

Natural Radio

News, Comments and Letters About Natural Radio

August 2013

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Being July in Illinois, there have been scattered thunderstorms rolling through every few days and my wife, Natalie, and I were sitting on the front porch with a glass of wine watching one roll through several nights ago. It produced a continuous roll of thunder from above, but the sky to the south was blue with a few clouds and the sky to the north and northwest was bright and yellow from the setting sun, and the sky was fairly bright. I wondered what was going on, so I checked the weather radar on my Smartphone but the 3G connection and Wifi were down because the power had flickered earlier in the day and messed up the router. Being quite comfortable on the porch, I didn't feel like going down in the basement and rebooting the switch, so I sat there frustrated because I didn't have the instant access to weather radar that I was used to. (I later found out it was a small storm, directly overhead with mostly inter-cloud lightning. The base of the cloud was high, so the setting sunlight was shining in under the storm.)

Instant data and information access are a normal part of life for most of us and it's very disruptive to lose that, even for a short time. While information overload is a danger, being able to access a wealth of information and connect with people all over the world has been a good thing, especially for those of us interested in esoteric topics like Natural Radio.

My first inkling of Natural Radio came in the early 60's from a Carl & Jerry article in Popular Electronics where Jerry tries to build a whistler receiver with a large loop antenna and winds up hearing signals from someone's wireless magnetic headphones.

The magazine also had an article about building a whistler receiver and a brief description of what whistlers were. I don't think the power line hum problem was mentioned. But there was really no way to find out more or to connect with someone who had actually listened to whistlers.

The public library had Alfred Morgan's the Boy's First Book of Radio and Electronics and the Boy's Second Book of Radio and Electronics, a ten or fifteen year old copy of the Radio Amateur's Handbook, and maybe an old radio servicing book and not much else. Unless one had access to a university library, there wasn't much information to be had. If you did find a reference that you could ask a question of, you did it by writing a letter and then hoping and waiting for a reply.

Now the information access is instant, (depending on your searching skills), and discussion forums and email make it possible for people with similar interests to network.

So, here's some new connections. I'll publish the links mentioned in this article on the naturalradiolab.com website, so you can easily access them without having to do an excessive amount of typing.

This morning I received an email from a young audio producer in the UK, Patrick Sykes, about a radio program he had produced. Patrick is a freelance radio producer working mainly with Whistledown Productions in London. He had his first professional producer credit earlier this year on *The Reunion*, for Radio 4, and is currently working on *UK Confidential*.

Patrick's show is called "Sunsong" and features the voices and recordings of Dan Tapper, sound artist; Stephen McGreevy, VLF recordist; and Dr Simon Foster of the Imperial College in London; as well as Patrick's own recordings. He describes his project this way:

The skies are never silent. Invisible to the naked eye, VLF, or Very Low Frequency radio waves, are the sonic equivalent to the stunning visual aurorae that illuminate the planet's poles. Caused by the interaction of solar energy with the charged part of the Earth's atmosphere, they can only be made audible with special equipment.

This audio feature blends the sounds with the voices of those who work with VLF, from science to sound art, King's Cross to California.

This is a really nice production that really gives a good introduction to Natural Radio without being didactic in approach, and certainly would trigger ones curiosity about the phenomenon.

You can find the show at SoundCloud, with more information about Patrick and the production process. <https://soundcloud.com/patrickesykes/sunsong>

I think most readers are familiar with Stephen McGreevy's recordings which can be found at: www.auroralchorus.com

Dan Tapper, whose work was featured in the show, has his information available at: www.magneticsignals.tumblr.com There are photos of Dan's recording setup and some of his recordings also. Dan's free publication, *VLF: A Sound Artist's Guide* is also available at that address. This book is a manual for the budding VLF sound artist explaining how to listen, record and process Very Low Frequency Sound.

Dan also performed his VLF sound installation *A Machine To Listen To The Sky* at The American Museum in Britain, Bath, UK, on May 2nd, 2013. This public exhibit attracted many visitors and introduced them to the wonderful sounds of Natural Radio. Pictures are available on Dan's website.

So, here's a new generation of Natural Radio listeners presenting the art and science of whistlers, tweeks and sferics to the world using new mediums of communication and information dissemination that most of us never even thought of. Hats off to these guys. It makes me optimistic about the future and I wish I had half of their energy and enthusiasm.