

I have received several inquiries on this, so here's the scoop. I am no expert, but do have some experience.

Car radios always have been, and still are, an excellent way for the cost conscious beginning DXer to break into the hobby. Many times, they can be had for little or nothing. But, the questions arise: which one's the best? What antenna should I use? I will attempt to answer these.

CAR RADIO SPECIES SINCE 1950:

6 volt vibrator (1950 - 1954-55) 12 volt vibrator (1955 - 57-58)
12 volt hybrid (tubes/transistors: 1957 - 1962-63)

Generally, these are best avoided. They are old, bulky, and are likely to have failing or bad parts, such as capacitors. All of them need several amps of DC to operate. If you must, Delcos (GM) were far and away the best, though most any radio from one of the "Big 3" automakers during this period will give good performance.

12 volt all transistor, analog dial (1962 - present)

This era can be broken down thusly: In 1962, the first all transistor models appeared in GM and Ford cars. The GMs were excellent: the Fords horrible. Beginning in 1968, Ford came out with a much improved radio, equalling the GMs in performance. Chrysler radios remained nothing special. During the 70s, the quality of GM radios went down. Ford now had the best. This remained true into the 80s, until the advent of digital auto radios.

12 volt digital radios: I have little experience with these. The first Chrysler model, used for several years from 83 or so on, was excellent. The GM models are well reported on. I know nothing about the Ford AM-FM but I once drove an '88 Ford van with an AM only digital, and it was poor. Digital car radios are horrific radiators of display noise. In the intended installation, the car body isolates the antenna from the noise. For this reason alone, I would avoid them, unless the antenna can be suitably isolated or shielded from the racket. Of course, the readout is their biggest advantage.

In all cases, I am referring to AM only radios. In AM-FM units, the AM circuitry was usually pared, to make room for the FM, except in digital sets, which are IC and PLL in nature. Digital AM-FMs perform well.

PICKS: 1960s - Get a Delco. Avoid AM-FM and station seeking. Avoid sets that were designed to mount as an integral part of the dash (no face.)

1970s-80s (analog) Get a Ford. Avoid AM-FM, cassette. Look for "Philco" or "Ford" on the faceplate. Manufacturers to look for are "Philco-Ford" and "Ford Aeroneutronic." Avoid "Audiovox" and any others.

Digital - Chrysler and GM units should be fine. I have no experience with Ford, other than that related above. Test one out to see.

AFTERMARKET SETS: I have no experience with any of these.

ANTENNAS: Use an unamplified, tuned loop, or a passive or active whip. Car radios have lots of RF amplification: too much gain, or longwires will overload them. A directly coupled air core loop is preferred here.

POWER: For any solid state radio, a 12 volt supply in the range of 500 mA will be sufficient (without the dial light.) Using the light will require more. Or, replace the dial light with a 1.5 volt grain of wheat bulb, and use a 62 ohm resistor to step down the voltage. Supplies in this range are plentiful.

Modifications are not advised. Filters for 262 kHz are non existent, and crystals on that freq (for a crystal or lattice filter) are rare & expensive. The whole idea of using the car radio was to save money.

After a while, the car radio DXer will want a better receiver. Auto radios are a temporary solution, at best. Yet, much good work can be done with them, with little outlay of capital, while the DXer saves for that dream receiver he wants.