers weren't using the products for protection, but for comfort, specifically comfort through control over noise. That's an important admission from a company that started with tinnitus and nightlife.



Corn

Their customers changed the brief without attending a meeting.



Herman

They found uses the founders hadn't centred. Parents, people managing sensory overload, workers who need a quieter office but still need to speak. Engage is now explicitly marketed for general noise sensitivity. The business has followed those customers.



Daniel

I want the company story first, then. Is this an old hearing-protection manufacturer with good marketing?



Herman

A much younger company. Maarten Bodewes and Dimitri O were childhood friends and engineering graduates in Antwerp. They liked concerts and nightlife, developed tinnitus and hearing damage, and disliked the tradeoff among protection, comfort and appearance in existing earplugs. They founded Loop at the end of twenty sixteen.



Corn

The ringing got a business plan.



Herman

Their first Experience product launched in twenty eighteen for concerts and festivals. The visible ring became recognisable, but it also belongs to the acoustic design. Experience uses an acoustic channel with mesh and a membrane to shape what reaches the ear, rather than relying only on a solid barrier.



Corn

You're about to fall in love with the channel.



Herman

I've worked around enough loud music to appreciate a filter that doesn't make everything sound buried. You'd appreciate it too if I described it less enthusiastically.



Corn

Try removing the word membrane.



Herman

No.



Daniel

How does that become a business worth talking about beyond earplugs?



Herman

Repeat use and a much larger audience than occasional concertgoers. Revenue was reported at forty-four million dollars for twenty twenty-two. Later reporting put it above two hundred million dollars, with Forbes reporting two hundred and twenty million last October. Those are reported snapshots, not a perfectly aligned financial series.



Corn

Still a remarkable amount of money for making less noise.



Herman

Especially with limited outside capital. Bodewes described only eight hundred thousand euros of total venture capital in Vogue. There's also an early AKILES announcement describing a million-euro funding round, so I wouldn't pretend those accounts reconcile neatly. The consistent picture is a capital-light company, profitable since twenty nineteen, rather than a startup burning enormous funding rounds.



Daniel

Where are they now? Still basically an Antwerp startup?



Herman

Antwerp remains headquarters, with offices in Amsterdam, New York and Shanghai. More than two hundred and fifty full-time staff, and the company's September material says more than twenty million earplugs sold. Other coverage counts products rather than earplugs, so don't treat every sales total as the same unit.



Corn

Even the ears need accounting conventions.



Herman

There are major collaborations, too. McLaren, Tomorrowland, Coachella, where it became an official earplug partner, plus fashion and entertainment names such as Pleasing and Paris Hilton. It has won Belgium's Deloitte Technology Fast Fifty twice, the first company to do so. That's an unusually broad commercial footprint for hearing protection.



Corn

The colour releases matter here. Once people choose a finish, rather than accepting a fluorescent cylinder from a dispenser, wearing protection can become an ordinary purchase. I don't need an iridescent earplug personally. I do understand why somebody might wear one who wouldn't wear industrial orange.



Herman

Would you pay more for appearance, Corn, if the acoustic performance were identical?



Corn

For appearance alone, probably not. For something discreet enough that I stop having the same conversation about why I'm wearing it, possibly. Social friction is still friction.



Daniel

That's useful, but I don't want the brand story to swallow the specifications. What's the trap when I compare the numbers?



Herman

Comparing different rating systems. SNR means Single Number Rating, widely used in Europe. NRR means Noise Reduction Rating, used in the United States. Different calculation and testing conventions produce different headline figures. They are not interchangeable, and neither is a promise that every sound reaching you falls by that



Herman (continued)

exact amount.



Corn

The decibels have regional editions.



Herman

Engage Two makes it concrete. Its SNR is sixteen decibels. Its NRR is eight decibels. Both can legitimately describe the same product under different systems. Eight being half of sixteen numerically does not mean half the benefit, half the protection or half the perceived quiet. Decibels aren't a linear usefulness scale.



Daniel

If I see sixteen on one page and eight on another, I shouldn't assume somebody has quietly halved the specification?



Herman

Correct. Check the letters beside the number first. Also don't simply subtract either rating from a room's sound level and assume that's your personal exposure. Frequency content and the seal in your own ears matter enormously. A lab rating helps compare products within the same system; it doesn't tell you whether the person behind you will stop being distracting.



Corn

Especially if the person behind you is Herman explaining ratings.



Herman

You could ask me to lower my voice.



Corn

I'd lose the independent benchmark.



Daniel

Put the core models alongside one another, then. What are the actual figures?



Herman

Quiet Two is twenty-four decibels SNR. It's the soft silicone option for broadly reducing sound, with focus, travel and sleep among its uses. I don't have a confirmed current NRR to put beside that, and I won't borrow the original Quiet's figure.



Corn

Experience Two is seventeen decibels SNR and twelve NRR. That's the music-oriented model. Its point is a more balanced listening experience than a plug chosen purely to block as much as possible.



Herman

Engage Two is sixteen SNR and eight NRR, as we said. Its priority is conversation and general noise sensitivity. Engage Kids Two also carries a sixteen-decibel SNR, with fit and positioning aimed at children, roughly primary-school age.



Daniel

The Switch modes use those same names. Are they the same protection levels?



Herman

No, and that's easy to miss. Switch Two gives twenty-six decibels SNR in Quiet mode, twenty-three in Experience mode and twenty in Engage mode. Those names describe intended uses within Switch. They don't mean the dial reproduces the separate products' ratings.



Corn

Three familiar labels, three unfamiliar numbers.



Herman

Dream is the sleep-specific design, with twenty-seven decibels SNR, the highest headline SNR in this lineup. It uses oval tips and a soft, pressure-relieving body intended to be comfortable against a pillow.



Daniel

Quiet Two at twenty-four, but Switch in Quiet mode at twenty-six. Does that make Quiet the wrong name?



Corn

Quiet is a product name, not an oath.



Herman

A more complicated body can attenuate more than a simpler silicone plug. That comparison alone isn't a contradiction. The murkier one is the original Quiet, whose older published figures include twenty-six point two SNR and fourteen NRR. Quiet Two's headline is lower, despite being the newer model.



Corn

We can't turn that into proof that the new one got worse. Different generations can have revised geometry, different testing or different reporting. Without a direct explanation, it's an unresolved comparison. What it certainly doesn't support is assuming Two means more attenuation.



Daniel

My other concern is frequencies. A single number doesn't tell me whether it helps with voices, a fan or cutlery.



Herman

It doesn't. Passive plugs generally attenuate different frequencies by different amounts. A low-frequency leak from an imperfect seal can matter a lot, and speech spans a broad range. The consumer pages lean on those single-number ratings. I haven't got a verified public octave-band table for each current configuration that would justify giving you a detailed frequency comparison.



Corn

We should narrow that carefully. We can say the useful curves aren't clearly presented alongside these purchase decisions. We can't say no table exists anywhere in the certification paperwork.



Herman

HearingTracker's HearAdvisor lab reviews are a useful independent reference across these models, but I can't honestly recite curves I haven't verified. I'd rather tell Daniel what the designs aim to do than invent a graph from the product names.



Daniel

Does Engage actually distinguish foreground speech from background speech?



Herman

No. There is no microphone deciding which person you want. Its filtering aims to keep conversation usable while reducing sound overall. A colleague beside you may remain understandable because they're close and facing you. A nearby background conversation can remain understandable too.



Corn

The plug hasn't read the seating plan.



Herman

Corn, suppose you can still understand the distracting conversation, but it's quieter. Would that count as success?



Corn

Potentially. I don't require every word to become unintelligible. Lowering its prominence might be enough. But if the words themselves keep pulling my attention, the promise of preserved speech becomes a drawback. That's why a conversation plug and a focus plug shouldn't automatically be the same purchase.



Herman

That distinction is also why we shouldn't call the lower Engage rating marginal by definition. A modest reduction can be exactly what someone wants in an ordinary office. In a dangerous sound environment, the same reduction may be inadequate. The task decides whether it is enough.



Daniel

What did the second generation improve, then, if the ratings aren't generally higher?



Herman

Mainly fit, comfort, retention and cleaning. Redesigned tips accommodate smaller ears better, and the company emphasises easier cleaning and keeping the plugs seated. Engage retained its sixteen-decibel SNR. Experience retained seventeen. Engage's externally tested NRR changed between generations, so an unchanged European headline doesn't mean every published measurement stayed identical.



Corn

A better fit can improve actual performance without improving the box number. If the old version slips or irritates you, the new one might work better in your ears. That's less exciting than a bigger figure, but more useful.



Herman

You've surprised me, Corn. I expected you to defend the original until the silicone fossilised.



Corn

I defend repairability, not an itchy ear.



Herman

Fair distinction. The revised shape matters especially over long sessions. A comfortable plug that stays sealed can beat a more attenuating plug you continually loosen.



Corn

We'll be right back with another edition of Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother, with Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

In nineteen ninety five the physicist Robert Matthews published a paper explaining why toast really does tend to land butter side down, mostly because of the height of the table, and it won him an Ig Nobel Prize the next year.

D

Dorothy

So there you are. You drop your breakfast and it's the buttered side that meets the floor, and the clever men have measured it and it's the table's fault.

D

Dorothy

Anyway. I've got a wash on and I should go and see to it. Bye bye, sweetheart.



Herman

Always delighted to hear from Mum. The extra flexibility in the earplug range comes from the Plus packages, rather than the generation number.



Daniel

What does Plus actually add? Is it a different filter or a bundle of accessories?



Herman

A removable Loop Mute insert and additional foam tips. The insert changes the acoustic path. Loop quotes an additional three decibels for Experience and an additional nine for Engage. Those are configuration-specific claims, not numbers to add casually to whichever rating you happen to find.



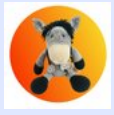
Corn

Engage leaves more sound through deliberately, so blocking that route changes more. Experience starts with a different acoustic design. The same-looking accessory doesn't produce the same change in every model.



Daniel

Does that make Engage Plus the obvious choice for an office that varies through the day?



Herman

It makes it a plausible choice. Conversation configuration when you're talking, Mute when you want more reduction. But if you mostly want strong passive isolation, Quiet is simpler. Extra configurations have value only if you use them.



Corn

Otherwise you're buying a tiny part to lose.



Herman

The independent listings also need care. You'll see Engage Two Plus listed at eight NRR and sixteen SNR. That describes the base configuration, not proof that the Mute adds nothing. Always check whether a measurement includes the insert and which tips were fitted.



Daniel

I can see why people end up asking which one to buy. The names are simpler than the comparison.



Herman

For your stated situation, I'd separate focused work from conversation. Quiet Two is the straightforward starting point when you want the room reduced and don't need ongoing interaction. Engage Two is the starting point when hearing somebody address you is part of the job. Plus gives Engage another setting without changing pairs.



Corn

Transit needs the same distinction. Engine drone and announcements are different problems. More passive attenuation can help, but the low-frequency rumble may respond particularly well to active cancellation. There's no prize for solving every sound with one product.



Daniel

What about Switch Two as the single pair? Is the dial worth the extra cost?



Herman

Switch Two is fifty-nine dollars ninety-five in the quoted US pricing. You get manual adjustment among three modes, without a battery or an app. It succeeds the original Switch, introduced in twenty twenty-three, with revised design and ratings. Its appeal is changing needs, not beating every dedicated model at its particular job.



Corn

A dial is refreshingly honest. You turn it and something changes.



Herman

Would you choose it over carrying two pairs?



Corn

If I changed settings repeatedly, yes. If I used one setting almost all day, I'd want the lighter, simpler option. I wouldn't pay for adjustability merely because I admire a dial. That's your department.



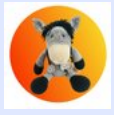
Herman

I admire a well-labelled dial.



Daniel

Music is more straightforward, presumably? Experience for concerts?



Herman

Experience Two or Two Plus is the music-oriented choice. The aim is to preserve sound quality while reducing exposure. But concerts vary enormously in level and duration. Clubs and especially motorsport can demand more protection than a moderate filtered plug supplies. Certification doesn't mean one product is sufficient for every event.



Corn

The same applies at a shooting range or around power tools. Pick protection for the exposure. A product designed to preserve a conversation has not become suitable merely because it looks less industrial.



Herman

My DJ objection to foam used to be that it changed the balance too much. That matters while listening critically. It does not make a pleasing sound balance more important than enough protection. You can have a lovely-sounding exposure that is still too loud.



Daniel

Sleep seems more about comfort. Is Dream's higher rating the reason to pay for it?



Herman

I'd prioritise how it feels against a pillow. Dream has twenty-seven decibels SNR and the sleep-specific geometry. Quiet Two is also a sleep option. A small headline difference is less decisive than whether you can lie on your side without pressure or keep the seal overnight.



Corn

The pillow gets a vote.



Herman

Children have Engage Kids Two, but fit and the actual classroom task matter more than treating it as a universal school accessory. A child who needs instructions, a child overwhelmed at assembly and a child doing quiet independent work may need different arrangements.



Daniel

Loop is selling a sleep mask now as well. Does that tell us where the company is going?



Herman

Eclipse is the clearest signal. Its September launch positioned a sleep mask as the next chapter in sensory wellbeing, beyond ears. The quoted price is forty-nine dollars ninety-five, with a SleepScore Validated label. That label on a mask doesn't validate medical claims for the earplugs.



Corn

They've found a second sense with an off switch.



Herman

Dream and Eclipse are also sold together in a Good Night Bundle, quoted at eighty-nine dollars ninety-one in the US. The bundle makes the strategy tangible. They're selling a coordinated sleep environment rather than just a little hearing protector.



Daniel

Bring the alternatives into it. If I'm deciding between Loop, foam and ANC earbuds, what actually changes?



Herman

Foam can offer substantially higher attenuation when fitted correctly. Many high-rated disposable foam plugs carry NRRs around thirty or above. Compare NRR with NRR, though. Don't compare that directly against Dream's SNR and call the numerical gap your personal protection difference.



Corn

Foam is cheap, effective and surprisingly dependent on being fitted properly. Repeatedly pushing an inadequately compressed plug into the outer ear doesn't reproduce the laboratory result. Reusables need a proper seal too, but some people find their fitting



Corn (continued)

routine easier.



Herman

Custom-moulded plugs are another category. They can offer excellent comfort and consistency, with different filters available. They aren't automatically stronger than every Loop. A musician's low-attenuation filter may deliberately let through more sound. The chosen filter matters, not the word custom.



Daniel

What about other off-the-shelf filtered plugs? Is Loop doing something nobody else does?



Herman

Filtered reusable musician's plugs existed before Loop. Alternatives from companies such as Etymotic and Alpine pursue related goals, with their own fit and filtering choices. Loop's advantage is a recognisable, approachable range, broad availability and attention to appearance and wearability. You shouldn't infer acoustic superiority from how familiar the ring looks.



Corn

Nor infer inferiority because they sell colours. The colour doesn't invalidate the filter. It just won't explain the filter either.



Daniel

ANC earbuds seem closer to the actual choice for working, though.



Herman

Often they are. AirPods Pro or Sony's WF-one-thousand-XM-five combine passive sealing with active cancellation. ANC is particularly effective against sustained low-frequency sound, such as engine drone and ventilation. Sudden clatter and changing speech are



Herman (continued)

harder targets, although the passive seal still helps with those.



Corn

Loop can't generate an opposing sound wave. It has no electronics. Its useful advantages are being small, battery-free and available immediately. No pairing, no charging, no deciding whether transparency mode has changed because an app updated.



Herman

Modern ANC can be very good without playing music. We should avoid implying earbuds only work by drowning the room out. Adding audio is another choice, and for some people that becomes another demand on attention.



Daniel

Can Engage promise that I'll hear my name or an alarm?



Herman

No promise. It aims to leave conversation usable, but distance, hearing, fit and room noise all matter. Any plug can make a signal harder to hear. Saying it preserves speech is a design description, not a guarantee about every voice or warning.



Corn

Doing nothing has costs too. If the room keeps interrupting you, an imperfect reduction can still be valuable. The comparison isn't always between ideal silence and slightly muffled conversation. Sometimes it's between staying in a room comfortably and needing to leave.



Herman

There's also the sound of yourself. Occlusion can make chewing, footsteps or your own voice seem more prominent through a blocked ear canal. Engage aims to minimise that sensation. It won't necessarily remove it, and some people dislike that more than the



Herman (continued)

external noise.



Daniel

That could undo the benefit if the substitute distraction is my own head.



Herman

It could. The quoted Engage Plus price range is roughly thirty-five to forty-five dollars, so comfort isn't a trivial detail. Loop advertises a hundred-day return policy and a two-year warranty. Check the current regional terms, but the opportunity to try the fit matters more than another product photograph.



Corn

Their tip guidance also calls for replacement every hundred nights or uses. Reusable doesn't mean untouched forever. Cleaning and worn tips belong in the ownership cost, alongside how often you lose the case.



Herman

I'd call all-day wearability the largest practical uncertainty left once you've chosen a suitable rating. We can compare specifications, but we can't determine whose ears will tolerate which shape.



Hilbert

Herman, does it count as a comfort test if the earplug supplier insists on sitting outside the room? Keith from the shop is doing that this month. He calls my shed semi-anechoic because I line it with egg cartons and a carpet offcut. I rent him the silence by the litre.



Corn

Charge for the air he brings in.



Hilbert

I'm charging for occupied volume. He keeps leaning forward. There are twelve sessions... eleven. A session doesn't count if Keith leaves his coat inside. I'm getting eleven minutes with foam and four hours with my Loop Engage Two. That's my number, not a product rating. You spend longer choosing the right letters, Herman, but I need the things to stay in.



Herman

Eleven minutes is useful as your tolerance, not as a comparison of the materials. The blocked-ear sensation varies with fit too.



Hilbert

Yes. My Engage pair is in use at my desk in the flat now. It isn't plugged into anything. That's one thing the supplier can't charge me for. I try the tuning fork and string test on myself this week. The result is not on any of Loop's charts. Keith says sounds about right through the shed wall. That's his peer review.



Corn

He's reviewing from outside your paid volume.



Hilbert

My cousin supplies acoustic fittings. His view is that the voice you hear inside your own head decides whether you keep a plug in. He says a quieter room isn't much use if every biscuit sounds like demolition. I don't trust him. He recommends whichever tips he has left. Keith recommends the carpet. Neither offers to find my kitchen timer.



Herman

If the timer is missing, the four hours may include the time you spend looking for it.



Hilbert

It does. The eleven minutes doesn't. I can hear the timer with the foam out.



Daniel

That makes the trial-and-error part clearer. Beyond comfort, what would change your recommendation for someone like me?



Herman

Whether the main interruption is broad noise or intelligible speech, and whether you need frequent conversation. If conversation matters, Engage is a reasonable first candidate. If you're working independently and want more reduction, Quiet is the clearer choice. ANC becomes particularly attractive when steady rumble dominates.



Corn

My change in perspective is that the rating can't rank the whole purchase. First it tells you something about attenuation. Then comfort determines whether that attenuation remains in your ears. Neither number substitutes for the other.



Daniel

I came in wanting the strongest specification. I can see why the strongest one might not solve the situation I'm asking about.



Herman

The recommendation is conditional on the job, not the diagnosis. ADHD doesn't automatically select Engage, and autism doesn't automatically select Quiet. The sounds you need reduced and the sounds you need available are more useful distinctions.



Corn

I'd like the next generation to publish configuration-by-configuration frequency curves as clearly as it publishes finishes, so we can separate a genuine acoustic improvement from a more tolerable four hours.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show.



Corn

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode fifty-seven, From Lawyers in Limousines to Developers in Their PJs; episode twenty-six twenty-five, White Noise vs Pink vs Brown; and episode ten, How ASR Went From Frustration To ... Whisper Magic. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Herman

If you enjoyed the episode, leave us a review wherever you listen. It helps people find the show.



Daniel

Good to talk it through. See you soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

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