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Author: Mark Spencer, WA8SME

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Build a Homebrew Radio Telescope

Explore the basics of radio astronomy with this easy to construct telescope.

Mark Spencer, WA8SME

There are many ham radio related activities that provide a rich opportunity to explore and learn more about the science of radio. One of those opportunities is radio astronomy.

All matter emits radio frequency (RF) energy dependent on the temperature and makeup of the matter, including the matter in space. The foundation of radio astronomy is to study the heavens by collecting and analyzing the RF energy that is emitted by bodies in space, very much as optical astronomers use light energy collected by telescopes. It sounds complicated. While professionals use very sophisticated and expensive equipment, you can, with some simple equipment and a little investment, build a radio telescope that will allow you to learn and explore the fundamentals of radio astronomy.

A Homemade Radio Telescope

In this article, I will build on an existing design of a radio telescope made from one of those ubiquitous TV dish antennas that you see around your neighborhood. The radio telescope (RT) project described here can easily be reproduced. Although this is not a fully capable RT, it can provide a wonderful learning opportunity for you, or perhaps students in your local school.

Figure 1 shows the radio telescope set up. The major components include a modified TV dish antenna mounted on a wooden support structure to allow pointing the antenna, a commercial satellite signal strength detector that displays the signal strength of signals collected by the dish on a meter and an interface that converts the signal strength into a amplitude modulated tone. The tone is fed into a computer sound card and finally a computer and software graphically displays the signal strength as a function of time.

The TV dish modifications are structural, and any available TV dish system can be used. The signal strength detector costs between \$40 and \$65 and is widely available from Web retailers. The interface circuit, which will be described shortly, is easily duplicated and costs approximately \$20. Finally, the display software is free.

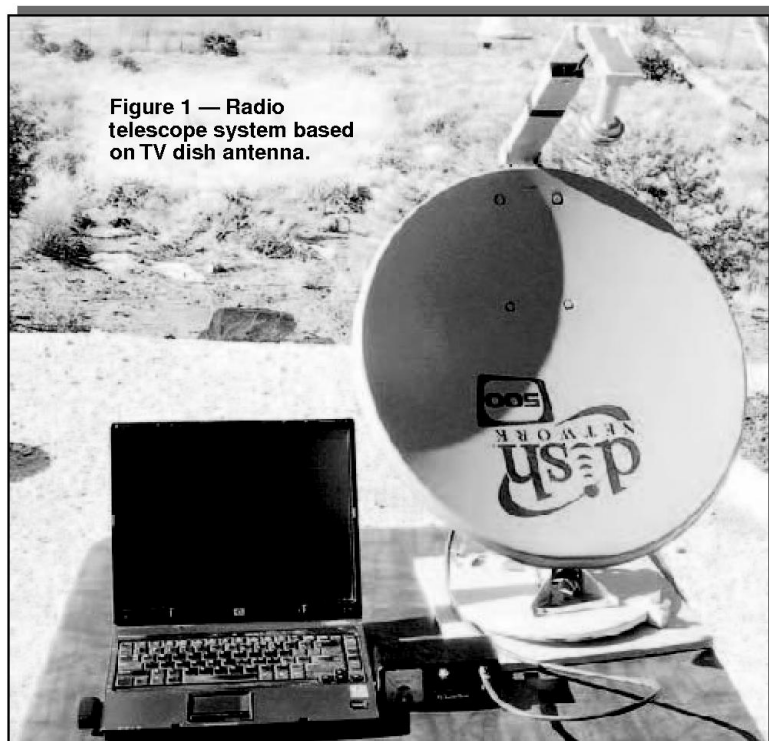


Figure 1 — Radio telescope system based on TV dish antenna.

Figure 2 — Dual LNB mount. Note two coax connectors.



Figure 3 — Homemade plastic single LNB mounting bracket.

What it Can Do

The following is just a sample of what you can do with this simple RT:

- Use the sun to study and determine the beamwidth of the dish and verify the mathematic formula that is used to predict dish antenna performance.

- Measure the radiation intensity of the Sun and perhaps detect changes in solar activity.
- Measure the relative changes in the surface temperature of the moon.
- Learn about and explore a common radio astronomy collection technique called the *drift scan*.



Figure 4 — Dual coax connector configured LNB. Terminate one connector with a dummy load.

- Explore the fundamental principle of energy emission as a function of temperature by detecting the relative differences between the temperatures of emitting bodies.
- Detect satellites parked along the Clarke Belt in geosynchronous orbit and illustrate how crowded space has become.



Figure 5 — CM satellite signal strength meter.

- Detect the Earth's rotation around the Sun and the Earth's spin on its axis by comparing daily drift scans of the horizon.

Antenna Subsystem

The basic RT system is based on the "Itty-Bitty" design that is described in two Web pages.^{1,2} The TV dish is an offset 18 inch dish that has down converter(s) mounted at the focal point of the dish. The down converter is called a low noise block (LNB). The LNB is a preamplifier/down converter that converts the satellite signals from around 12 GHz down to around 2.4 GHz. Most modern dishes have two or more LNBs to access more than one TV satellite at a time without changing the pointing of the dish

¹Notes appear on page 45.

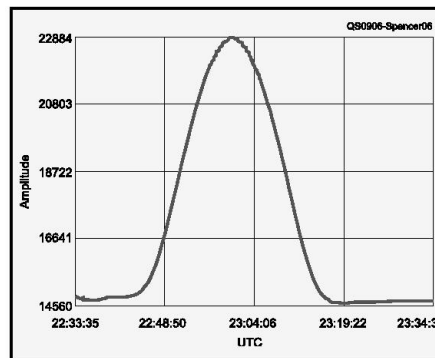


Figure 6 — SkyPipe screen showing antenna response.

(Figure 2). The LNBs are mounted to share the focal point of the dish. Since only one LNB is required for the RT, I made a minor adjustment to the published Itty-Bitty design to position the single LNB at the dish focal point. Mounting the single LNB at the focal point really helps in pointing the antenna.

I used the existing LNB housing and mounting bracket as a template to determine the distance between the edge of the mounting arm to the mounting hole of the LNB. I then used a piece of plastic to fabricate a new mounting bracket for the LNB as shown

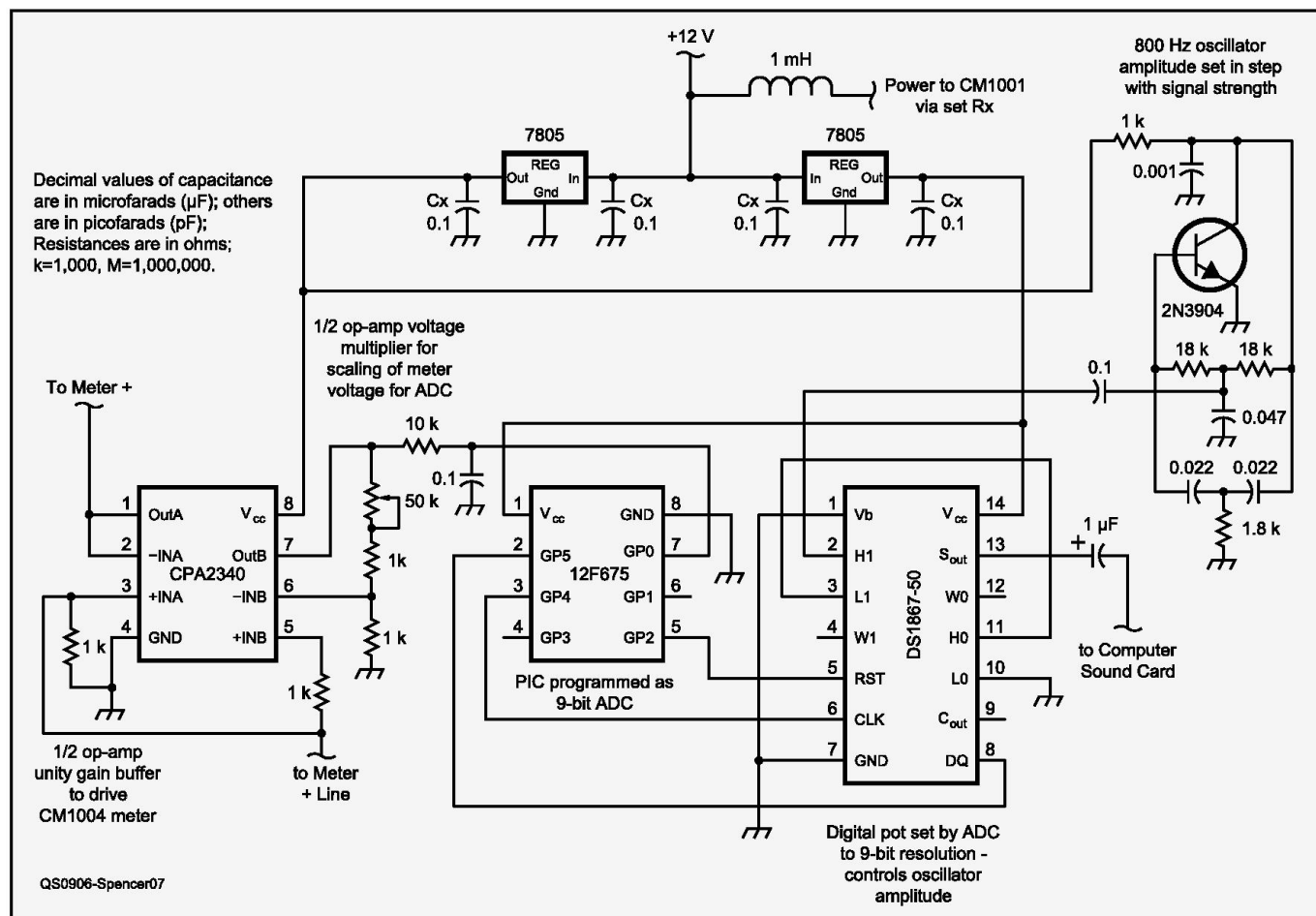


Figure 7 — RT Interface circuit diagram.

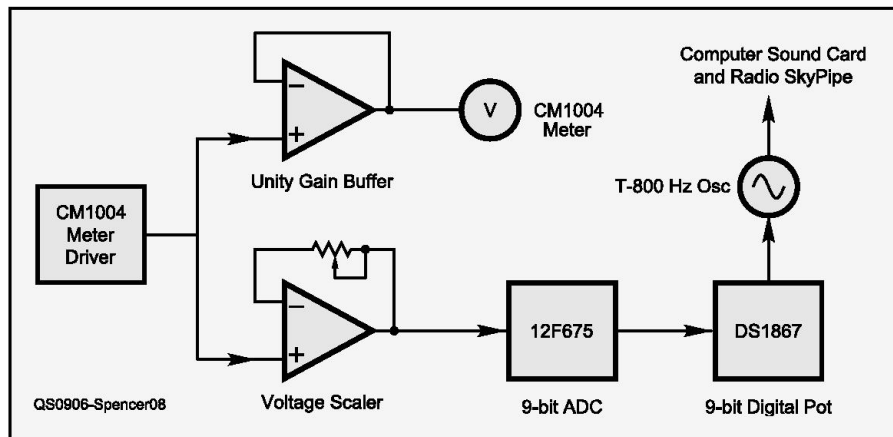


Figure 8 — RT Interface block diagram.

in Figure 3. The dimensions are not super critical, but careful placement certainly will improve the RT performance.

Some LNBs have two coax connectors. Only one will be used in the RT (Figure 4). It is a good idea to terminate the extra coax connector with a 75 Ω dummy load plug to balance the load on the LNB. The dummy loads for F type TV coax connectors are readily available from electronic parts retailers.

Note that the dish is mounted upside down. Though this orientation is not ideal for receiving satellite signals, this arrangement helps with pointing the dish in its radio telescope role.

Satellite Detector

The detector used in this project is the Channel Master (CM) satellite signal level meter model 1004IFD (Figure 5).³ The CM is connected to the LNB. Power is supplied to the LNB through the coax connection from the CM. The CM detects the signal coming from the LNB and gives a meter indication of the signal strength and also varies the frequency of an audio tone to help technicians point the dish at the desired satellite. As you move the dish through the beam coming from the satellite, the meter indication will increase and then decrease coincident with the pitch of the audio tone.

The Itty-Bitty plans detail how to connect power to the CM and in turn connect power to the LNB (this power connection is handled by the interface in this project). Though somewhat effective, the CM meter and variable frequency tone indications provide limited utility in detecting changes in signal strengths required for radio astronomy.

Display

To really study the signals received by the RT, you will need to see them displayed graphically on a strip chart. There is an excellent software package called *Radio-*

SkyPipe that is posted on radio astronomy Web sites.⁴ The free version of this software is a good place to start. *SkyPipe* uses the computer sound card to measure the incoming signal strength and graphically displays the signal strength as a function of time. Figure 6 is illustrative of a signals detected by the RT. *SkyPipe* is very easy to use but some study of the HELP files will make it easier for you to fully tap into the capabilities of this software.

SkyPipe requires audio signals to be fed into the sound card MICROPHONE jack. The output of the CM detector is either an analog meter reading or a frequency modulated (constant amplitude) tone that is not really compatible with *SkyPipe*. An interface is required.

Interface

What is required to make the CM output work with *SkyPipe* and a sound card is to convert the signal level into an amplitude varying audio tone. The interface designed to do this is shown in Figure 7 and as a block diagram in Figure 8. Refer to the block diagram during the description of the interface function.

The unity-gain op-amp is used as a buffer between the CM meter driver circuit and the analog meter. The other op-amp is used as a voltage multiplier to scale the CM meter driver output voltage to match the 5 V reference voltage of the following analog

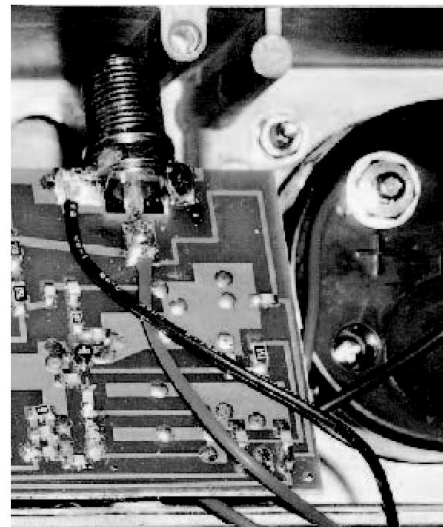


Figure 9 — Power and ground connection to CM board.

to digital converter (ADC). The variable resistor in this voltage multiplier circuit is used to calibrate the CM to *SkyPipe*. The voltage from the multiplier is fed to a programmable interface controller (PIC) that is programmed as a 9-bit ADC to convert the analog voltage that is a function of received signal strength to a 9-bit digital word that is used to control a digitally controlled variable resistor. The interface includes a simple Twin-T audio oscillator circuit that provides a tone of approximately 800 Hz that is fed to the computer sound card. The amplitude of this audio oscillator is varied by the digital pot that is being controlled by the PIC. The result is the audio amplitude being varied in step with the signal strength detected by the CM.

The circuit provides power to the CM and the LNB. A 12 V source in the CM is tapped through an RF choke and this is connected to the LNB coax connector inside the CM (Figure 9). The 12 V is also regulated to 5 V to provide power to the interface. Though probably not required, there are two 5 V sources, one for the digital components of the interface, and the other for the analog components with one common ground point. This arrangement is used to isolate potential digital and analog noise sources within the circuit.

The interface is built on a circuit board and mounted right inside the CM box

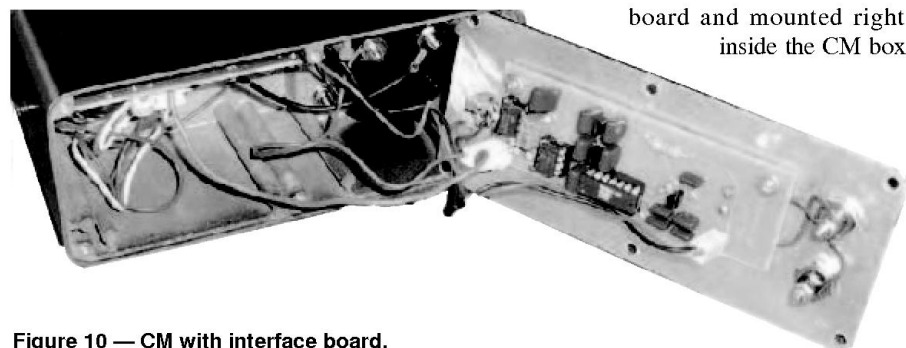


Figure 10 — CM with interface board.



Figure 11 — Aiming the RT at the Sun, note LNB shadow location.

(Figure 10). Though I made an etched circuit board for the circuit, the hand wired prototype worked equally well for those who would rather roll their own. The PIC firmware is available on the *QST* Web site.⁶

RT in Action

The first thing you need to do is learn how to point the RT antenna. The best place



Figure 12 — Example calibration curves.

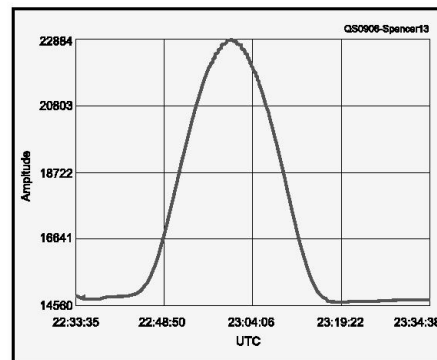


Figure 13 — Drift scan of the Sun indicating antenna's azimuth pattern.

to start is to connect the CM to the antenna and point the antenna at the Sun. *Caution:* Do not look into the Sun as you do this, or at any time. Adjust the pointing angle and elevation until you get peak signal strength as indicated on the CM meter or hear the highest pitch audio tone. With the antenna pointed directly at the Sun, take note of the position of the shadow of the LNB on the surface of the dish (left in Figure 11). If you look from behind the dish, along the LNB

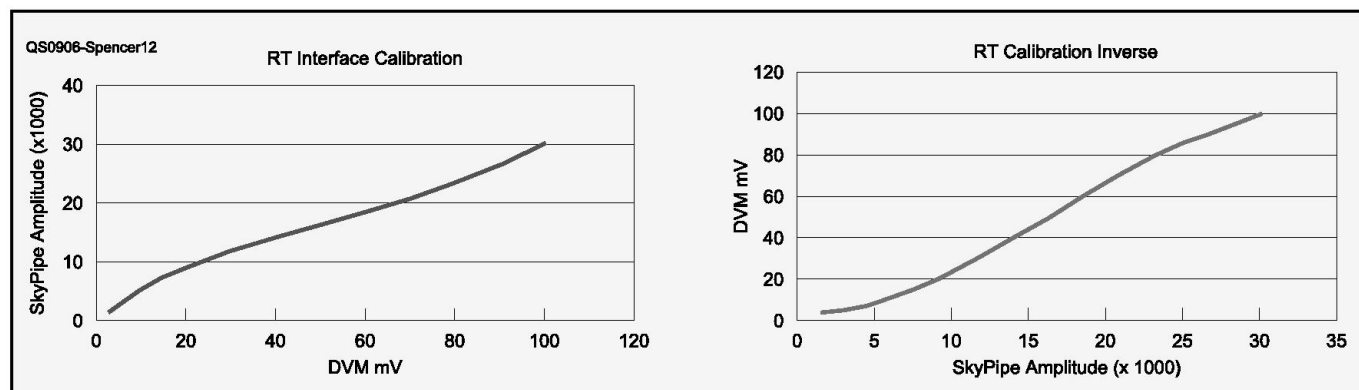


Figure 14 — Sequential drift scans. Note the time offsets between the peaks.

supporting arm (between the arm and the rim of the dish), you will see the Sun being blocked by the LNB.

Once you have the RT set up, it needs to be calibrated to match the output of the CM to *SkyPipe*. I have developed an *Excel* spreadsheet template to help with the calibration and a few of the other activities that you can accomplish with the RT (also available from the *QST* Web site). Turn the RT to a signal source, the Sun, or the side of a building would work. Turn the gain control of the CM to set the meter to maximum. Run *SkyPipe* and adjust the variable resistor on the interface board until you get a reading on the *SkyPipe* graph vertical (y) axis of approximately 32,000. With the maximum value set, adjust the CM gain control through the voltage range (0 to 100 mV) in 10 mV steps and record the corresponding y axis value on *SkyPipe*. This data is entered into the *Excel* spreadsheet to compute the calibration curve between voltage and y axis value. Both voltage and y axis values are used in analyzing recorded signal strength data (Figure 12).

A good first activity is to do a drift scan of the Sun. A drift scan means that you set the antenna azimuth (AZ) and elevation (EL) to some fixed pointing angle and allow the Earth to serve as the rotator to drag the antenna across the sky. To do a drift scan of the Sun, first set the elevation and azimuth to point directly at the Sun (maximum signal) and then move the azimuth toward the west

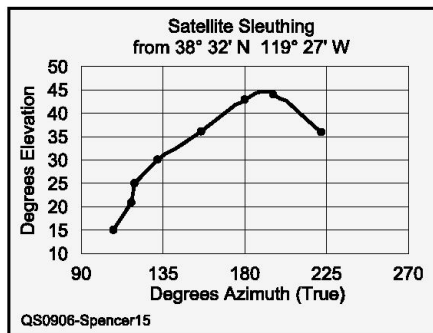


Figure 15 — Clarke Belt plot — tracking down satellites.

(leave the elevation set) until you are off the peak signal. Now start *SkyPipe*. In about 15 minutes, the Sun will pass through the antenna pattern beam width and the result will be as illustrated in Figure 13. You can also use this collection technique to explore the antenna performance parameters.

A good second activity is to do two drift scans of the night sky on two consecutive nights (beginning the scans at the same time each night) using the same fixed antenna azimuth (AZ) and elevation (EL). Figure 14 shows two such drift scans. Although at first glance they may not seem similar, there are some interesting features that are pointed to by arrows. If you compare the time that these two peaks occurred, the time difference is about 4.5 minutes. This shift is the result of the distance the Earth had traveled during the 24 hours between collections.

This illustrates that the Earth's rotation as well as its travel in orbit needs to be considered when comparing drift scans. Enough to make your head spin (pun intended)?

A final good starting activity is to point the antenna toward the Clarke Belt and find all the satellites in geosynchronous orbit transmitting on 12 GHz. If you record signal strength peaks and AZ and EL for each peak, you will develop a graph of the Clarke belt as illustrated in Figure 15.

I have only scratched the surface, and the sky is the limit of this little project. The RT project can certainly broaden your horizons and expand your understanding of our universe. If you would like more detail than can be presented here, please contact the author.

Notes

¹www.setileague.org/articles/lbt.pdf.


²www.aoc.nrao.edu/epo/teachers/ittybitty/procedure.html.

³www.pctinternational.com/channelmaster/0612/satellite.html.

⁴radiosky.com/skypipeishere.html.

⁵en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geostationary.

⁶www.arrrl.org/files/qst-binaries/.

Mark Spencer, WA8SME, is ARRL Education and Technology Program Coordinator. He is an ARRL member and holds an Amateur Extra class license. You can reach Mark at 774 Eastside Rd, Coleville, CA 96107 or at wa8sme@arrrl.org. 

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In The May/June 2009 Issue:

■ Bob Melvin, W6VSV describes his "Backyard Antenna Test Range" and how he measures gain and radiation patterns for UHF and microwave antennas.

■ Thomas Alldread, VA7TA, completes the description of his "NimbleSig III" dual output DDS RF generator. This circuit provides signals over a range from 100 kHz to 200 MHz, with 1 Hz resolution. In the concluding part of the series, Tom describes the control-software command set in detail and provides the final calibration procedures.

■ Gary Steinbaugh, AF8L, continues his description of "A Cybernetic Sinusoidal Synthesizer." In this installment, Gary tells us about the design and operation of the oven-stabilized, crystal-controlled oscillator portion of the circuit. By mounting the crystal, a resistive

heating element and a temperature sensing IC in a separate foam insulated enclosure, Gary is able to maintain the crystal at a constant 75°C, right at the most temperature stable point of the specified crystal.

■ Professor Dr Thomas Baier, DG8SAQ, presents "A Simple S-Parameter Test Set for the VNA2 Vector Network Analyzer." This circuit is a handy addition to the "Small, Simple, USB-Powered Vector Network Analyzer Covering 1 kHz to 1.3 GHz" that he presented in the Jan/Feb 2009 issue. Now you can measure the S parameters of a circuit without changing the input and output ports of the device.

■ Bob Hillard, WA6UFQ, presents his "Universal VFO Controller." If you have built or are considering building the AM QRP Club's DDS-30 or DDS-60 synthesizers or using the newer Silicon Labs Si570 DDS ICs, this project will control the VFO for you.

■ Rudy Severns, N6LF, presents more of his research in "Experimental Determination of Ground System Performance for HF Verticals." Part 4 compares the performance of five different vertical antennas. Each antenna

was tested with a single four foot ground stake, and then adding radials in the progression 0, 4, 8, 16, 32 and 64. Don't miss any part of this series if you use, or have thought about using, vertical antennas on HF!

■ Ray Mack, W5IFS, continues his software defined radio column. In this installment of "SDR: Simplified," Ray takes us through the software installation and set-up to begin our experiments with the Blackfin BF537 Stamp evaluation board.

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