



Turn the radio up

Bowie museum has eyes and ears on the past

BY KRIS CORONADO

A flip of a switch. The turn of the dial. A downloadable podcast. These days, turning on a radio can be an afterthought. Brian Belanger remembers when times were different. “The stories that are behind the development of radio are really fascinating,” the 71-year-old says. “People don’t appreciate how we got from where it started [broadcast radio for entertainment purposes began in earnest in the 1920s] to where we are today.”

As curator of Bowie’s National Capital Radio & Television Museum (2608 Mitchellville Rd., 301-390-1020, www.radiohistory.org) since it opened in 1999, Belanger is trying to preserve that history, which includes such pieces as a 1977 radio shaped like a cheeseburger and a 1939 model that could print news reports. Although the two-story museum explores the evolution of both radio and television, its radio collection is particularly intriguing in this high-tech age.



Speakers such as the **1926 Enchanter** were made to stand out. “People who designed them tried to make them interesting,” with such designs as needlepoint and seascapes, Belanger says.

One of the early pieces to combine popular technologies is the **Air King Radio-Camera**.

Costing \$29.95 in 1948, the device was not a hit. “The camera was not a very good camera, and the radio was not a very good radio,” Belanger says.



Sold in 1924 for \$286, the **RCA Radiola AR-812** was portable. “The only problem was it’s so doggone heavy,” Belanger says. With two batteries, it would have weighed about 40 pounds, he estimates. Owners would also have to carry an accompanying speaker.



In the 1920s, radios weren’t cheap. Many families built their own, such as this **reproduction**. Wire was wound inside the oatmeal box; a sliding contact allowed for tuning. But you still needed earphones and antenna wire, Belanger says.



This **1939 Philco Radio Model 39-116** with “mystery control” was one of the first with a wireless remote, Belanger says. Using the phone-book-size remote control, listeners could select from eight stations they had programmed when they bought the radio.

The radio’s two **shortwave bands** enabled listeners to pick up local police reports and programs across the Atlantic, such as Radio Moscow or the BBC — a boon during wartime. “With war in Europe, a lot of families had relatives” there, Belanger says.

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