



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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MUSIC IN THE AIR

Crystal sets were wildly popular at the dawn of the radio age, in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were a very simple form of radio receiver, which were eagerly built by aficionados with inexpensive parts: a wire antenna, a coil of copper wire, a capacitor, a crystal detector, and headphones. The most important component—the crystal detector—was a nugget of crystalline mineral such as galena, the natural form of lead sulphide. Crystal sets could receive amplitude modulated (AM) signals, and some could also tune in to shortwave bands if the signal was strong enough. But it usually wasn't, hence the headphones. The popularity of these ingenious devices waned significantly in about 1920 when amplifying receivers equipped with vacuum tubes were introduced and commercial radio took off in a big way.

But they never disappeared entirely, and are still enjoyed by hobbyists and used by the Boy Scouts to teach electronics. Like many of his contemporaries, my father made several crystal sets when he was a young man, and still had one of them, carefully packed in a small wooden case, when my brother and I were considered old enough to appreciate it. We had to share it, of course, so a strict schedule was created and overseen by the parental authorities. There was nothing more

exciting in my life at that time than getting into bed at night, pulling the covers over my head, putting on the headphones, and stroking the crystal with the “cat’s whisker” antenna, searching for radio stations that were playing music. There was a lot of static and crackling, and sound came and went in frustrating waves at times. But when a station came through clearly, and I could stop jiggling the wire, I would lie back, wrapped in my own little world, and listen to music. It was quite magical, and I often fell asleep with the headphones still clamped to my ears, the sounds mysteriously travelling to me through the air.

By this time, of course, my father had moved on to far more sophisticated equipment. His pride and joy in those days was a Garrard stereo set with a radio and gramophone housed in a polished wooden cabinet. Between the four of us we had a fairly large collection of vinyl 78s and LPs, and what with his classical pieces, my mother’s Frank Sinatra and Benny Goodman albums, and the rock & roll records my brother and I listened to, the house was always full of music. Inevitably, there were occasional conflicts over which music to play and, especially, how loud it could be played. But on the whole we all agreed (sometimes grudgingly) that individual tastes mattered and were to be



Crystal set photos





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respected. As a result I grew up listening to an eclectic range of styles and genres that did a lot to broaden and deepen my tastes in music.

My dad loved to talk about classical composers and their musical language, explaining that they used tonal textures, varying keys, and carefully orchestrated rhythms to communicate with our emotions as we sat in the living room listening to their work. My mother's reaction, on the other hand, was almost entirely physical; she felt music in her body and loved to express those feelings by dancing. She taught me how to dance, stressing that I should feel the music and respond with rhythmic movements that expressed, as gracefully as possible, whatever the music made me feel. In her opinion, fixed dance steps were for folk dancing. "Dancing to steps is like painting by numbers," she said. Her advice came just in time for my love affair with rock & roll, which was all about wild, uninhibited movement. Or so I thought.

We played lots of records at home, but we also listened to the radio. The Uruguayan government launched the country's AM classical radio station—El Sodre (Servicio Oficial de Difusión Radio Eléctrica)—in December 1929. It was an ambitious initiative whose stated mission was to broadcast "shows and programmes of

an artistic, scientific, educational, or entertaining nature that will improve the spiritual life of the inhabitants of the country." In time, El Sodre developed into an important cultural force, and in the 1950s and 1960s was a reliable source of classical music from all over the world. It goes without saying that it was my father's favourite station, and he used it to show us that classical music was not necessarily "boring and stuffy," as my brother and I described it. He explained that, as in every style, there are some pieces you like and some you don't. The more you listen, the more you learn what moves you one way or another, and bit by bit you refine your taste and find composers and compositions that you want to listen to all the time. "Like your Elvis records, and that Buddy Holly fellow," he said.

Broadcasting has come a long way since Heinrich Hertz demonstrated the existence of radio waves in 1888, and Guglielmo Marconi started working on a wireless telegraph system in 1894. Over the course of my lifetime I have listened to music on many different kinds of gadgets. As I write this, Pandora is playing on my computer. I didn't inherit my father's technical mind so I still understand as little about radio waves as I did when I was a little boy listening to a crystal set under my bedclothes. And I'm still marvelling at the magic of the music in the air.

Crystal set photo

