

The AirPods Max are getting left behind, so are new Apple headphones coming this year?

It was inevitable that despite their hefty \$549 price, Apple's AirPods Max headphones would eventually start to miss out on the company's latest software enhancements. Headphones are basically computers now and have evolved into their own platform, so just like with any iPhone or Mac, Apple's ecosystem tricks and new features increasingly require more powerful silicon and revamped components.

We started to see the swan song for the two-and-a-half-years-old AirPods Max earlier this month at WWDC when Apple announced several new features coming this fall that, in nearly all cases, will exclusively apply to the second-generation AirPods Pro – and no other models. The headlining feature is called “Adaptive Audio,” a new sound mode that intelligently blends noise cancellation and transparency modes based on your surroundings. “You can stay present in your environment while distracting noises are automatically reduced,” Apple's Ron Huang said during the keynote presentation. Adaptive Audio will generally muffle the outside world, but you'll clearly hear certain sounds – bike bells, car horns, etc. – that are important for personal safety.

Adaptive Audio builds upon the Adaptive Transparency mode that launched with the second-gen AirPods Pro. On those earbuds, Apple's passthrough mode can quickly soften ear-piercing sounds like sirens and construction work. The company said this on-device processing was made possible by its H2 chip, which (so far) is only available in the latest AirPods Pro.

The AirPods Max have an H1 chip in each ear cup, but apparently, that's still not enough to make Adaptive Audio happen.

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/ The Verge

Adaptive Audio promises some unique functionality, and I'm looking forward to testing it. But some of Apple's other new audio features – again, all exclusive to the newest AirPods Pro – seem inspired by what we've seen from the earbud competition.

Personalized Volume is another of those tricks announced at WWDC. Over time, the AirPods Pro will learn your volume preferences in different conditions and automatically try to keep the loudness right where you like it. This is an idea that Google pursued with past Pixel Buds, but the company ditched Adaptive Sound with the Pixel Buds Pro. Apple is very cognizant of hearing health, so I'd wager Personalized Volume will only crank your music up so far.

And then there's Conversation Awareness, which is a feature I'd argue Sony pioneered before other earbuds adopted the same concept. That said, Apple's implementation sounds slightly more sophisticated than simply turning down the volume and flipping on transparency mode as soon as you start talking. Conversation Awareness lowers the music, sure, but Apple has said that it can "enhance the voices in front of the user, all while reducing background noise." There's a focus on isolating voice frequencies that isn't present in other approaches to this I've tried so far.

But again, the bad news for AirPods Max owners is that none of this new functionality is coming to Apple's most premium headphones. They're not being ignored completely; you'll be

able to quickly mute yourself on calls with the digital crown, and Apple has said the sometimes-unpredictable automatic device switching will be much more reliable after this fall's round of software updates. But the most helpful upgrades aren't coming. Even small conveniences like the shorter "Siri" activation word – no more "Hey" required – are only for the second-gen AirPods Pro. Ouch.

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