

Radio's *Field Of Dreams!*

by Frank Foti,
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When was the last time you turned on the radio and heard something truly exciting? Think about it. I mean really think about it...Hmmm, it's not easy, is it? For me, it's probably during the last heyday of CHR, about 20 years ago, when Z-100 (WHTZ) made it's run in New York City.


Today, radio has become boring and mundane. Outside of a few unique exceptions, listening to the radio has lost its luster. That was one of the reasons I got into this business: the excitement that the medium brought to me. It was my "friend" when working around the house, or even as I worked at the station. It was a living, breathing entity that felt like a family member. Sadly, in my view, this family member now appears to be on life support. If something doesn't change soon, last rites may be in order.

Fortunately, pessimism has never been my strong suit. I've heard the future of FM Radio, and it's truly exciting! The amazing thing about this future is that it's not a new format, super-duper air talent, or amazing station slogans and promotions that have brought the excitement back. Surprisingly, it's technical! Multichannel surround sound in 5.1 glorious channels! For the past few decades, part of the appeal of FM radio has been its technical superiority. (Remember Steely Dan's "FM - no static at all...") The world moved on and FM remained the same. But now, for the first time since 1961, when FM went stereo, we have a new technology that will blow your socks off.

All of this is made possible by an ingenious development by the Fraunhofer Institute (FhG) and Agere Systems. Yes, these are the same FhG folks who created MP3 and MPEG AAC. And the Agere people are former Bell Labs audio coding researchers. I'll spare all the techno-babble, but this is the only surround system that will provide a full multichannel listening experience to FM radio listeners. This is accomplished using a technique called "coded-discrete surround" which prepares the audio for transmission over iBiquity's new digital HD Radio system.

Multichannel 5.1 surround creates an impressive "theater of the mind" – something you must hear to truly appreciate. Imagine turning your Production Director loose with the power of additional audio channels on station liners, sweeps, and promos. Hey, even your commercials will sound exciting! Just think about all the possibilities with that multi-person morning show. The use of surround channels offers endless creative-possibilities that will stimulate live on-the-air bits, and morning show routines.

And music...Have you heard any of the 5.1-channel DVD-Audio or SACD discs? Those *will* take your breath away! The re-release of many classic albums has brought listeners new appreciation and enjoyment by presenting them in an environment that actually draws you into the sonic experience. Steely Dan's *Gaucho*, Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," The Who's "Tommy," REM's "Automatic For The People," Roxy Music's "Avalon" and Fleetwood Mac's "Rumours" are a small sampling of discs that

A photograph of a baseball bat and a baseball on a grassy field. The bat is on the left, and the ball is in the middle. The background is a soft-focus green field.

will leave you not only wanting more, but making a trip to the local audio store to outfit your living room in 5.1. (Even the latest Britney Spears disc is incredible in surround.)

Getting this music on the air will make for exciting radio. Are you aware that it's not possible to buy a 2-channel stereo receiver anymore? If you don't believe me, walk into your local Best Buy or Circuit City and try to find one. All they'll have are stereo boom boxes, as everything else is multichannel. The surround audio that accompanies DVD movies and videos has conditioned early adopters to a multi-channel world, and this is rapidly spreading to the mass audience. How many times have you noticed the crawl that's posted at the beginning of primetime TV shows, or movies, that says "this program is broadcast in 5.1 Surround Sound?" And most video and computer games now offer surround sound as well.

Acura, Cadillac, Volvo, Mercedes, and Lincoln have already announced 5.1 surround with DVD-Audio/SACD players in their upscale 2005 models. As happened with FM Stereo, this will work its way down to all automobile models in a few years. The auto industry is going this way because the consumer wants it.

Thus, radio *must* move into the surround world, or it will get left behind, just as AM became a technical backwater once FM stereo was universally accepted in the late 1970's. All of radio is now at risk due to the advancement of surround technology, because consumers have more exciting alternatives to listen to — many involving surround sound. We must advance FM radio as well if we want it to remain interesting to consumers. Sure, program content needs to be compelling, but now we've got a technical reason to get excited about radio again, and it perhaps will also help to inspire new and compelling programming... as FM stereo did when it was a fresh technology.

If you're now convinced, you're probably wondering, "OK Foti, so what's next? When can I crank out this cool excitement that you've pontificated about?" For this to happen, only a few key people need to hear and act on this story: people at the record labels, radio executives, iBiquity Digital Corporation, and the receiver manufacturers.

"I've heard the future of FM Radio, and it's truly exciting!"

We need the record labels to provide the 5.1 content. This shouldn't be hard. There's already a lot of surround available, and with the incentive of radio's promotion, most new releases could be in surround format. The record labels win, as they would have a new revenue source from material they already have — the same as what happened when CDs came out. And the general excitement about a new recorded music format would draw people back to record shops. DVD Audio and SACD multichannel are ready for consumers now, but record companies need radio to help them promote these new disks. This is a no-brainer. As Nike would say, "Just Do It!"

Radio broadcasters need to perform two significant functions: Adopt this tech by installing it, and then promote the hell out of it! Remember how many station ID's

used to go something like “101, WMMS, FM-STEREO”? That was how radio subliminally conditioned us to “stereo.” Well, time to do that discipline again: “100.7, WMMS, FM-Surround.” Also, radio can easily tie in with audio stores to promote surround sound. Live remotes from audio outlets, radio give-aways, and advertising to help tell the story so that consumers will have a top-of-mind desire for digital surround radio .

(By the way: yes, your facility *will* need to be upgraded to surround. But in this digital world we live in, moving into 5.1 surround is not the challenge that FM faced when it rolled out stereo in 1961.)

The iBiquity Digital Corporation, the creator of the HD Radio system, needs to adopt a standardized surround transmission system. As I said, only one surround technology is capable of faithfully reproducing the sound field without degrading both the surround effect and the conventional stereo signal: The “coded discrete” system from FhG/Agere. Contact iBiquity and lobby them to select one single system, as this will hasten the acceptance of this exciting tech. There are other proposed methods out there and iBiquity has been reluctant to endorse a particular system out of risk of offending the others, but the fact is that ALL of them offer degrading performance to both the surround and stereo performance. So let’s get iBiquity off the fence to get this going and make sure we launch surround on FM with the best tech possible.

**“We have a chance
NOW to breathe
new life into our
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The last group of people we need to convince are the receiver manufacturers. If records and radio are on-board, then the receiver folks will follow. They stand to sell more speakers, amplifiers, and radios... a win all the way around for them.

The FhG/Agere system will appeal to the manufacturers because MPEG standardization means that the tech will be universally available to everyone at a reasonable cost. By contrast, the alternative methods are proprietary and thus worrisome for the manufacturers. One of the reasons MP3 has grown so fast is that it is an open standard available to all.

All this makes sense doesn’t it? So, are you with me? Just think: *we* can actually put life back into radio. Make it fun and exciting again! I’m hearing a line from that wonderful movie “Field of Dreams”: “If you build it, they will come.” We’re losing listeners to many alternatives, a trend that will continue if we don’t act. We have a chance NOW to breathe new life into our medium. I guess you can sense my excitement... so, what about you?

If you wish to share your views with me, or learn more about surround for FM, contact me at Telos/Omnia: (216) 241-3343, or email: frank@omniaaudio.com.



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