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So This Is the Golden Age

On 76 years of AM magic

By Adam Swenson

In my office are two radios. One is a white Bose Wave model, complete with AM/FM digital tuning, a CD player, line-in jacks, an alarm clock, digital readouts—it's like the old pocket-splitting Swiss Army knife with everything on it.

The other is a 1931 Philco Superheterodyne Model 89, an art deco, cathedral style piece crafted of lacquered hardwoods with a hand-rubbed finish. It has an illuminated dial that blazes beckoningly. It receives AM and shortwave radio signals courtesy of an ungainly 30 or so feet of orange antenna wire. The signals are amplified through a series of glowing orange vacuum tubes that burn off dust (creating a pleasant woody aroma) before they are sent to the original 76-year-old speaker where they are projected into the room, warm, resonant, and proud. These soundwaves have character: they are Bing Crosby, the Beach Boys, and Brudda Iz. They are AM radio.

The Bose is sleek and white. It's modern, with a full complement of buttons and corresponding green lights on the front to tell you what's happening. It has digital technology—flip it over and you'll see a green circuit board with capacitors, transistors, slight copper trails pressed in, orchestrated, master-minded. It's a product of lean and automated manufacturing. It is thoroughly explicable.

The Philco, on the other hand, is magic. The Philco is alive. The dial glows an incandescent firelight yellow. The whole thing is quintessentially analog, old science, alchemy. Every time I twist the power knob I have to wait for the tubes to warm before the sound comes through. And every time I experience a sinking dread that she won't power up. She is 76 after all—my experience tells me that objects don't/won't/can't last forever. The second law of thermodynamics is a law after all, not a suggestion.

But she is faithful. She was built to last, long before there was such a thing as planned obsolescence. Philco is long since gone, merging with Ford in 1961(remember that Ford/Philco radio in your '65 Falcon?), then disappearing some 20-odd years later, but the radio that Philco built is still in my office, still projecting Frank Sinatra's velvety-smooth croonings.

The Philco is a relic of the golden age of radio, from the 30s through World War II. FM radio was still largely theoretical and TVs didn't show up *en masse* until 1948-49—when it came to mass communication, AM radio was the only game in town.

It was in the late 20s and early 30s that on-air advertising and sponsorship grew exponentially, fueling the growth of radio. Pepsodent toothpaste was a brand on the brink of extinction back in those days. Their salvation came in their sponsorship of *AMOS 'n ANDY*, a program that aired from 7:00 to 7:15 PM Monday through Saturday. America was instantly addicted. To maintain dinner hour business, restaurants had to pipe in the show so families could listen while they ate and theaters delayed the start of movies until the show was over.

Just like today, there were those in the golden age who chafed at government regulation, viewing the FCC as an organization imposing unnecessary and unreasonable regulations on radio content. In their book, *Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves*, writers Bill Crawford and Gene Fowler tell the story of Doc Brinkley, physician and owner/operator of KFKB (Kansas First, Kansas Best). The FCC allowed him to promote his pre-Viagra Viagra over the airwaves (as a cure for male impotence, he would surgically attach a piece of goat gonad to the man parts so that recipients could “Be the Ram What Am With Every Lamb”) but his call-in prescription show was just too much. Listeners would phone him for an on-air diagnosis and get a prescription they could pick up at their local pharmacy. (Ever the profiteer, Brinkley split proceeds with pharmacists.)

Shut down by the FCC, Doc Brinkley moved his operation to the border town of Del Rio, Texas and set up a monolithic “border blaster,” a 500,000 watt powerhouse just across the river on Mexican soil. (The FCC would only grant permits up to 50,000 watts at the time.)

At night Brinkley’s station was powerful enough to reach most of the northern hemisphere—the radio waves would stay close to the earth’s surface due to the reflection of the ionosphere and could even be heard across the world if conditions were right. There are documented instances of listeners writing in from Finland to a station broadcasting from Acuña, Mexico. The transmitters were so powerful that birds flying by would fall out of the air stone dead and the signal could be received on barbed wire fences, bedsprings, and (according to one man) dental work.

With no regulating agency to govern them, border blasters played whatever their owners desired. Spiritualists, quacks, edgy musical acts—anything too far out of the mainstream for the continental US found a home here. Johnny Cash first heard his future wife, June Carter, singing on Doc Brinkley’s station, and the KGB learned English from none other than Wolfman Jack.

For 76 years now, this little tabletop radio has connected people through the vast elements of time and space. What did the listeners think as the news of VE day hailed from its shiny wooden frame? Or when Dr. Martin Luther King stood on the steps of Lincoln Memorial and passionately revealed his dream for the future. Did this Philco play “The Star Spangled Banner” when it was announced as our national anthem in 1931?

I like to imagine families lying fireside, mom darning socks, dad resting after a long day in the field, kids listening intently to this new “singing cowboy” Roy Rogers.

Maybe this is something we should get back to.

The radio for this story was provided by Dave Christensen, the owner/operator of Antique Radio Company, downtown Stillwater. He is the undisputed heavyweight champion of the valley when it comes to the buying/selling/care/feeding of vintage radios and can be reached at antiqueradioco@usgo.net.

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