

Like gamblers, they enjoy spinning dials to see what pops up. But they play their game on radios and TV sets. They're called DXers, night hawks who stay up late into the night to pick up broadcasts from far off places. Writer Saul Chernos heads out under a full moon to monitor the airwaves, with unusual results.



Obsessive listening

BY SAUL CHERNOS

It's 3 a.m., mild and slightly overcast. I see the full moon peep through the clouds. The momentary burst of light reveals sleepy farmhouses. All is silent, save the crackling of my radio. A pair of blinking red-and-white lights disturbs my reverie. Nothing extraterrestrial. A flashlight pans my face and the policewoman asks me, incredulously, what I could possibly be doing parked by the side of the road at this ungodly hour.

"Nothing, ma'am. Listening to the radio."

"Listening to the radio?"

Was I some kind of alien visitor? Stuck high on a hill in rural York Region, west of Newmarket, Ont., I handed her my driver's license and insurance to establish myself as a law-abiding member of her species.

"I'm a DXer," I explained. "DXers are hobbyists who listen to the radio and try to hear as many stations as possible, as far away as possible. Sort of like amateur ham radio operators, except that we don't talk — we just listen."

The officer seemed to under-

stand, or at least accept that I wasn't armed, dangerous and on the lam. I showed her the log-book I keep, complete with details of each station meticulously logged, recording the date, time and nature of the reception.

While most people listen only to strong, local broadcast stations, DXers search in between for weaker signals.

I happened upon the DX hobby back in the mid-1970s, when I discovered I could hear St. Louis Blues NHL hockey live on KMOX on 1120 on the AM band.

I really knew I was onto something the night I heard a voice telling me "it's 70 degrees, and you're tuned to KFI, Los Angeles."

Over the next few weeks, I tested the limits of my clock radio, easily snagging stations from Boston, Atlanta and New Orleans.

Winter was fast approaching, and I started hearing Spanish-language stations across the AM band. On 730, I identified "La X de Mexico," which I later determined, through lists of radio stations obtained at the Metro Toronto Reference Library, was XEX in Mexico City.

The library became a treasured source of information about radio

stations around the world. Periodicals such as the *World Radio and Television Handbook* included lists of radio stations, complete with addresses where I could send a cassette tape or written documentation of what I heard, and request a letter or postcard verifying the authenticity of the reception.

Organizations such as the Ontario DX Association and the Worldwide TV-FM DX Association were mentioned. I promptly joined these.

Membership in DX clubs exposed me to hundreds of people who, like gamblers, enjoyed spinning the dials to see what might pop up.

I met Wayne Plunkett of Toronto, who logged his first long-distance station back in 1954. "We'd just got our first television set and had hooked up a Yagi antenna," Mr. Plunkett recalls. "The technician told us we'd only be able to get the CBC on channel 9 and Buffalo on channel 4. But when I turned the set on, right off the bat, I saw channel 2 in Denver, and channel 5 in Bismarck, North Dakota. That's what was on the very first time a TV was on here. From that point on I was hooked."

Mr. Plunkett did some research on signal propagation and discovered his reception, in the month of May, marked the beginning of a four-month season for a phenomenon known as "e-skip."

E-skip occurs when signals in the portion of the radio spectrum allotted to FM and TV bounce off the atmosphere. While FM and TV signals travel along a line of sight and generally cover a radius of up to 100 kilometres, certain atmospheric conditions cause signals to reflect back to Earth hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away.

DXers in Ontario have reported receiving FM and TV stations as far away as Newfoundland, Bermuda, Cuba and Wyoming. Scientists haven't proven what causes e-skip, though theories abound. Most DXers attribute the phenomenon to solar flare activity.

While some DXers favour the commercial broadcast bands, many hobbyists prefer the decidedly global shortwave band, because it is positioned in an area of the radio spectrum where signals are routinely reflected by the ionosphere.

From Newmarket, Ont., Harold

Sellers has logged stations from 190 countries, spanning all continents, including Antarctica. During the day, Mr. Sellers can easily hear stations in Europe and Africa. As evening falls, South and Central American broadcasters enter the fray, and late night becomes a truly global mix. Asia and the South Pacific arrive with dawn.

Many shortwave buffs are eager for information from different political perspectives about events around the planet. During the Falklands War, Mr. Sellers listened to the special propaganda stations Argentina and Britain used to broadcast to opposing troops.

Some hobbyists specialize in tracking obscure signals, scanning for mysterious "numbers" stations on which announcers read lengthy lists of numbers.

The prevailing theory is that the numbers are secret codes used by spies or smugglers.

In the late 1970s, Mr. Sellers tuned into a shortwave frequency used for ship-to-shore communications and stumbled upon a search-and-rescue operation in progress in the Caribbean.

"A small boat had gone aground and was breaking up," Mr. Sellers says. "I heard the coast guard communications as they were trying to locate the ship."

Mr. Sellers wrote the coast guard and received a letter verifying his reception, along with a copy of the rescuers' communications logs.

"It's the fascination of hearing what goes on behind the scenes," he adds.

The unknown and unexpected hold great attraction for DXers.

Some have reported listening in on military aircraft carrying top-level officials. Others have tuned in to see how a major meteor shower might affect TV reception.

Unusual DX events are mostly unscheduled. One evening last fall, I took a friend to my favorite hill in rural York Region to introduce him to the hobby.

"I'll show you how easy it is to hear Detroit and Ottawa at the same time on a car FM radio," I said.

It was nearly 3 a.m., mild and slightly overcast.

The FM radio crackedled, and my jaw dropped as a station identified itself as KTMX-FM in York, Nebraska.

We had visited the hill on a whim. And we got lucky: Nebraska's KTMX turned out to be my personal distance record for a particular kind of FM signal propagation that can occur when warm air aloft mixes with cooler air at ground level.

After entering the details in my log book, I noticed my friend fast asleep and snoring in the back seat of the car.

I turned up the volume slightly, hoping he wouldn't wake up and ask me to take him home.

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