

transmissions are the best ever heard. We do not believe there was ever a 'golden age of broadcasting' and suspect that fond memories rather than demonstrable proof form the core of this myth. (If you have both, it is possible to form a more balanced view!) This is not to diminish the inspiration and artistry, sometimes bordering on genius, of some pioneering BBC engineers, who worked with much cruder tools. There is less excuse for them to get it wrong these days, yet they frequently do! This is sometimes due to carelessness or incompetence, or plain bad judgment. What is more depressing is when it is "got wrong" as a matter of policy! This makes it impossible for any self-respecting audiophile to enjoy musical broadcasts during the daytime when 'Optimod' is in full swing. However, this is sonic bliss compared to what lies in wait for one further up the band: on most pop stations a combination of over-modulation and dynamic squashing can produce a muddled cacophony that, at the very least, mocks the high standards achieved by broadcasting authorities over the years. But... it may be argued that anyone owning a top-notch FM tuner playing through a high-resolution system is NOT likely to subject it to these sonic horrors except in error or in a wild scurry to the next station along the dial.

14) IS THERE ANY FUTURE FOR FM BROADCASTING?

Few facts are available and much speculation! The broadcast authorities would have us believe NOT. Investment in digital broadcasting has been substantial, and there is no turning back. If the system meets its specification in full, for those who have the need it should be possible to select a wide variety of distant stations with negligible distortion and background noise. Certainly there should be real gains for listeners in poor reception areas, but other 'gains' may be less tangible. Most committed Radiophiles complain more bitterly about transmission practices and quality rather than inherent limitations of analogue broadcasting or FM receivers. We quote the words of a former BBC engineer: "Cherish your well designed and proven analogue tuner. It may be years before you hear anything as good". (The same may be claimed for NICAM, another story of past excellence and unexplored potential in the wake of digital broadcasting).

There is also the intriguing 'conspiracy' theory. This alleges that engineers, sworn to silence, have been told to progressively limit and degrade analogue broadcast quality whilst at the same time giving every possible advantage to its digital counterpart as and when it is phased in. Thus the perceived 'sound improvement' will quickly spread amongst the general public making the digital option more desirable and bringing closer the day when the FM waveband will fall silent. Tut tut.....how absurd.

So what will happen when those transmitters are finally switched off? Is it really the scrap heap for all those hi-spec analogue tuners that have given so much pleasure over the years?

Well, we probably have ten years' grace anyway; this has been accepted privately, if not publicly, as a realistic hypothesis. But long before that there will be a glut of digital-to-RF converters. The real threat to analogue tuners, relegating them to museum pieces, is more likely to come when the asking price for a digital-to-RF converter is many times that of a cheap'n'cheerful digital tuner. But... perhaps by then there will be few of our generation around to care.

GOOD LISTENING! Steam radio still has a lot to offer.

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