OVER THE HVE odd years that digital radio has been broadcasting in Australia, there’s been a substantial improvement not only to the quality of the signal, but also the digital radios on offer. However, unlike the FM and AM bands, the DAB+ signal — Australia’s version of DAB, short for ‘digital audio broadcast’ — still has a way to go before it can be fully embraced and enjoyed across the country.

First, the good news. If you’ve never used a digital radio before, the leap across from analogue is profound. The biggest draw in crisper sound quality over both the AM and FM bands, thanks to enhanced compression techniques — handy, as broadcasts can be as low as 120Kbps (foreign language or talkback stations) all the way up to 128Kbps.

Tuning a DAB+ radio is simple. All the radios tested had a ‘full scan’ function that would find the available signals in the area. From there, the stations were presented on each unit in alphabetical order, rather than being organised by their frequency range — very handy if you know the name of the station you’re looking for, and especially in our testing area where we picked up nearly 60 stations.

All stations have the capability to display text that will, usually, tell you something about the song that’s playing, station info or the name of the program that’s on. All of this will depend on what the station itself chooses to push out.

However, it’s not all positive news for DAB+. In areas where we picked up nearly 60 stations, you’re looking for, and especially in our testing area, the available signals in the area. From there, the stations were presented on each unit in alphabetical order, rather than being organised by their frequency range — very handy if you know the name of the station you’re looking for, and especially in our testing area where we picked up nearly 60 stations.

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BUYING A DIGITAL RADIO.

WHAT YOU SHOULD LOOK FOR WHEN BUYING A DIGITAL RADIO.

DIGITAL RADIOS

SUPERGUIDE

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LOCATIONS

CRITICAL SPECS

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TOO MANY SHORTCOMINGS.

ALL STYLE AND LITTLE

SUBSTANCE.

It all looks good on the surface. A big, central, easy-to-grip-and-turn volume knob, placed between twin stereo speakers, with a sturdy—looking carry handle that can be extended. Even the auxiliary-in port is on the front, encouraging you to use it as a useful all-rounder. Sure, it’s not quite the modern version of the boombox, but it definitely pays homage to it. However, the Lenco doesn’t come close to the ruggedness of a street blaster at all. The problems start from the top. The handle doesn’t fit snugly inside the body of the radio, meaning that it clunks in and out where you go to grab it. Turn the volume up and the plastic body hums with distortion, though this disappears at mid volume. There are no controls to adjust the treble and bass, and the sound range between harsh and tinny, piercing without definition. Lastly, the screen is atrocious, look at it straight on and it’s difficult to read thanks to the harsh backlit and blur on the text. At least it’s cheap.

Pure Evoke D2

A PORT-SIZED SPEAKER FOR THE KITCHEN CORNER.

The D2 is a squat but cheery-looking unit with a small footprint and sound that belies its size, though its physical size works for and against it.

There’s nothing redundant or superfluous here, with the volume and select knobs — the two most used buttons — dominating the front (incidentally, they have a silicon ring around them to offset the hard plastic. It’s a small but welcome touch). There’s only four preset buttons with the fourth used to stash the remaining six station presets. On a flat surface it’s not possible to press any of the buttons without the D2 tilting backwards, meaning you’ll have to steady it with your other hand. It’s not that the D2 is lightweight, just that it has a top-heavy design, and the small display squashes the clock — you’ll have to squint if you want to read the time. While it’s only a single-speaker, the D2 produces crisp, clear audio, making it perfect to stash in the corner of kitchen or study.

Sangean DPR-16

PORTABLE AND PRACTICAL, BUT A LITTLE THIN.

Looking for a rugged radio that would be an ideal travel partner for day trips or overnight stays? From appearances alone, the DPR-16 has what it takes to withstand being thrown into a bag or suffer a few knocks while you’re packing up last-minute items. Smartly, you can run it off mains or six D-cell batteries, fill it with rechargeables and the AC adaptor will charge them when plugged in.

That big side-mounted selection dial takes bumps without accidentally choosing a different station, and the rocker-style volume buttons feel satisfying to touch. It also doubles as an alarm clock, though the ‘ snooze’ button is wedged somewhere in the middle of the top row of identical buttons, and the big, bright blue display gives off a lot of ambient light. Audio quality is fine if unexceptional, as there’s lack of bass and overall clarity coming from the single speaker, and it’s missing an auxiliary input.

Sangean DPR-39

THE POCKET RADIO CHAMPION.

Despite looking like an MP3 player from 2002, this pocket-sized radio is a bit of a rough gem. It’s about twice as thick as an iPhone 5, almost as tall and only slightly wider. It’s not exactly feature packed, but it doesn’t need to be. Like many pocket radios, and phones that have FM radio, your headphones act as the antennae. A full system reset will turn the radio off but set the hard plastic. It’s a small silicon ring around them to prevent the buttons and easy-to-use nature is well thought out.

MONO MEANS ONE

STEREO RADIOS

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Bush BCR35DABW

A SLEEPER THAT’S GROWN ON YOU.

You should know that the Bush’s main purpose is to be an alarm clock with a radio built in, rather than a radio that doubles as an alarm — there is a distinction. The dimmable clock display is big, and clear, two alarms allow you to set weekday and weekend times — so far, so standard. Bush knows that it’s taking up a powerpoint, and so there’s a USB port built into the rear of the body so you can charge your smartphone — that intelligent design. Audio quality is passable, since the speakers are on the weak side. Design wise, it’s very sturdy and good-looking from afar, however under your touch the hard plastic buttons feel a bit cheap and noisy to press, but that large, dominating snooze button feels like it would bear the brunt of a good whack if you’re feeling less than enthusiastic about waking up. As for everything else, you’ll have to use it for a good few weeks to memorise where other functions — like the volume buttons — are placed without having to sit up and look at them.

Aves Classic

TOO MANY SHORTCOMINGS.

The appeal of this simple but handsome unit with its pale wooden finish, lovely soft-touch buttons and easy-to-tune nature is rapidly offset by thin sound quality and frustrating quirks. After battling with lock outs that meant yanking the power cord out when we were initially setting it up, and then performing a full system reset and scan, the Classic was ready to go. Some stations mysteriously had zero reception until we flicked to something else and then came back to what we wanted to listen to. With the sound on, at full tilt, the Classic maintains a good volume though has little in the way of punch but reproduces midranges and bass, and overall clarity coming from the single speaker, and it’s missing an auxiliary input.

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PORT LOCATIONS

If you’re planning on plugging in headphones, make sure you’re comfortable with the position of the headphone port.

SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL RADIOS SINGLE-AND DOUBLE-DIN FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

DIGITAL RADIOS

SUPERGUIDE

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