

The Reactor

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Short Wave Long on Pleasure

There's a little radio station in San Francisco, KALW, which routinely brings its listeners the BBC and Radio Canada programming via satellite. If they're like me, those other listeners take it all pretty much for granted. After all, we get a lot of our radio and TV programming these days via satellites floating in the Clarke Orbit, 22,300 miles above us. A whole industry has been built up using satellites floating in space. Words like "uplink" and "transponder" are almost everyday language. Kids these days should be forgiven if they think that communication from anywhere in the world is a piece of cake.

In 1926, however, it was a big deal to have a communications radio link with the Far East, and that link

on the West Coast passed through what is now Pacifica. Globe Wireless kept the information flow to the Far East open through antennas that covered part of Fairmont and Pacific Manor. Pacifica is a pioneer in global communications, including the south pole expeditions in 1929.

In the '40s, short wave radio was still a big deal. My little Hallicrafters with the long wire antenna out my window in Santa Rosa brought me the foreign places I didn't know much about. There was Radio Australia, with the strange laughing cry of the Kookaburra bird as its "mascot;" Radio Brazzaville, in French Africa; Leopoldville, in the Belgian Congo; HCJB in Quito, Ecuador, where American Protestant missionaries spread their message from the roof of the world; the BBC world service from London ("Fourteen hours Greenwich mean time"); the Dutch broadcasting station from Surinam in the Antilles. Short wave listening in those days was a never-ending search for the country and the station not previously heard. I had QSL cards from around the world, from places that still give me the thrill of discovery after 40 years.

Occasionally I still turn to the short wave band. Radio Australia is still out there, but the Kookaburra has been

retired. Leopoldville is gone, as is the very territory of the Belgian Congo. Now it's called Kinshasa, Zaire. Across the river, Brazzaville is now the capitol of the People's Republic of the Congo, but the great transmitters are gone. Radio Moscow after 40 years still pours out its mountains of fine-sounding drivel. For all I can tell the same announcers may still be on the job. They all sound alike. I enjoy an occasional chance to listen in on China, and Radio Japan, and Radio Deutsche Vella in Cologne.

There's still some of the old pleasure, but short wave is an anachronism in the modern world, a static, difficult signal, a relic from the time of Fred Allen and Fibber McGee. Faithful old HCJB is still there, broadcasting its message of Christ from the top of the world. But even today, in this blasé modern world, it's fun to tune around the short wave band and pick up a station not heard before. There's Radio Swiss International. There's the French station from Paris I heard for the first time a few minutes ago. I haven't heard Canada for a while, but the initial four tones of "O Canada" still can send a chill up my back, as for that matter, does the Russian "Meadowlands." (I don't have to agree with the politics to enjoy the music.) Try short wave. You might enjoy it.

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