

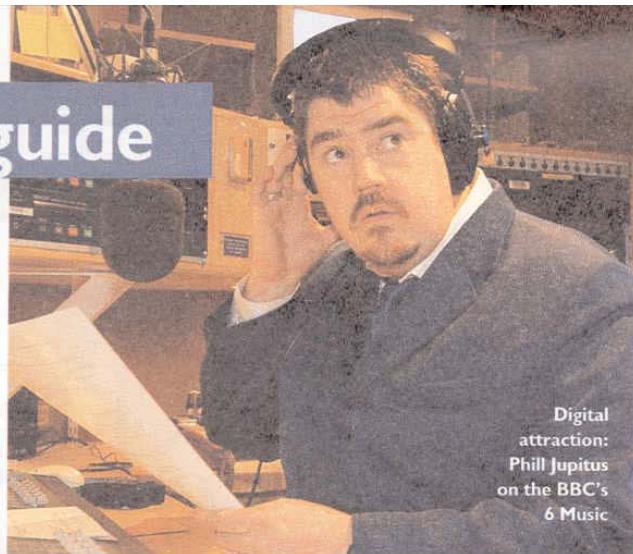
Buyer's guide

Radio stars

If you want the best possible sound, should you go digital or stick with an FM tuner?

Hailed as the future of broadcasting, digital radio, or DAB (digital audio broadcasting), offers listeners more variety than ever. There are a dozen new national stations, and Londoners can choose from 45, targeted at specialist audiences such as Asian communities, classic-rock enthusiasts and the Saga generation. With the Radio Authority awarding digital licences at the rate of one a month, the range of interests catered for will only increase.

However, the main selling point of digital —



Digital attraction: Phill Jupitus on the BBC's 6 Music

crystal-clear, interference-free reception — is not yet a reality, because of the type of digital processing feeding the tuners and the audio compression that is applied by broadcasters.

Currently, a top-notch FM radio offers superior sound quality, provided your aerial is up to it (and this means external, not fixing wire to your wall with Blu-Tack). Hi-Fi Choice has tested six new tuners to compare digital performance with FM; here are three to suit different tastes.

CLEAR WINNER

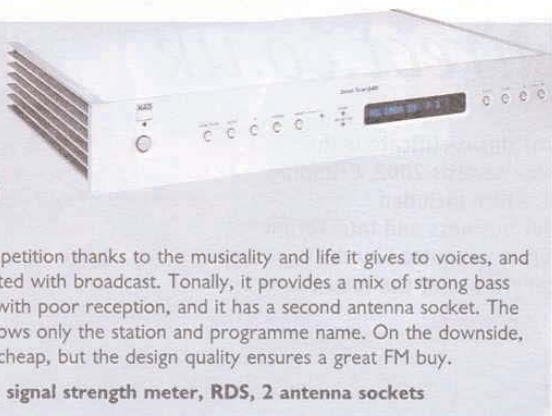
NAD S400 FM

£600; call 01908 319360 for stockists

***** A beautifully made machine with performance that maximises the potential of FM broadcasting

The S400 manages to stay ahead of the competition thanks to the musicality and life it gives to voices, and it works hard to reduce the sibilance associated with broadcast. Tonally, it provides a mix of strong bass and light treble. There are features to cope with poor reception, and it has a second antenna socket. The box displays radio station data (RDS), but shows only the station and programme name. On the downside, programming presets can be fiddly. It is not cheap, but the design quality ensures a great FM buy.

Specifications: remote control, 30 presets, signal strength meter, RDS, 2 antenna sockets



ROCK STAR

NAIM NAT 05 FM

£745; call 01722 332266 for local stockists

**** Sound is everything and frills are irrelevant in this FM tuner for music buffs

The Naim is no all-rounder, but it has qualities that mark it out for the dedicated foot-tapper. With a poor radio signal, noise is higher than ideal, although the tuner comes with a flyer advertising the famous external "Galaxie" aerial from Ron Smith. However, this box is happy with jazz and rock, delivering bass with aplomb, and so the lack of detail is less of an issue and long-term listening becomes fun.

Specifications: remote control, 99 presets



DIGITAL DREAM

PURE DRX-601ESM DAB

£329.99 from www.videologic.com

***** Low-cost, with no frills, this makes an excellent introduction to digital listening

There is little to choose between this and more expensive DAB tuners, although the sensitive listener will discern a slight roughness to the sound. The LCD display on the front also looks basic, but is legible if viewed square on. The sound quality is dominated by the grandly titled "Psycho-Acoustic Compensation" — a filter that reduces unnecessary treble from the mix.

Specifications: remote control, dynamic range control, signal strength meter



Reviews adapted from the August issue of Hi-Fi Choice. Summer issue on sale now. Maximum rating ***** All prices include Vat

This virtual

Danny O'Brien

Missing links

I am about to give an explanation of a piece of insanity. If this was the web, I could link to a better, longer discussion, then get on with the nitty-gritty of whingeing.

Hyperlinks are the lifelines of the internet, joining together topics and people thousands of miles apart. Search engines monitor these links to estimate the importance of websites: the more that link to a site, the more visitors it receives; and the more people that follow links to the site, the higher a search engine places the site in its esteem (and its search listings). Every blue underlined word that points to a website creates another opportunity for a visitor to stumble in.

Tell that to the radio station NPR (National Public Radio), America's attempt at Radio 4. NPR shows are gentle, unassuming affairs filled with liberal Ivy League graduates who can't quite believe that there are no adverts.

The programmes mainly consist of people asking rhetorical questions ("Should we go to war? Are we at war already? What is war?"), which then cut to improvised jazz solos. It's all very endearing, and nice to have in the background when you're loading the dishwasher.

NPR's website, however, is another matter. This seems to be run by paranoid lawyers, because the site forbids anyone on the web to link to any part of it without prior agreement. Do so and they will sue, they say. According to the station's ombudsman, NPR is worried about being "exploited" by commercial operations.

The insanity here is twofold. First, linking is good for a site.