

Sam Tellig

Sam Listens to the Radio

I never did take to the telly. Call me old-fashioned.

Growing up just after World War II, I caught the tail end of radio's golden age. I remember a time when there was no television, when I listened to radio for hours on end. Jack Benny. *The Lone Ranger*. Bob and Ray. *Ozzie and Harriet*.

Close to the ocean, Fall River, Massachusetts, was a great place for AM reception. Stations barreled up the coast from New York City during the day, their groundwave propagation enhanced by water. (Many AM transmitters were, and still are, located on islands or on spits of sand surrounded by marshes. You can see the AM transmitter farm in the Meadowlands as you drive along the New Jersey Turnpike.) At night, stations came in from as far away as Des Moines or St. Louis. One of my favorites was the Grand Ole Opry, from WSM, Nashville.

My parents owned a Philco Model 90 Cathedral Table Radio, which they no longer used after they bought a TV. When I was 12, I took the Philco to a school chum who restored old radios. Within weeks, the two of us had made the radio look and sing like new: new tubes (the output tubes were a push-pull pair of Philco 45s), caps, resistors, even a new grillecloth. This was the twitchiest AM tuner I ever encountered. Breathe on the tuning knob, at night, and you could change from WNBC 660 to WSM 650. One day, while my parents were out for the afternoon, I set up the ladder and rigged a "secret" antenna from my bedroom window to a tree just outside.

I reveled in the golden age of New York disc jockeys: Martin Block, William B. Williams, Jim Lowe (still alive and only recently retired), Al Collins, even as the sun was setting fast—not because of TV but because of Top 40 and rock'n'roll. At night, I tuned in scary shows such as *Lights Out* and *Suspense*, especially since my parents had told me not to. I checked the closet and under my bed every night for whatever or whoever might lurk. Sometimes I got up in the middle of the night just to look again. I never did

find anyone. Or anything.

If you want to experience what radio was like just before the outbreak of World War II, check out the DVD of *Radio Days*, Woody Allen's sweet, funny, beautiful, heartbreakingly nostalgic 1987 film. For a history of early radio, check out *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio*, by Tom Lewis (HarperCollins, 1991).

Old radio sets were fun—especially those built in the 1930s. Many had beautifully detailed art-deco wooden cabinets. Do a Google search on *antique radios* and you'll find plenty of websites with photographs.

If it was fun to listen to the radio, it was even more fun to work at a radio station. Most stations in most cities were locally owned. Some were literal mom-and-pop businesses. I worked for a while at WALE, then in Fall River: 1400 on your dial. Polkas, anyone? (The ad-sales director was Polish-American.) Shopping news? Traffic accidents? Fires? Parades? Bowling? Obituaries? Funeral homes have big ad budgets, you know. A person could be dead on the radio up to 24 hours sooner than in the newspaper.

There are still some good AM stations here and there, including NPR affiliates such as WNYC 820 in New York and WRNI 1290 in Providence, Rhode Island. True, AM fidelity extends up to about 7kHz at best. But an AM broadcast can still sound... well, well, if you have a decent receiver, like a G.E. Superadio 3, available from Amazon.com for \$39.08 plus shipping. It's big, ugly, clumsy, and has few features, but it has killer AM and very good FM.

Music Hall RDR-1 table radio

My friend Roy Hall likes radios, too.

"I love old technologies that I can improve upon," Roy said, "like turntables and cartridges. Why not radios?"

Roy has brought out the Music Hall RDR-1 radio. "RDR" stands for "Radio Done Right." Goodness knows, enough others have done radio wrong—especially where AM is concerned.

The Music Hall RDR-1 looks like a Sangean WR2, which you can buy from

J&R Music World for \$149.99. The RDR-1 retails for \$199.99 and is fairly large for a table radio: 9.4" (240mm) wide by 4.5" (115mm) high by 7.1" (180mm) deep. It weighs 5.7 lbs (2.6kg).

As Roy has said on other occasions, "It's the profit that does it." He emphasizes that "The RDR-1 is not a rebadged WR2. Do you think I would put my name on an existing product and charge an extra 50 bucks?" (It's not easy to rile Roy.) "The radio is made in the same factory as the Sangean WR2. It's based on the WR2, which is a very good radio—if you want one, buy one—but the RDR-1 takes the performance a step further.

"We started with an existing model because it was so much less expensive than developing an entirely new model from scratch, which would have taken years instead of months," Roy explained. "We made changes in the circuitry to improve sensitivity and selectivity. We voiced the radio differently for a better soundstage and the full, rich sound that advertisements like to promise. The 3" speaker is horn-loaded. That's how we get such good bass in a small cabinet. There's a 7W amp, not the flea wattage found in most table radios."

Well, hold on, Roy—the RDR-1's specs say 7W at 10% total harmonic distortion at 100Hz.

AM, or Medium Wave, is a continuation of shortwave, and Sangean is known for its top-quality shortwave radios, sold under its own brand and others (certain RadioShack models were made by Sangean). Not surprising that a company known for making good shortwave radios will know how to make a good AM radio, too. How useful is good AM? Well, when the Red Sox are playing the Yankees, I don't have to listen to the New York announcers.

I haven't heard AM reception this good, at home, in 30 years. Of course, I use an external AM antenna. (The RDR-1 also has an internal AM antenna, but why throw away good reception?) The AM reception is exceptionally quiet, at least in our house: low noise, no buzz. In all likeli-

hood, the only way to get better AM reception is to buy something much more expensive, like a Drake communications receiver.

"If you weren't so lazy, you'd install a proper FM antenna on the roof," Roy observed. "Make it directional and I'll bet you pull FM stations from Boston, Philadelphia, and Albany."

The RDR-1 has five FM station presets and five AM presets, and I'm happy to have them. The RDR-1 also does double duty as a clock radio. I especially like the way the volume comes on slowly, so as not to jolt one out of bed. There's a sleep timer, too. And the RDR does RDS (Radio Digital System). With RDS, a station's call letters or other identifier is shown in the display instead of the tuned frequency.

The RDR-1 works in stereo through the headphone jack (assuming enough signal strength), and there's an Aux input jack for connecting an iPod, portable CD player, or the like. For casual headphone listening with so-so 'phones, the jack is fine. Otherwise, you need a good headphone amp. Roy will be happy to sell you a Creek.

The RDR-1's clock will run for six minutes following a power failure; after that, the clock, the alarm, and the presets must be re-entered. My only complaint is that setting the clock and the alarm is a finicky process for an old fuddy-duddy like me.

I'm still discovering new features of the RDR-1, some of which matter in Europe but not in North America (like switching to alternative frequencies via RDS) and some of which do (like scan

tuning). Some might find the small remote control useful. You could put the radio anywhere in your bedroom

sound quality might vary. Then there's the problem of running on batteries (AA or AAA), which get expensive when you

IT HELPS IF **YOU USE THIS OR ANY FM TRANSMITTER** FROM A CENTRAL PART OF **YOUR HOUSE**, PREFERABLY ON THE **TOP FLOOR**.

and control the radio from bed with the remote.

The downside of having all these features is that it takes time to familiarize yourself with the RDR-1. But once it's set up, its operation is fairly intuitive.

I asked Roy: Why invest \$200 in an FM/AM radio when high-definition radio is finally here?

"You're talking to a man who makes turntables. New technology doesn't make old technology obsolete. FM and AM radio will be around for a long time. HD radio is very good technology, and we may introduce an HD receiver ourselves. But the iBiquity Digital chipset for HD receivers is expensive. That's what's holding HD radio back—not the broadcasters."

Highly recommended.

TAW~Global Whole House FM Transmitter Gold Edition

Did you know that it's legal to operate your own FM station? True, the FCC limits you to 250mV at 3m. But that's probably enough to send an FM signal to most rooms of your house, and even the backyard patio or deck.

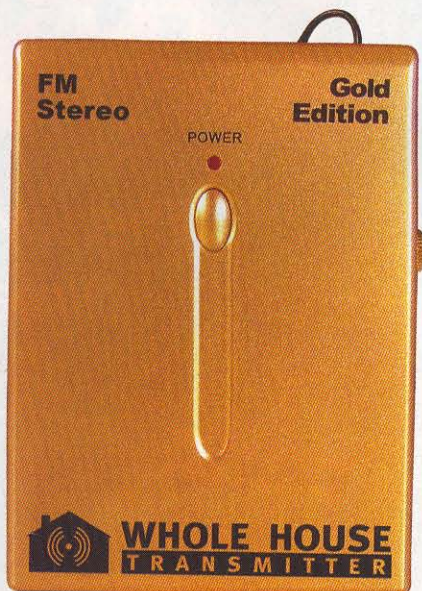
Think what you could do with all that power. You could plug your iPod into an FM transmitter and have your own version of Jack FM, minus the commercials. You could send a signal from your satellite radio receiver to all FM receivers in the house. You could connect your computer's audio output to an FM transmitter and send streaming audio to every FM receiver within 150'.

This type of device has been available for cars for several years. Most people use them to play their iPods through their car radios. You can use any of these devices in the home, too, though the range and

forget to turn off the transmitter. Perhaps you're better off using an FM transmitter designed primarily for the home.

The first such device I came across is the Whole House FM Transmitter Gold Edition from TAW~Global, LLC. Sold direct, it retails for \$89.99 plus \$14.50 shipping. (You can reach them at sales@tawglobal.com.) The Whole House comes with a cigarette-lighter power adapter for the car. It also works on three AA batteries—or you can use your computer's USB port.

The transmitter itself is very compact: 2.5" (65mm) by 3.3" (85mm) by 0.6" (15mm) thick. But it looks expensive for what you get: a box of little bits and pieces—transmitter, wall wart, connectors, adapters, etc.—none of which looks expensively made. The antenna is a fragile piece of wire that dangles from the transmitter; easily damaged, I fear. Still, the thing works, and I have no quibbles about the sound.



It helps if you use this or any FM transmitter from a central part of your house, preferably on the top floor. (For-

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