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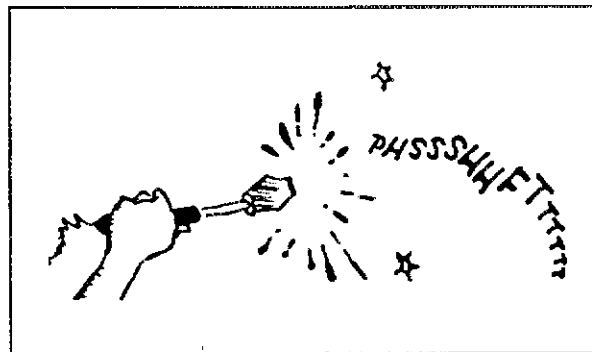


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# Solder to Talk

Imported radios? Single sideband?  
Solid-state rigs? Bah! Real hams  
don't even need a mike button!

By Eric P. Nichols KL7AJ  
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I sifted through the Saturday mail and found his QSL card. It was one of those photo QSLs that depict a ham shack in all its disarray (I never knew why any ham would want to make public his slovenly habits). Emblazoned in red ink under the call sign AL7LL was the signature, "Sam Kyriss, the Ham Virus." I vaguely remembered the QSO from many months before. I had run across a strong carrier on the 75-meter band and had thought that yet another broadcast station had encroached upon my precious band. Upon further investigation, however, I was amazed to find that the carrier was emanating from a legitimate Amateur Radio station. I had never used the AM position on my transceiver, but I thought I'd give it a try. I gave AL7LL a shout and he came right back.

"You gotta back down on that RF gain there, old man. Drop it down to a hundred mls or so."

*How in the world does that guy even know what rig I'm using, much less to tell me how much plate current I should be drawing?* I thought to myself. I was so taken aback that I immediately complied. AL7LL came back again.

"Now you're sounding almost like a real AM station, OM. Name here is Sam. Go ahead!"

We exchanged all the typical drivel, and then he proceeded with a dialog of High-Level AM and how modern "riceboxes" didn't cut the mustard in the real world. He gave a complete rundown of every defect each modern rig exhibited when it was used to try to "do AM." He had correctly identified make and model of my transceiver. Yes, the QSO was now clearly recalled. I flipped over the QSL card, and on the back was a friendly note with an invitation for me to visit his shack "to see how AM was supposed to be done." The address wasn't far away, and I had a few errands to do in that part of town anyway, so I had little to lose in dropping in on this unique personage.

## Flux, Fumes and Fustian

Shack was an apt term. Sam's place was a tiny, yellowish-gray clapboard affair, set back in a jungle of unmowed grass, booby trapped with old bicycles and lengths of hidden antenna wire. I knocked on the door and a big, bald, bearded head appeared. I handed the fellow his QSL card, and said that I was

taking him up on his offer. He looked at his card as if it were an invitation to an exclusive country club, and handed it back to me.

"Glad you could make it," he said, and he opened the door further to allow my entry. "The XYL is gone for the afternoon, or I misplaced her around here someplace."

Sam led me through the kitchen, where unwashed dishes were balanced in four-foot teetering columns. We exited the rear kitchen door and made our way across a concrete patio that looked as though it had been shelled with mortar fire; it was full of cracks and holes. I was struck dumb upon entering his garage. Around the entire perimeter was a continuous bench, covered with radio gear bearing names and model numbers I'd never heard of, none of which sounded even remotely Japanese. A high-pitched whistle emanated from three six-foot equipment racks in the center of the floor, reminiscent of a small gas turbine at idle. An odor that seemed to be a cross between BO and burnt insulation permeated the atmosphere of the garage.

One small area of the bench was oddly clear of rubble, starkly contrasting with the 50 or so linear feet of equipment-strewn plywood surface. In the center of the odd clearing, a hole was drilled through the countertop. Two No. 10 insulated wires protruded upward through the hole about 10 inches. Each wire was stripped about an inch from the end. To the left of the wires sat a three-pound coffee can filled to the brim with paste flux. To the right of the wires, in a crude homemade holder, rested a monstrous old-fashioned soldering iron, the business end of which weighed three pounds if it weighed an ounce.

"Let's make a contact!" Sam threatened. He made his way over to the bench where the soldering iron rested, donned insulated gloves, grabbed the iron and plunged it right up to the hilt in the can of flux. A veritable Vesuvius of acrid smoke belched out of the coffee can. Sam inhaled deeply and exclaimed, "Aaaahhhhh, the smell of radio!"

## The Big Broadcast

I watched in horror as he twisted the two wires together, and several loud "clacks" resounded from several locations around the garage. He then ceremoniously soldered the two wires together. The gas turbine sound now resembled an F-111A at takeoff. He ambled across the garage toward one of the

boat anchors, grabbed an ancient carbon mike and rapped it several times on the edge of the bench. He then proceeded to call CQ for 10 minutes straight, finally ending in his call sign. Then he walked over to the racks in the middle of the floor and warmed his hands in front of a couple of huge glass tubes whose plates were now orange with agony. He returned to the mystery wires and unsoldered them with the same flair, once again filling the air with loud "clacks." He sauntered to another location on the bench and tuned around on a receiver, listening for a response. Much to my amazement, a strong carrier appeared, and when Sam fine tuned to it, I heard what sounded like someone rapping a mike on the edge of a tabletop. The speaker came to life.

"AL7LL, this is KL7GKY. How are you doing, you old bag of BS?"

GKY continued with a 20-minute diatribe, dutifully pausing at the halfway mark for a station break, and then turned it over to Sam. The carrier from GKY's transmitter continued for the better part of a minute after he said "over," and I surmised that Jack was performing the same sort of ritual as Sam had done. Sam plunged the iron into the flux once more, and replenished the cloud of flux fumes that hung in the atmosphere like a smoggy day in Burbank. He resoldered the wires together, and began another "transmission," which could be more aptly described as a broadcast. The garage was now uncomfortably warm and I noticed that the plates of the tubes in the "afterburner" were now glowing just short of the color blue.

After a few of these interminable exchanges, Sam asked if I'd like to operate some. He handed me his weapon with a vaguely sinister chuckle and said, "The first one is always free!" Trembling, I took hold of the iron, twisted the wires together with a gloved hand, plunged the iron into the can of flux, and watched as the plume of smoke arose to the ceiling of the garage. Sam was rubbing his hands together gleefully as I inhaled deeply. "Aaaahhhh, the smell of radio!"

*The author is indebted to Sam Kyriss, AL7LL, currently living in Texas, his real-life Elmer, who taught him much about old-time Amateur Radio and mobile HF operating. Sam helped in the preparation of this story and continues to inspire younger hams.*

QST