The arrival (finally) of Internet radio
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'Net gains: Radio future has arrived, in the form of Internet, or online, or Wi-Fi radio. For years, naysayers - many of them connected to commercial radio - swore that people wouldn't do their listening online. After all, it required being at their computers. And the first Internet stations were slapdash, basement-hobbyist or rabid-music-freaks' audio versions of blogging.

No more. Internet radio is not only on PCs (and there's nothing wrong with that); it's on cell phones and radiolike tuners (actually little computers that connect with networks). Compact portable models are being perfected, and Wi-Fi radio is on its way into automobiles.

On the programming side, virtually all commercial broadcasters, having come to their business senses, have online versions of their stations (albeit still saddled with long breaks for advertising and other messages).

The majors, including Clear Channel and CBS, offer virtual players and phone apps to guide listeners to any of their myriad stations. Meantime, services that let listeners create their own custom stations, like Pandora, Slacker, Last.fm, and Rhapsody, are everywhere, offering potent alternatives to mainstream radio.

For me, the real joy comes in being able to pull in virtually any station I've ever dreamt of being able to hear. "Morning Becomes Eclectic" on KCRW in Santa Monica; WWOZ, the legendary blues and gospel station out of New Orleans; K-Earth, an L.A. oldies outlet that stays true to the sound of "Boss Radio."

Closer to home, I can bypass the weak AM signals of KPIG and KFRC and find the oinkers and Scott Shannon's "True Oldies Channel" in digital audio. I don't have to drive to the North Bay to hear KRSH ("The Krush"). Flick the dial, and I'm tuned into the mellow WMVY, out of Martha's Vineyard. Another flick and I'm on an all-Beatles station - out of Russia!

The ability to pull in such stations is one reason radio has hit a turning point, says Bob Crane, who sells Wi-Fi radios, including one built by his own company, C. Crane, which is based in Fortuna, in Humboldt County. Internet radio gives people "access to the stations they've always wanted to listen to," he says. "Where we've seen the biggest impact is with people from overseas. When they get their hometown stations, they fall on the floor." Even though those stations have been available on their computers, says Crane, listening on a radio is different from computer speakers.

With a device like C. Crane's CC Wi-Fi Internet radio ($160), a listener has a tuner that can go into any room that's reached by Wi-Fi. It employs the Reciva Internet radio aggregator to access some 16,000
stations around the world. If that's not enough, one can also play any music that's stored in his or her computer.

The CC Wi-Fi is compact; the sound is OK, but even Crane admits that it's "just a good radio, a lower-cost entry level Wi-Fi radio that is simple to use." Fortunately, he also sells other models (along with a wide variety of other radios - AM/FM, shortwave, weather and even HD - and loads of electronic goodies) at www.ccrane.com. He raves about the $300 Squeezebox Boom from Logitech. It's twice as big, sounds at least twice as good, and even includes an alarm clock.

With high-end setups (like Sonos' multiroom system) priced at $1,000, Internet radio, like satellite radio, won't sweep the nation overnight. But C. Crane already offers one unit at under $100, and there are others to be found - online, of course.

'Band' leader: Dave Logan is back. He's the radio programmer who helped launch KFOG as a rock station in September 1982. He left in 1989 and programmed everything from XM satellite radio to Air America, along with rock stations in Chicago and New York. He returns to town after a year in Seattle at KBSG, an oldies station recently supplanted by an all-news format.

His gig: programming "The Band," the classic rock station that replaced smooth jazz KKSF at 103.7 FM in May. The owner, Clear Channel, is in financial disarray, and "The Band" began without live jocks, except for John Scott, PD of sister KKGN ("Green 960"), who's on weekend mornings. Other DJs emanate from other cities, prerecording their voice tracks. And the music is tres familiar: the Eagles, Doobie Brothers, the Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Journey, ZZ Top, Fleetwood Mac.

But, Logan says over lunch at Coco 500, everything's great. He wouldn't discuss Clear Channel's finances, but said he expects to be hiring more live, local DJs, beginning with a music director who'd also do an air shift. For now, he's fine with out-of-town DJs like Ron Michaels, Bryan Schock and Ginger. All stations, all formats, use voice-tracked, prerecorded personalities and programs, he noted.

The Band's talent are constantly updated on local news and events and sound like they're broadcasting from KKSF's Townsend Street studios. Noting the success of syndicated broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh, Logan said, "People are less concerned about where it comes from than what comes out of the speakers."

His current DJs may not take real-time phone calls, but, Logan says, "there is interactivity, and much of it comes the way people prefer to do it - online. I answer all the e-mails, so the communication with the PD is more direct than ever." Listeners write about the music, he says, which is familiar for good reason.

"There are two rock stations to either side of us. KFOG is very eclectic and female-friendly. The Bone (KSAN) is very hard rock, for young men. Our opportunity is this huge realm of music that's the mainstream rock of America, that's underserved by the other radio stations.

"People still love those bands," said Logan. "These bands and their songs are timeless, and endure."

The Music Woman: Elma Greer, the music librarian at KSFO (560 AM) during its glory years as "The World's Greatest Radio Station," from the late '50s into the '70s, died Aug. 23. At a station
dominated by outsized personalities, she kept the music - jazz, big band, vocalists - flowing. She won several "music director of the year" awards from industry publications.

Elma was known as "Legs" (station superstar Don Sherwood once said, "She has the greatest wheels I've ever seen"). Said DJ Carter B. Smith: "She was smart in just giving the talent the new material and had them decide what they would put on the air." "She was beautiful, witty and professional," said DJ Dan Sorkin. "She was a dream to work with," said Allan Newman, former KSFO PD. "She was one of the very best in her field, but most of all, she was just one hell of a great gal."

I'll second that emotion. I met her when I was an S.F. State student and got to take a turn as a DJ on the Sunday show "Records at Random." She treated us young intruders with utmost respect.

Years later, she served as country music editor at the radio trade publication, the Gavin Report. She retired in 1993, but returned to work less than a year later with Concord Records as artists relations coordinator until she retired again, in 1997. She was a member of the Broadcast Legends. {sbox}

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