

When Shortwave Was the Gateway

Long before the Internet, shortwave listening lured thousands to Amateur Radio.

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According to recent research, a large percentage of ARRL members obtained their Amateur Radio licenses between 1965 and 1975. When you ask those amateurs what drew them to the hobby in those ancient times (and, yes, our research has asked that question, too), many respond with two words: *shortwave listening*.

Anyone who tunes through the shortwave broadcast bands today would likely wonder what the attraction could have possibly been. Shortwave broadcasting today is a pale shadow of its former self. Among those few broadcasters left, most no longer produce English-language programming, and the few that do rarely swing their antenna patterns to target North America. The media tsunami of the Internet has made shortwave broadcasting largely obsolete, even in less developed areas of the world. Satellite radio and television have also hammered their own nails into the shortwave coffin.

But the decade between 1965 and 1975 stands in stark contrast to international broadcasting as exists today. As the late L.P. Hartley famously wrote in his novel, *The Go-Between*, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

Voices from Another World

If you were an American in the '60s and '70s, you often formed your opinions about the world beyond our borders through American radio, television, and newspapers. Unless you traveled internationally, it wasn't easy to gain an alternative perspective — except for those lucky enough to discover shortwave broadcasting. To tap into this ethereal stream of alternative information, all you needed was a competent receiver and a sufficiently long strand of wire.

My first shortwave receiver was barely “competent.” It was a RadioShack Science Fair “P-Box” kit, the model 28-110 three-transistor regenerative shortwave receiver. (If you'd like to take a trip down P-Box

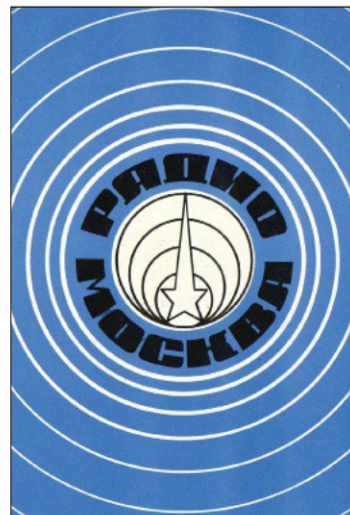
memory lane, go to my.core.com/~sparktron/pbox.html.) After eagerly soldering the last component, connecting the battery, and tossing about 20 feet of wire outside my bedroom window, I heard something quite odd. My first shortwave signal consisted of nothing more than the strumming of an acoustic guitar accompanied by a chirping bird. The signal was loud, and the simple tune repeated, over and over.

I'm sure veteran shortwave listeners are already smiling. They know that what I was hearing was an *interval signal*, a brief snippet of music intended to warn listeners that a broadcast was about to begin. Sure enough, as the clock in my parents' living room chimed the hour, I suddenly heard, “This is Radio RSA, the voice of South Africa.”

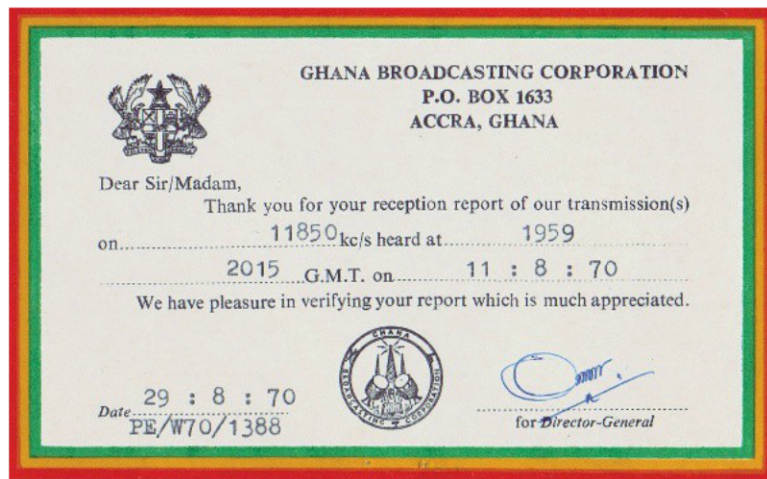
I remember feeling a tingle race up my spine. South Africa! I was listening to a signal coming all the way from *South Africa!*

Even the worst receivers could pick up other powerhouse stations such as HCJB (from Quito, Ecuador), the BBC, Radio Havana, Radio Canada International, and Radio Moscow, just to name a few. With a better receiver (and antenna), the door opened to the rest of the shortwave broadcast world. I still recall the thrill of picking

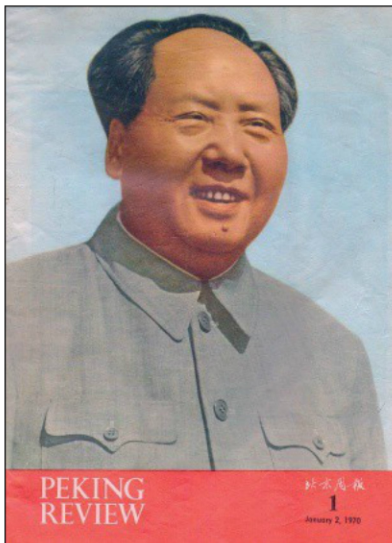
up — just barely — a broadcast from the English-language service of Radio Ghana, the news from 4VEH in Cap-Haitien, Haiti, and many more stations. Not only could you listen to their unique points of view, you also had the luxury of vicariously exploring their cultures through music, poetry, and even cooking recipes.



Many shortwave listening veterans will quickly recognize this card as a QSL from Radio Moscow, circa 1969.



A prized QSL from Radio Ghana.



To my parents' dismay, this was one of several issues of *Peking Review* that spilled from the Radio Peking QSL package.

Keeping Listeners Engaged

At the end of every broadcast, the stations usually encouraged listeners to send signal reports and comments. In those halcyon days before the Internet, this correspondence had to take place through the postal system. You would send a letter noting the time, frequency, and signal strength, along with a few notes about the actual broadcast content (to prove you really heard the broadcast). In return, you would receive — sometimes months later — a QSL confirmation card.

Shortwave broadcast QSLs were highly collectible back in the day, and the stations usually took such correspondence very seriously. For the broadcaster, it was a means of keeping listeners engaged.

Some shortwave broadcasters took QSLing to the next level. Not only would they send the requisite cards, they would include calendars, pennants, magazines, and printed broadcast schedules. If you sent a report to Radio Moscow, for instance, you earned a place on their mailing list and received a copy of their broadcast schedule on a regular basis. Other broadcasters went even further.

My biggest surprise arrived one afternoon in a battered package that looked like it had traveled around the world several times before finally making its way to me. The package was covered in Mandarin script, along with a blue stamp telling me it had been opened by United States postal inspectors.

Uh-oh.

When I opened the mystery package, several *Peking Review* magazines spilled onto the floor, each bearing a vivid color photograph of Chairman Mao Tse-tung. Along with the periodicals, there were plastic pocket calendars, a pennant, and, of course, a QSL card from Radio Peking.

My parents were more than a little concerned. Not only was this the height of the Cold War, the Cultural Revolution was raging in China. They had just recovered from the shock of learning that their teenage son was listening to Soviet propaganda, and now he was receiving literature from the Communist Chinese. My father remarked that my name had probably been added to an FBI file (and he may have been right).

It wasn't all about geopolitics, though. Many shortwave broadcasters kept it light-hearted, reading listener letters over the air, answering questions, and even playing song requests. Radio Nederland's "Happy

Station" broadcasts, for instance, were entertaining shortwave favorites with a large worldwide following.

Funny Voices

When shortwave listeners went hunting for new stations to add to their logs, they invariably stumbled across strange signals that sounded like mushy, garbled voices. If your receiver was blessed with a Beat Frequency Oscillator (BFO), and you knew how to use it, you soon discovered that it could make those odd signals intelligible. However, this often raised more questions. Who were these people? Why did they seem to be carrying on conversations at all hours of the day and night?

I decided they must be spies, and that their innocent-sounding conversations were chock full of clever code phrases. "I'll see you on the net tomorrow night, Charlie," probably meant something like "I will plant the microfilm beneath the garbage pail at the end of the alley, Charlie." Remember: this was the Cold War and spies were everywhere.

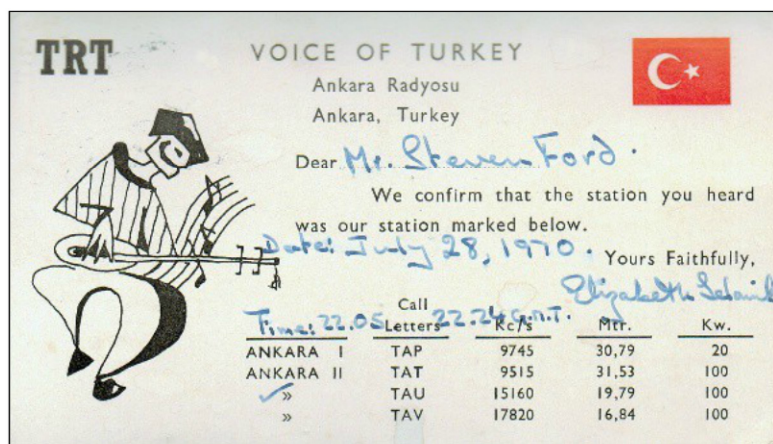
Of course, like most of us "of a certain age," I soon discovered that the signals belonged to hams. I recalled being astonished when I learned that I, too, could have an FCC-issued call sign and generate my own shortwave signals. From that moment I was done being a passive radio listener; it was time to start *transmitting!*

Shortwave Memories

As I said at the start of this column, the heyday of shortwave broadcasting is long past. The shortwave broadcast community has attempted to modernize with Digital Radio Mondiale, which offers FM-broadcast-quality audio in a digital format, but it is too little, too late. One by one, shortwave broadcasters have closed their facilities and, in many cases, transferred their broadcasts to the Internet.

If you grew up with shortwave, it has been a sad spectacle to witness. Such is the nature of change, though. If you are in need of a strong dose of melancholy, listen to the final broadcast of Radio Nederland at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXp8sg8wIXw.

Even so, if you love the magic of radio — and you wouldn't be a ham if you didn't — you have to admit that the golden era of shortwave broadcasting was a heck of a time to be alive. None of us would trade those memories for the world.



A QSL confirming reception of the English-language service of The Voice of Turkey.