

## **SHORTWAVE GREETINGS FROM AROUND THE WORLD FOR THE YEAR 2000**

by Dianne Ballon

*I always thought that recording shortwave broadcasts as the world turned into the New Year would make great radio, but who wants to forfeit a New Year's Eve celebration? It was easier to tune into London every year (7:00 PM Eastern Standard Time) to hear Big Ben ringing in the New Year and then go out. But with the turn of the Millennium, I could no longer ignore the thought.*

*When I finally decided to record shortwave broadcasts from around the world entering the year 2000, I knew it would be a huge undertaking. What I didn't know was that the old 1955 Zenith Trans-Oceanic shortwave radio my Dad gave me would be up to the task. I had an engineer check it out for safety reasons. He tweaked a few things and thought it should work okay but said I should always unplug it after use. The tubes get hot.*

*I ran that receiver for hours at a time, day after day, month after month, tuning well into the night up into the big day and evening. I remember feeling miserable at times because of the all the unknowns. It was December in Maine, and the storms could be fierce not only affecting the shortwave reception, but also cutting off electrical power. But there loomed a bigger problem, one that was being talked about around the world. Would Y2K shut down all the satellite and computer systems and cut off shortwave broadcasts completely? So I started recording broadcasts of countries preparing for the world coming to a halt-- just in case. I remember recording a somewhat dry report from Lithuania worrying about Y2K and Nova Scotia thinking out loud as to how it would plan for the possible shut down, something about ships docked in the harbor generating power.*

*The sky did not fall, and the broadcasts came through. What follows is an account of the work as it progressed. Here then is a description of the world coming through the airwaves...*

Today, with the click of a mouse, you can hear radio stations from around the world without interference. But there's something about turning a radio knob well into the night and hearing stations for the very first time from the other side of the world, with all the frequency squeals and interference, that led me to take on what would become an arduous project. While public television and Peter Jennings News Hour in the United States took advantage of the latest satellite technology to bring the New Year to the world, I monitored and recorded the new millennium from my farmhouse in Maine with my 1955 Zenith Trans-Oceanic shortwave radio.

I started in October of 1999. First I needed a schedule of transmission times from each country broadcasting to the United States in English, Eastern Standard Time. Ironically, I downloaded the transmission schedules from the Internet rather than waiting for the post. In fact, it pained me to see how easy it was to tune into broadcasts via the Internet compared to the laborious work ahead of me.

Dialing in a shortwave frequency digitally would have been so much easier, but I had no luck in finding someone who would lend me a digital shortwave receiver. I was left with my two analogue receivers. The 1955 Zenith was much more powerful than my SONY ICF 7601 portable. But the Zenith ran on tubes and no battery, so if Y2K zapped the power out on New Year's Eve, at least I had the SONY as a backup.

I worked the two simultaneously: noting rather unscientifically, where I found each station on the dial. For example: Japan @ SONY 6.10 "top" or Zenith @ 28.8. The Zenith had a handy ruler across the top of the set, so that when I located a frequency on a particular band, I could note roughly where the dial was located. But the ruler had no small increments. You'd be surprised how easy a station could be lost by moving the dial a 16th of an inch!

For better reception, we strung a 200 foot wire antennae from the barn to the house that came in through my window and could be clipped to either receiver. My database included the time and frequencies of each broadcast to North America (East) by country. I converted UTC to Eastern Standard Time, figured out time zones and figured out when each country celebrated its midnight. What I wanted was broadcasts of countries ringing in the New Year live, and countries wishing us a Happy New Year.

At first, I didn't think I was capable of receiving Australia. Australia broadcasts to Asia and the South Pacific Islands only. Then one evening as I was turning the dial, I caught a broadcast from Romania ending with: "We finish our transmission to Europe." If I could receive broadcasts beamed at Europe, I may be able to get Australia. I went back to Radio Australia's Website, took down the broadcast frequencies, and on December 10th, I got it! In fact, Australia came in so well, that as a safety measure, I tuned in each morning, noting, "Careful: the BBC next to Australia, on the right."

I recorded signatures or station IDs ahead of time, with the idea of using them in my piece. To those unfamiliar with shortwave, you may find the oddly distorted piano or tone melodies that repeat over and over, a curiosity. These occur at the beginning and end of a broadcast. This is followed by a musical version of the same melody and an announcer listing the station name. My favorite is Radio Prague, which uses the first few bars of Dvorak's "New World Symphony" and then repeats in several languages: "You're tuned to Radio Prague, the International Service of Czech Radio." Radio Austria uses "The Blue Danube," and Russia has a wonderful foreboding orchestral piece, and then a commanding voice stating: "This – is - Moscow."

As time drew nearer, I rehearsed tuning into each frequency at the designated times. It was during this time that I accidentally came across a station I was unable to receive ever since. I heard what I thought was music from either Radio China or Radio Taiwan, and decided to record it for ambiance. Then, came the announcer: "And wishing you a Happy New Year. And don't forget to tune into The Voice of Vietnam!"

Hearing the weather forecast from Belgium and Ireland caught my interest, so when New Year's arrived, I kept the recorder rolling during the weather. Here's what I got from Radio Netherlands: "The weather forecast for The Netherlands for this First Night calls for cloudy skies--- probably obscured by fireworks smoke..."

The airwaves were crowded on New Year's Eve! Stations that were received only days earlier like India, Finland and Turkey were nowhere to be found. Stations that usually came in loud and clear like Radio Netherlands or Radio Deutsche Welle came through with interference. On an average, I had to locate 3 countries at the top of each hour. Usually I tried the strongest signals first. Radio Slovakia International was one of my weaker stations, and it came through loud and clear with a wonderful New Year's greeting from Bratislava. The announcer even included greetings from his technician Stanoff, in wishing us a Happy New Year.

Then it was working round the clock to edit and produce the piece. Ironically, editing was far less laborious than having to locate all those shortwave broadcasts. My radio piece made it on the airwaves nationally.

After the luxury of cleaning up what amounted to 10 folders worth of notes, database printouts, and up to 100 sound files to backup, I sent for QSL cards (verifications from the stations I listened to).

And I did miss those broadcasts. In fact for months later I kept my dial tuned to a world music program from Radio Australia that could be heard on 9580 kHz between 8:00-10:00 AM EST. At around 9:30 AM, the signal starts to fade and then completely disappears--- which is for those of us who tune in, part of the lure of listening to shortwave.

Postscript: At the turn of the Millennium, I heard (appropriately) The Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra's performance of *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In 2008, Kol Israel ended its shortwave broadcasts (except for a broadcast in Persian to Iran) and can now be heard via the Internet only.