

Getting Wound Up Over World Band

The classic Goon Show BBC radio comedy series used to speak about good old steam radio as a contrast to more modern media. We may not have seen real steam radio yet, but the South African firm of BayGen (<http://www.freeplay.pair.com/>) has given us the next-best thing.

If you want to be in tune with the latest style in ecological awareness, or if you simply need a radio that won't let you down should your last batteries expire in the middle of the deepest jungle or after a California earthquake, the BayGen Freeplay radio may be the answer. You don't even have to raise steam by boiling a kettle: the secret is *clockwork*. When this receiver won't talk to you, just wind it up for 20 seconds, and stand back to hear a half-hour of radio pleasure.

Winding compresses a spring, which releases energy at a rate that is enough to drive the receiver for 35 to 40 minutes. British inventor Trevor Baylis thought up the design after considering how to spread radio into parts of Africa where repair facilities, electrical power supplies and money for batteries can't be found. The Freeplay is now in full production at a factory near Capetown, and some of the production output is being marketed actively in countries where buyers are unlikely to have any of these problems.

For example, Universal Radio and Hammacher-Schlemmer in the United States are offering it for under \$100—World Harvest Radio and others may follow suit shortly—and the price from European dealers and department stores is typically under \$130. These prices are high for the technology involved, but the factory is using the profits to subsidize low-priced distribution in the poorest areas of Africa, as well as to all kinds of community service organizations worldwide that apply and qualify.

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For your money, you get a three-band receiver (FM, mediumwave AM and world band: Model "A" 3.2-12.1 MHz/Model "B" 5.8-18 MHz) with the feel, sound, size and weight of something from the early 1960s. Although designed to be rugged, and subject to continuing improvement in this regard, the wind-up mechanism nonetheless has a limited life, and repair is not for the faint of heart. Yet, it should be robust enough to last many years of occasional use.

The Freeplay is no high-fidelity hit, certainly, but perfectly adequate for program listening, especially evenings, where stations are reasonably strong and adequately separated. No DX hot rod, either, though it can catch exotic distant stations when conditions are right.

Radios just don't come any more economical to run than this. For emergencies and survivalist situations, the BayGen Freeplay is, for now, the *ne plus ultra* in world band portables.



South African President Nelson Mandela examines the windup BayGen Freeplay radio with (hands clasped) BayGen CEO Rory Stear, inventor Trevor Baylis and Christopher Staines of Baylis Generators. The radio is made in South Africa by a workforce that includes numerous disabled employees.