

Radio ahead



Keen to upgrade the antediluvian sound system in his 911 Carrera 4, associate editor Philip Raby fitted a state-of-the-art Blaupunkt digital head unit. Photographs by Michael Whitestone

It was tough being a teenager in the 1980s. You had to listen to the right music. You could either be cool and into new wave, or exceedingly uncool and chill out to prog rock (for want of a better term).

Me? Well, being awkward, I sat on the fence and was into both, with LPs (remember them?) from the likes of Joy Division and The Psychedelic Furs alongside offerings from Pink Floyd and (I really do hate to admit this) Genesis.

I was always keen to discover new sounds,

though, and my collection expanded to include artists as diverse as John Martyn, The Grateful Dead and The Pogues. I'm just as bad today, and the latest additions to my CD collection include Rufus Wainwright (Loudon's son) and Moby. And then there's blues, jazz, and even classical...

So why am I confessing to be a musical snob? Well, the problem is that I also enjoy discovering new music, and – in theory, at least – one of the best ways of doing this is by listening to the radio. But until recently there hasn't been a UK station that caters for

we 30-somethings who, like me, have what I like to think is discerning taste.

Commercial radio is completely out of the question as far as I'm concerned because of the incessant advertisements and unimaginative playlists. So that leaves the BBC. Both Radios 1 and 2 have excellent evening broadcasts, but during the day Radio 1 suffers from bland music and presenters young enough to be my children, while Radio 2 has, er, bland music and presenters old enough to be my grandparents.

In both cases said presenters tend to be more interested in their own inane chatter than the music they're playing (*A bit like some of we scribblers, then... – Ed*). And since most of my radio listening is done when I'm in the car during the day, I've been very frustrated.

And then I heard about the BBC's 6 Music, a new station that caters for, well, people just like me. It plays a wide variety of both old and



New head unit fitted straight into the existing dashboard slot; a good reason for choosing another Blaupunkt unit

new music. As I'm writing this, for instance, it's just featured Coldplay, Echo and the Bunnymen and The Beach Boys; an eclectic mix if ever I heard one, and right up my street. Presenters include Jools Holland, Suggs, Bob Harris, Tom Robinson and Janice Long, all likeable people who take their music seriously.

I first sampled 6 Music over the Internet (www.bbc.co.uk/6music), but to listen to it in the car requires a special type of receiver. Why? Because the station is broadcast digitally using the new DAB (digital audio broadcasting) standard of which the BBC is a thoroughly enthusiastic proponent.

Conventional analogue FM stations broadcast on different frequencies, which is why you have to tune in to each one individually. With DAB, on the other hand, a number of stations are broadcast on the same frequency (within the range 215–230Mhz).

This has the potential to free up valuable

airwaves (the UK government wants to discontinue analogue radio and television broadcasts in the future), while at the same time allowing many more stations to be broadcast. The BBC, for instance, currently has nine national DAB stations, compared with just four on FM.

Other advantages are that you don't have to retune your car radio as you drive around the country (although, to be fair, RDS looks after this for you when using FM). Text can be broadcast alongside the audio (telling you about the music being played, for instance), and there's even the potential to display still pictures on suitably equipped receivers. What's more, just like FM, DAB can interrupt a programme with traffic reports.

Finally, the digital signal offers what is described as 'consistently good sound'. It's not affected by atmospheric conditions or electrical interference, in other words. As with a GSM phone, basically, you either receive the signal or you don't. More about this later, however.

It all sounded good, or at least I thought so, which is why I went in search of a DAB receiver for my 911 Carrera 4, which still had the now antique Blaupunkt Bremen SQR46 dating from 1989. My requirements were for a single-disc CD player and a unit that visually suited the 911 dash, which meant black rather than the now fashionable silver, and not too many bells and whistles.

My search trawled up the recently introduced Blaupunkt Woodstock DAB52, which costs £399 including VAT. This has a built-in DAB receiver (some earlier systems relied on a remote box) plus FM and AM (the latter I never use), a CD player (which plays both conventional discs and MP3-formatted CD-ROMS), a slot that accepts multi-media cards containing MP3 tracks, and not least a removable fascia for security purposes. I was also attracted by the fact that the unit is the same make as the original factory-supplied system, and is predominantly black.

I was also pleased to find that Blaupunkt still uses the same mounting system for its head units. Using the two wire 'keys' supplied I removed the old unit and unplugged it. The speaker leads had old-fashioned two-pin DIN plugs, which I was reluctant to cut in case I ever wanted to replace the original radio, so I went along to my local Halfords superstore for a suitable adaptor.

Not surprisingly, Porsche 911s weren't listed in his catalogue (*I really can't see why – Ed*), but the assistant took one look at the old Blaupunkt connectors, pronounced them to be identical to those in 'old Fords', and sold me an adaptor for £9.99. Thus equipped I was able to connect the Woodstock to the car's existing wires and then slide the unit back into the fascia. It looked perfect.

That was the easy part; now for the aerial.

The 911, as you probably know, has as standard a windscreen-mounted antenna for conventional (FM and AM) radio signals, but a special aerial is required for DAB.

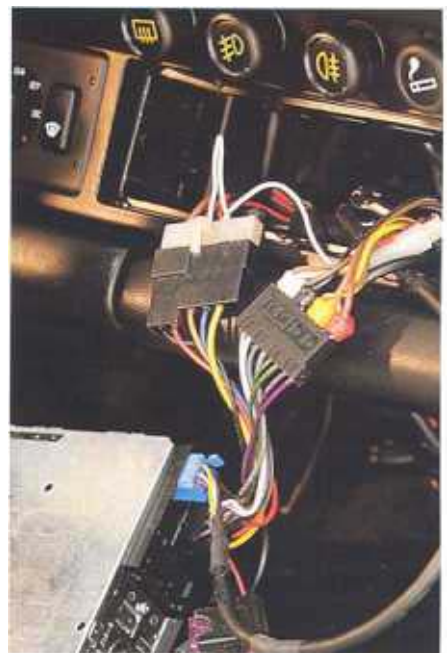
Blaupunkt offers either a glass-mounted item for the rear window, or else a roof-mounted unit which requires a hole to be cut in the bodywork. Normally I'd have shied away from the latter, but it so happens that my car had an old-style roof-mounted telephone aerial, which has long been redundant. Great, I thought; I'll just replace that with the DAB aerial.

If only it had been that easy. There's a zip in the headlining that reveals the mechanism for the sunroof. But the aerial was positioned just above the (welded-in) bracket for the sunroof motor, and there was only about an inch between that and the roof itself; not much room to get in with a spanner.

After much fiddling and not a little cursing I managed to get the new antenna into place, and then turned my attention to the cable run. I found that there were two cables running from the old phone aerial. I can only assume that for some reason a new one had to be installed at some point.

One ran forward along the edge of the roof and down the 'A'-pillar, but there was no way I could use this route without removing the headlining – a thankless job by all accounts – so I turned my attention to the second cable. This ran down the 'C'-pillar, under the trim below the rear side window, down the inside of the 'B'-pillar, under the carpet alongside the sill, and then up behind the dashboard.

Half an hour spent removing and replacing trim (all of which is secured by good, old-fashioned screws, not those horrible plastic



A low-cost adaptor was required to link the existing speaker and power cables to the new Blaupunkt head unit



New Blaupunkt Woodstock DAB52 (above) fits in well with the 911 dashboard. Original unit (right) was also made by Blaupunkt, but technology has moved on in the last 13 years

Leading the way

The UK – and particularly the BBC – is arguably the world leader in DAB, but the rest of Europe is also implementing the technology, as is Canada. So-called pre-operational services are being broadcast in Australia and South Africa, with much of the rest of the world taking ‘an advanced interest’.

The noticeable exception is the poor old USA, which (surprise, surprise; most of you guys don't even have cellphones that are compatible with the rest of us) has no plans to adopt the worldwide DAB standard, although unsuccessful experiments have been made to broadcast digital signals over the existing FM frequencies.

For up to date information on your country go to www.worlddab.org. ■



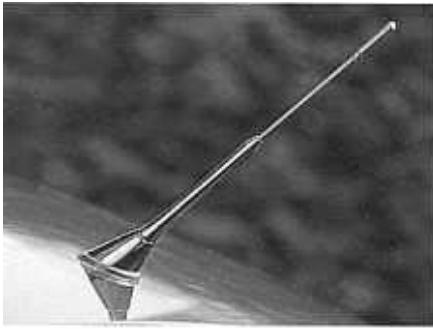
clips you find in more modern cars) was all that was needed to run the new cable to the head unit. And then for the moment of truth; my first experience of DAB.

Finding a station is simple. The receiver searches for what are known as ensembles; groups of stations, basically. The BBC has its own ensemble for national stations; independent stations have another. Once you're locked on to an ensemble you can flick through the various stations within it. As with a conventional radio you can store your favourite stations using the preset buttons.

But I was disappointed by the sound quality. I'd assumed that the car's standard speakers wouldn't be much good, and had planned

to upgrade them in the future, but they sounded so bad that I investigated further immediately. And the problem was obvious as soon as I'd removed the grilles from the door speakers. The cones had disintegrated, due no doubt to the combined effects of age and dampness within the door. There was no alternative but to fit new ones.

Once again I was keen to find units that looked 'right' in the car, so I opted for Infinity Reference Series 552i units at £59.95 a pair. These fitted straight in without me having to modify the door panels and, not surprisingly, made a remarkable difference to sound quality. OK, so it's not up to domestic hi-fi standards, but I have my home system



Roof-mounted DAB aerial (above) fitted through hole left by an old mobile-phone aerial. An alternative is a glass-mounted antenna that would fit on the rear window

for that. At some stage I'll replace the rear speakers, too, and perhaps add a power amplifier, but for the time being I'm quite happy with the set-up as it is.

Despite a woefully inadequate instruction book the Woodstock is very simple to use, and there are a number of controls for customising it to your personal requirements. The first thing I did was turn off the so-called spectrometer – a level meter on the display – which was just too much like something out of *Star Trek* for my taste.

There's also the option of turning off the scrolling text which DAB stations broadcast. I'm undecided on this. You could argue that it's an unwelcome distraction for the driver, but the location of the radio in a 911 is such that you can't see it without making a conscience effort, anyway, and when I'm stuck in traffic it helps keep boredom at bay.



The original door-mounted loudspeakers had clearly seen better days!

DAB reception is excellent in central England (where I live) and the south-east, but is still patchy around the south. When the signal starts to go the sound can break up slightly, despite the BBC's claims to the contrary. If you have a digital television you'll be familiar with the pixelation that occurs when the signal drops. Imagine an audio version of that and you'll understand what it sounds like.

I certainly get a lot of pleasure from 6 Music, although I suspect I'll end up buying yet more CDs as a result of being exposed to all this new music. There are other digital stations, such as Virgin (the world's most listened-to Internet station, would you

believe?), and Planet Rock, which I must confess I switch to on the odd occasion when I feel like listening to some heavy rock.

I'm not a sports fan myself, but if you are then digital offers Radio 5 Live (which otherwise you'll find only on AM) and Talksport. There's also 1Xtra, which the BBC controversially launched as a black-music station, and you can use DAB to listen to Radios 1, 2, 3 and 4, BBC World Service, ITN News, Bloomberg financial news, PrimeTime (easy listening for the Saga generation) and many, many more both national and local stations of various types. In fact, there really is something for all tastes; even mine! ■

CD alternative saves space

Fitting a CD multi-changer in a 911 means sacrificing valuable luggage space, so instead I chose a Blaupunkt Compact Drive MP3. This accepts an IBM Microdrive, which is a tiny 1Gb hard disk on

which can be stored the equivalent of around 15 music CDs. It fits in the glovebox, and is controlled from the head unit in precisely the same way as a multi-changer.

The Compact Drive comes complete with

one Microdrive disc and a reader which plugs into your computer's USB port. As is often the case these days the software supplied was for Windows only, but my OS X-equipped Mac recognised the drive and I was soon copying MP3 tracks onto it.

Compact Drive MP3 costs £499. For more information on both this and the Blaupunkt Woodstock DAB52 call 01895 838880, or go to www.blaupunkt.com. ■

