

Shortwave radio still packs an audible thrill

Broadcasts can surprise an adventurous listener more than any MP3 playlist

By Robert MacMillan

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NEW YORK - Somewhere on a lonely mountaintop on a starry night, or maybe in an apartment on a bustling city block, someone is channeling the whole world onto a mobile device. It's not a phone; it's a shortwave radio.

A staple form of broadcasting in many parts of the world since the 1920s and 1930s — shortwave in North America has been mostly a hobby for decades.

Now that the Internet is a fixture in many homes in the United States and Canada, there are few practical reasons to buy a shortwave radio. Thousands of stations that once were available only on the shortwave band are online.

Shortwave also is distinctly old fashioned, cast against the shadow of the annual Consumer Electronics Show, which was held in Las Vegas earlier this month. The mother of gargantuan gadget fests featured shortwave radio makers, but the action these days revolves around digital audio devices.

The contrast is stark: iPods and satellite radios are slim and pocket-sized, while shortwaves are throwbacks, typically as square as a textbook and just as serious looking.

So why bother with shortwave?

It's easy and cheap — and fun. You can hear and learn things that you would never find even if you work your search engine like a mule. From Swaziland to Paris to Havana, shortwave broadcasters can surprise an adventurous listener more than any MP3 playlist.

"You tune carefully, twist the radio from side to side, and there's still a bit of a 'Hey, I made this happen!' sort of thing," said Harold Cones, retired chairman of the biology and chemistry department at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia.

It's also magic. Shortwave radio enthusiasts acknowledge the thrill — the romance, in a way — of going out at night and snaring news, music, odd bleeps, religious zealots and other broadcasts from the wild sea of frequencies in the sky.

In aural terms, the Internet wins. Shortwave by nature sounds dirty: Its signals whoosh from clouds of static and are subject to the whims of sunspots and atmospheric disturbances.

But when you hear voices over the noise and squeal, and realize you are hearing Mongolia, live, there is a warmth and a human connection that are hard to find on the Web.

Shortwave also can deliver news faster than you might find it online, and in places where your other devices don't work, said Ian McFarland, a former host and writer at Radio Canada International.

"It's more portable than a computer, especially if you ... don't have a laptop and you don't happen to have a hot spot on your favorite beach," he said. Batteries also keep them going a long time when the power goes out.

On a serious note, shortwave stations often resist many government attempts to jam them.

"Shortwave is unfettered by intermediaries so it's pretty much always there," said Lawrence Magne, publisher of the [Passport to World Band Radio](#).

Getting started

You can find shortwave radios at a variety of Web retail and auction shops like Amazon, Universal Radio, The Shortwave Store, Grove Enterprises or even National Public Radio.

Bob Grove, at Grove Enterprises in Brasstown, North Carolina, also offers [a handy beginner's guide](#).

You could drop thousands of dollars on a radio, but units such as the [Eton E100](#) generally range from \$50 to \$250. A perfectly serviceable radio sells for as little as \$30, but more expensive models are better at pulling in fainter signals.

Listening is best an hour before and after sunrise and sunset — and away from urban areas — because of atmospheric conditions and because many broadcasters in distant lands are gearing up their broadcasts.

Try searching for distant shortwave signals, identify the station, write to them and get a "QSL Card," the broadcaster's acknowledgment that you made contact.

For die hards, listening to shortwave can make hours go by in a dream. For others, its an acquired taste — Bob Grove said his wife is "partially tolerant."

"I've had radio equipment in my car in the past, and I have learned not to turn it all on when we were going on a date somewhere."

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