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Is it legal to listen to music while riding a motorcycle

Here in the UK, we love to listen to music whilst out on the road. If we're jumping on a bike for a Sunday ride you can bet that we'll be travelling along to a soundtrack - 64% of road users told us they always put a tune on. But what are the rules around listening to music while riding a motorcycle? And how well do we know them? We're here to explain. Are motorcyclists allowed to listen to music? We surveyed thousands of road users to find out what they knew about the Highway Code and its guidance on listening to music. Almost half (45%) said they thought listening to music whilst in control of a motorcycle was illegal in the UK. Many people believe this, but it is not actually true. One in ten (9.4%) also thought it was illegal to sing along to music while out on a motorcycle. The Highway Code does not prohibit motorcyclists from listening to, or singing along to, music. However, there are some strict guidelines that riders need to follow to ensure they don't get hit with a fine or penalty points. There are some rules to be aware of. There are a few important things that a motorcyclist can do to be as safe as possible on the roads: You must have motorbike insurance You must have a good helmet and protective clothing You must have a well-maintained vehicle You must ensure that you are fully aware of the Highway Code and are following it at all time. Motorcyclists are allowed to listen to music whilst on the road, but there is some particular guidance around this. Point 148 of the Highway Code says: Safe driving and riding need concentration. Avoid distractions when driving or riding such as: loud music (this may mask other sounds) inserting a cassette or CD or tuning a radio Essentially, listening to music may be allowed, but should be avoided if it is deemed to be a distraction. In our research, the majority (58%) didn't know that the Highway Code advises against playing loud music. Nearly two thirds (62%) also weren't aware you should always find a safe place to stop if you want to put music or the radio on - never do this while on the move. Driving a motorcycle whilst listening to very loud music, or not pulling over to put on a playlist is very risky and could indicate a lack of proper control over the vehicle or imply that you are riding without reasonable consideration for others. Both are very serious offences and could lead to a fine of £5,000, nine penalty points, or even a disqualification. According to AskThePolice, 'it is not an offence in itself to listen to music on a mobile device whilst driving, riding or cycling. However, listening to music can be distracting. You need to be able to bring to bear all the senses you can and being able to hear is important in enabling you to be in proper control of your vehicle in traffic. A person using a device playing loud music, may, therefore, be deemed not to have proper control of their vehicle or to be driving without reasonable consideration for others, both of which are relatively serious offences.' The rules around wearing headphones Naturally, if you're out on your bike rather than in a car then you'll probably be wearing headphones to listen to music. There have been various reports that wearing headphones is illegal or that you could be fined for this. However, the team at IAM RoadSmart recently confirmed that while it is not set in law, the same guidance applies to headphones as it does to playing music through a car stereo: If you're caught and police think that they are distracting you, then the same penalties could apply You could be charged riding without due care and attention, or careless riding Any audio device can diminish your ability to ride safely as it can block out noise from traffic, as well as emergency sirens Experts at IAM RoadSmart added 'A really good driver (or rider) uses all their senses to anticipate problems. Cutting out your hearing could mean you miss key clues about the road surface such as black ice, or warnings from other road users. Added to that is the distraction factor of anything you have banging away directly into your ears. Some types of music have been shown to make us speed and be more aggressive, and that intimate podcast you saved up could be so good you start thinking about it and not the road ahead. What about if you're parked up? Believe it or not, but it is still possible to get into trouble if you are playing loud music from a stereo or audio device (and other people can hear it). Local authorities have powers to issue a noise abatement notice - which is the same as if you had loud music on in your house and were disturbing your neighbours. Under section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002, the police also now have much stronger powers - but they have to be on the scene to deal with it. Traffic police could stop and seize your vehicle if they deem it to be causing alarm, distress or annoyance to members of the public. Essentially, if a police officer sees a biker with a loud stereo, the offender can be warned to turn the volume down and if they don't their bike could be seized. In summary Much of the Highway Code is founded on common sense, and it is easy to see why listening to loud music or putting a playlist on while on the move would distract a rider. Our recommendation is always to be cautious, careful, and considerate of other road users. If you think that your music could be distracting you then turn it off or turn it right down. Around five or six years ago, I was expecting an important phone call from a prospective employer. I spent most of the day nervous. Couldn't eat, couldn't relax, couldn't think about anything else. So with 3 or 4 hours left to wait, I decided to go for a ride to waste away the time. And eager to give my new comms system a try, I connected it to my phone and set off on my ride - with AC/DC performing a live show inside my helmet. Listening to music while riding my motorcycle: AC/DC through a Cardo (Image: Cardo) "42 39 56, You Could Say She's Got It All" An hour into my ride, I was rocking along to "Whole Lotta Rosie" when all of a sudden, my helmet started to ring. I looked down at my phone to see the name of the guy I wasn't expecting for another few hours. Sssshhhiiiiitttt. I dabbed at the phone with my gloved fingers to cancel the call. But the cheap phone case prevented the touchscreen from working beneath my fingers. New motorcycle intercomms can be fiddly! The Stress Of Listening To Music While Riding A Motorcycle! I knew that in a few seconds, the comms headset would auto-answer the call. And whether I was ready for it or not, the voice of my next manager would soon be permeating through my helmet. 5 seconds to go... 4 seconds, 3 seconds... Double yellow lines everywhere - nowhere to stop. 2 seconds, 1 second... "Hi, is that Paul?" Listening to music while riding a motorcycle doesn't go well with filtering! (Image: motorkar) The Saviour Of The Golden Arches Unfortunately, I was in a town I didn't know when all this happened. And I was stuck in heavy traffic. There was nowhere to stop and nowhere obvious for me to turn in so that I could complete my call. With sweet filling my helmet, I saw the golden arches of a McDonald's drive-thru. And getting to that car park became my only mission in life. Police sirens whizzed by and the sun beat down on my shoulders. But eventually, I made it. And in a quiet corner of the car park, I completed my call without ever taking off my helmet. (For those of you who are wondering, yes, I did get the job!) Unable to disconnect the call, I completed it with the helmet on (Image: Honda Community) Listening To Music vs Riding A Motorcycle In Silence And that, dear readers, was my first ever attempt at having some sort of media play through my helmet. In the years since then, I've tried listening to music on my phone whilst diverting calls to voicemail. So far, that has prevented a repeat of the above experience. But there's always something to spoil the experience. The volume is too high or too low. I don't like the song that's on. Or I decide halfway through that I want to listen to something else. Worse still, this is always the time when a fellow rider wants to speak to me. And invariably, I end up having to take my helmet off to communicate because it's easier than trying to turn the music off with gloved hands. In my experience, riding with music just isn't worth the faff. Listening to music while riding a motorcycle always means removing my helmet to talk to people Who's Listening To Music While Riding A Motorcycle? Everyone, Apparently Whilst I know many people who wear earplugs, I only know a few that love listening to music whilst riding a motorcycle. But after doing a bit of research on various forums, it turns out that most riders like listening to music while riding a motorcycle. And this was further confirmed when Carole Nash conducted a UK survey on thousands of road users regarding motoring and music. The overwhelming majority enjoyed listening to music whilst on the road. But there were also some common misconceptions. Almost half of those asked (45%) believed that listening to music while riding a motorcycle was illegal. And, astonishingly, 9.4% of people thought that singing on a motorcycle was also illegal. As it happens, listening to music (or indeed singing) whilst riding a motorcycle in the UK is not illegal. But for our American readers, make sure you check your State rules on whether it's legal or not to listen to music. For example, in California, you can listen to music, but only through one headphone. The other ear must be left unencumbered to hear sirens and other road noises. Listening to music while riding a motorcycle isn't illegal in the UK (Image: Inceptive Mind) Listening To Music While Riding A Motorcycle: What The Science Says Okay, so it's all well and good me telling you what I think. And it's all well and good telling you what the thousands of Carole Nash survey participants think. But what does science say on the matter? Does science say we should, or shouldn't listen to music whilst riding our motorcycles? Well, we delved into the scientific research from the Universities of Cambridge, Sussex, Tel Aviv, and Sydney, amongst others. And this is what we found. Seeing what science has to say on the subject of listening to music while riding a motorcycle (Image: Technipages) Listening To Music Whilst Riding A Motorcycle Can Enhance Performance For many years, listening to music has been a proven way to keep your mind in the moment - especially when performing routine tasks. For instance, if you're an experienced tourer, you would've spent many hours transiting on motorways. And science has shown us over the years that listening to music when performing tasks we know well can enhance performance and concentration. But if we drill down a little further, we also find that whilst listening to something is good for our performance, that doesn't necessarily mean we should listen to anything. Listening to music can help enhance performance and concentration while riding a motorcycle Music & Riding: The Misconception Of Multitasking Whilst we all like to think we're great multitaskers, the fact is that most of us aren't. Actually, not only can most of us not multitask, but we're woefully shit at it. Very few people in this world can multitask. For most of us, multitasking simply means doing two jobs badly. But that doesn't mean we can't listen to music and ride. To an extent. For example, you'll have no problem reading this post whilst listening to soft music playing through your headphones. But I challenge you to read it whilst listening to an Audiobook. Or listening to rap music. Go ahead, give it a try! Probably not a good idea to multitask on roads like these! (Image: Life In Norway) Two Tasks That Use The Same Part Of The Brain You can't read this article whilst listening to an Audiobook because both require the language centre in the brain to process the words. As much as we try, it's very difficult for us to fully take in an Audiobook AND take in the contents of this post at the same time. So what we have to do is focus on one thing and then the other. We switch between the two. Listening to music while riding a motorcycle can mean switching between tasks (Image: Skyland Trail) Here's What The University of Sussex Has To Say In one of their recent studies, the University of Sussex took this concept of multitasking and applied it to driving. And sure enough, they found that road users can drive and listen to soft music simultaneously. But when drivers are asked to drive whilst listening to an Audiobook, everything goes tits up. Why? Because we are trying to perform two tasks that both call on the same part of the brain. Performance decreases when driving and listening to an Audiobook (Image: New Atlas) Listening To Music While Riding A Motorcycle Can Call On Your Imagination So when listening to an Audiobook, the narrator calls on our imagination. They read to us in dulcet tones and we form visions in our mind. We internalise and envisage what is being described to us. And whilst this is perfect for winding down in the evening, it isn't good whilst driving. Because we end up going from the road to the book, and then from the book to the road. And it's in these gaps that accidents are likely to occur. When the Audiobook whisks you away into the lush, green forest with turquoise rivers and bluebells, you start to picture it in your mind. And that means you don't see the idiot that's about to pull out in front of you. So if we know Audiobooks aren't good for us but music is, then what exactly should we listen to? Listening to music while riding a motorcycle is good providing it doesn't divide our attention (Image: BikerOutpost) Music And Its Effect On Concentration A paper by van der Zwaag et al found that music can positively affect behaviour whilst driving. In other words, music can make us feel good. And that invokes a positive state and safer driving. Additionally, it also found that whilst music can make us safer, it does so without hindrance to our capacity in high-demand situations. Moreover, music also helps with fatigue and boredom. This is why it's a good idea for those long cross-country sections of your tour where you see nothing but motorways all day. Listening to music while riding a motorcycle has shown to decrease boredom and fatigue So What Should You Listen To? Various studies have found that particular genres of music affect us in different ways. For example, fast-paced music in the gym can help us work out harder. But for touring, that fast-paced tempo could actually cause some unwanted right wrist-twisting that could catch you out at the next bend. In contrast, the 'Mozart Effect' study found that classical music removes stress hormones whilst increasing dopamine levels. This results in a feeling of calmness and contentment by the listener. Classical music has also been found to increase visual attention as well as keep you occupied with the constantly varying sections. The complexity keeps you guessing where the music is going next. Listening to classical music while riding a motorcycle should yield good results (Image: deanodog) Listening To Music While Riding A Motorcycle Can Serve As A Distraction I'm one of those people who likes to have music playing in the background whilst sat at my computer. I don't really listen to it... it's just 'there.' And this is fine for browsing the web. But what about in my uni days when revising for an exam or writing my dissertation? Did I listen to rock, rap, or old-school dance? No, because it distracted me. My mind would fight with the task at hand and I would listen to the lyrics rather than type. It served as a distraction. And the same can be said whilst riding. Your music shouldn't be serving as a distraction and pulling you away from the task at hand. Don't become distracted by listening to music while riding your motorcycle (Image: J Pleakis) Does Music Volume Matter When Riding? Several of the studies found that loud music (over 95dB) actually reduces reaction time. In contrast, we stated above that music can have a positive effect on mood and state. But it seems there is a volume threshold where music becomes a hindrance rather than a benefit. You should be listening to music while riding a motorcycle at a moderate volume. The Soundtrack To Your Life Might Not Be A Good Idea This sounds strange. But some of the studies found that we're likely to become overly engrossed in songs we love. We all have favourite songs, and we all know how they make us feel. Oftentimes, we associate those songs with fond memories that we're transported back to when we hear them. And this can be distracting. Also, we may start singing along - which is fine. Until we get lost in the music and end up over-exuberantly bopping away in the saddle. This is where turnings are missed, hazards are ignored, and dangers are unseen. Listening to music while riding a motorcycle: don't get lost in the moment! (Image: TripAdvisor) Music Tempo Can Unintentionally Affect Your Riding As mentioned above, fast-paced music can be good in the right setting. But in driving scenarios, it's not uncommon for riders to unintentionally speed up when listening to a fast-paced song. In contrast, we can become lethargic and zone out if the tempo of the music is too slow. For balance, try to listen to music that is somewhere between 60 and 80 bpm. Interestingly, that is also the rate at which our hearts beat. A tempo of 60-80bpm is best when listening to music while riding your motorcycle Listening To Music While Riding A Motorcycle: Conclusion On balance, it would appear that listening to music can have a positive effect on your riding. Get it right, and you can enjoy increased alertness, heightened concentration levels, alleviation from boredom on long stretches of motorway, a release of endorphins, and some relief from stress. Remember, you want your music playing at a moderate volume. It needs to be loud enough for you to take it in, but not so loud that it becomes a distraction. It also needs to be the right tempo. Happy Hardcore isn't the genre for riding! Something between 60 - 80 beats per minute seems to be ideal. Lastly, try not to play music that will compete for the spacial segments of your brain - such as rap or Audiobooks. And play something you like. But nothing you like so much that you start air-drumming to the solo at 80mph! If you enjoyed this post, we think you might like these!



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