

Move over, iPod: Internet radio captures the enduring magic of the medium and makes the local global.

by Bill McKibben

## Radio Free Everywhere

The iPod shows you mainly what's already going on in your head—it's cool, but only as cool as solipsism can ever be. I've got a way cooler device: a squat little box that sits on your kitchen counter or your bedside table and connects you to pretty much the entire Earth. And in so doing makes you think anew about the global and the local and what community amounts to—makes you think about connection, which is, after all, the main topic of our age. It's a kind of home epistemology center that also happens to rock.

Or croon, or wail, or chat, or do anything else a radio can do. Because that's all I'm talking about: a table radio, though one that, assuming you have a broadband connection and wireless network in your house, lets you tune in to almost any station anywhere that's streaming its signal on the Net. Your computer will let you do this too (go to [www.reciva.com](http://www.reciva.com) for a portal that will let you listen in), but there's something about having a little box there in the kitchen—the whole thing is more elegant (think presets), and it connects you with the earliest moments of electronic entertainment. Because radio is, of course, the great survivor medium, a century old and still occupying more hours in the average American's week than network television—and just about every other type of entertainment, too.

At the moment, radio's most talked-about form is satellite—[XM](#) and [Sirius](#), eager to merge their hundred-channel lists of music and talk into something profitable. But given what's out there for free, it's hard to imagine why anyone would bother to pay for a satellite subscription (except for the fairly crucial fact that you can get satellite radio in your car, while easy Web-streaming in transit is still some years off). Like reggae? There's a reggae channel on XM. But if you own an Internet radio—mine is an Acoustic Energy model, produced by an English company and available from many electronics retailers for about \$300—you can listen to seven different stations from Jamaica, including [MegaJamz](#), [KOOL FM](#), and [Love 101](#). Personally, I enjoy the soca show from Barbados on CBC at [98.1 FM](#), partly because of the music, partly because of the weather report—always 80, always breezy—and partly because of the lilting voices of the DJs. “My grandmother always used to tell me, ‘Never wake up vexed,’” said the lady who does the morning shift one day last month when I was feeling, in fact, a little tense. Something in both that sentiment (the opposite of the keyed-up political hysterics on our own dial) and that last choice of word relaxed me—and almost instantly conjured up colonial history with all its complexities.

Indeed, if, like me, you're a pathetic Anglophone, then much of the Internet listening experience is about the rise and fall of the British Empire. Except that on radio it never really fell. The BBC, supported by the annual license fee paid by every Brit who owns a TV, remains the dominant English voice, carrying a staggering quantity of programming. The best of America's National Public Radio programs are as good as anything on the Beeb, but the sheer volume of stuff

pouring out of London certainly seems to dwarf our public-radio output. And most of it's endlessly better than the dry news and ceaseless cricket scores on the BBC's World Service, which is all that American listeners usually hear of British radio. In fact, an Internet radio is worth the money if all you do is preset the first five buttons to the BBC flagships: [Radio 2](#), for instance, the most-listened-to station in the British Isles, plays jazz and pop music and light comedy and the occasional organ concert. Or [BBC 7](#), established a few years ago mostly to air the system's endless archives; at any given moment, *Doctor Who* might be on the air, or episode 51 ("Life Under the Tudors") of the 240-chapter *Short History of Ireland*, or old tapes of *The Goon Show*. It also carries hours of daily children's radio, not to mention original stand-up comedy.

Best of all is [BBC Radio 4](#). It's the talk channel, but there's not much American-style call-in-we're-all-experts-here chatter. Instead, it's the aural equivalent of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, with documentaries on "The Greenspan Years," or "Boris Yeltsin: A Flawed Giant," or "*Peak Nestwatch*," a nature group that campaigns against, among other things, "serial egg collectors" who shoot birds of prey. You might hear *The Food Programme* chronicling the vegetarian roots of Jainism, or an actor reading Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, or another actor performing the winning story in the National Short Story contest. There's also *The Archers*, believed to be the longest-running radio soap in the world, each episode of which lasts a quite reasonable 15 minutes.

Until it went off the air in May, my favorite BBC Radio 4 show was *A World in Your Ear*, which showcased radio from around the planet, each week on a theme. One week, for instance, it was Zimbabwe's travails: I listened to a clip from the state-run Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, but also ones from the community radio station in Bulawayo (a station that's been denied a license by the government, so it exists only on cassettes and CDs passed hand to hand), and from the Voice of America broadcasts into Zimbabwe (jammed by the state), and from the talk shows on Cape Town radio that have turned into a forum on Robert Mugabe's tyranny.

*A World in Your Ear* made clear that the real glory of Internet radio lies not in the polished programs of the BBC, delightful though they are—instead, it lies in the ability to eavesdrop on local discussions, to hear the world in its various moods and timbres. For most of the 20th century, listeners tried to do this with shortwave radio, but it was difficult, and not just because of the hissing static. Shortwave stations have generally been government operations, designed to show a certain face to the world—they have been remarkably alike in their somber (and untrustworthy) approach. But radio, at its best, is the most gloriously local of all media, hemmed in by the nearest range of hills, signals fading 10 miles out of town. We've forgotten much of this in the United States, where deregulation in recent years has allowed a few big players (Clear Channel, Infinity) to buy up thousands of stations and turn them, essentially, into repeaters for their cheap-as-possible broadcasts. It's impossible to overstate the awfulness of most of this radio. (And to say that Americans have *chosen* to listen to it is simply not true—when licenses become available, these deregulated giants have the cash to make the best offers, and then their efficiencies of scale force out the remaining competition. There are whole communities whose dial is nothing but that endless round of homogenized music and bellicose talk.)

Which is why it's so nice to be able to easily listen to what real American radio remains. My tabletop pulls in nearly every public-radio station in America, meaning that the great talk shows on dozens of stations—[KUOW](#) (Seattle), [KPCC](#) (Los Angeles), [KQED](#) (San Francisco), [WBUR](#) and [WGBH](#) (Boston), [WNYC](#) (guess)—are always in range. You can listen to famous music programs, like *Morning Becomes Eclectic* from [KCRW](#) (Santa Monica), but also to dozens unknown outside their home regions. I have no idea why the best early-rock-and-roll show and the best two hours of world beat pour out of public station [NCPR](#) in the far-northern New York town of Canton, but they do—Wednesdays and Fridays, three to five in the afternoon. Almost every college station in the country streams its signal, too, which means you can get one of the nicer perks of, say, a Harvard education: Every spring and winter during exam period, Harvard's [WHRB](#) airs music “orgies”—round-the-clock exhaustive stretches of everyone from Beethoven to Keith Fullerton Whitman, whose “hyper-programmed rhythms and concrete sounds, bleeding freakout guitar, Beach Boys-style sweet harmony, eastern euro-prog, vintage synth burbles, classic-era minimalism, early mainframe computer music, fluxus-lineage borderline nonsense, complete and utter chaos, doomy chamber pop, and quiet melancholy” (that's Whitman's own description of his music) played for 32 hours over the course of a few days one spring.

Compared with all this splendor, satellite radio is exposed for what it really is: a glorified airline entertainment system—hundreds of channels signifying next to nothing. Signifying next to nothing because satellite *comes from nowhere*. Just like the Clear Channel stations, it surrenders the thing that makes radio so magical: connection to a community. As a rough rule of thumb, the smaller the community at which a signal is aimed, the more interesting the radio—it scales down better than it scales up. Unlike television, which looks amateurish until you've spent large sums of money and so must always aim for a large audience to cover its costs, radio allows anyone with talent and access to a transmitter to create compelling programs for practically nothing. And it gets more compelling—more real—the smaller it gets. So [ZIZ](#), the voice of St. Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean, with Sugar Bowl spinning records in the morning and Ronnie Rascal in the afternoon, manages to conjure up that place effortlessly. A few hours of listening and you feel like you've wandered onto the islands, that you have some sense of the country's mores and rhythms, not to mention its economy, since the station broadcasts a series called *Ready to Welcome the World*, which aims to teach locals how to offer “world-class service” to vacationers.

Radio is mental travel. Listening to Sirius, even the world-music shows, is like traveling to Club Med. You aren't going to be disappointed or upset—but you aren't going to be excited or entertained, either. It's just like home, except someplace else. Tuning around the local-radio dial is more like staying in an endless string of bed-and-breakfasts, the kind with talkative hosts. Sometimes it's boring, but boring in an interesting way.

One of my favorite stations, for instance, is [WOJB](#), on an Ojibwa reservation in northern Wisconsin. It programs lots of Native American music and news, and lots of other music you hear almost nowhere else. (Check out *At Risk Radio* on Friday nights for one of the few programs that can slide straight from Conlon Nancarrow and his player-piano studies into Guy Klucevscek and the “Ping Pong Polka.”) But once a year, it also offers live round-the-clock coverage of the area's great sporting event, the Birkebeiner 51-kilometer ski race, which draws upward of 9,000 Nordic racers. Hundreds of them get interviewed as they cross the finish line,

and the endless parade of flat midwestern voices (“Yep, good race, nice course. We’ll come back next year.”) locates the place with novelistic precision. If you’re looking for a vacation to a place without cynicism, WOJB is for you. If you’re eager to wallow in some sonic vice, tune in to [William Hill Radio](#), usually geared to the betting shops of the same name across the United Kingdom—it’s the only place I know where you’re likely to hear live commentary on greyhound racing. If you want to time-travel back to the politics of a less hard-edged day, try [KBOO](#) in Portland, Oregon, or [KPFA](#) in Berkeley. Sometimes, when all I want is sound, I’ll turn on [Oman FM](#), for what I think is Koranic chanting—and what I know is simply otherworldly beautiful.

Internet radio has its challenges, of course. Some are technical (stations that refuse to boot up; college stations, predictably, have the best Web connections), and some are political (the recording industry, in its ongoing effort to alienate every possible customer, keeps trying to get Internet stations to pay more than terrestrial radio for the right to broadcast songs, perennially threatening to take them off the air).

And I don’t listen to it all the time. Since I live in a particular place myself, I do listen to the few stations—public, community, college, and even one commercial—that still cover my locale and keep me in touch with my neighbors, my sports, my politics, my weather. But sometimes the summer sun wears me down, and I switch on the CBC [Yellowknife](#) service, just to listen to the cool temperatures of the Arctic. The last time I tuned in, someone was reading an obit for a tribal elder who had died the day before, a man who had spent the last decades of his life leading school trips into the wilderness, acquainting local youth with places he’d always known. “It wasn’t unusual for him to tell the same story every night around the campfire,” said one friend. “But always in a different way, so that you got a kick out of it every time.”