

The Amazing Little C.Crane WiFi Radio

A GlobalNet Review By Loyd Van Horn, W4LVH

Nearly every week, I receive email from readers of the *GlobalNet* column, many of them asking me where they can find a basic, easy-to-use and cost effective WiFi radio for their home or office.

I think I have found the answer.

There are many flashy WiFi radios on the market with lots of bells and whistles, but most of those fall flat on their face when it comes to combining those features with low cost and ease of use. Many of the WiFi radios on the market are either too expensive or too difficult to use for what you get.

So, when I received the mid-priced (under \$150) C.Crane WiFi radio in the mail, I was admittedly a little skeptical that this unit would be any different. Especially since it seemed so minimalistic in its design and list of features.

Thankfully, I was wrong ... very wrong.

❖ Out of the Box

To be honest, I was even more skeptical when I opened the box and began to see what I had to work with. While the radio was packaged very well for shipment, with basic shock-support to keep the radio safe, it was the design of the radio that had me questioning what this radio could actually do.

The radio is a very basic, black plastic box with a few small buttons, a small speaker and a basic screen. It's one of the smaller WiFi radios I have examined, measuring 6.5 inches wide, just under 4 inches deep and 4 inches tall. This isn't a flashy, contemporarily designed WiFi radio that you are going to be using as a design element in your home. There was also a small "wall wart" AC adapter and a 28-button remote in the box.

On the unit's front panel, you will find one large rotary knob, which is used for scrolling through selections on the various menus, as well as controlling the volume level during use. Turn the knob to scroll through selections in each menu and press or click the knob in to make your selection. There is also a red power button, a back button for menu navigation, a reply button, and three preset station buttons (which also serve as play/pause/stop and seek buttons for playing files wirelessly from a PC).

There is a handy 47-page instruction manual, written entirely in English, which explains the functions of each of the buttons and how to navigate through the various menus and functions.

On the rear of the C.Crane WiFi radio, there is an ethernet jack for wired use, a headphone jack, a line out (for running audio from the radio to an



external speaker system), and the jack for the AC adapter.

Curiously, there was no line in or auxiliary input on the C.Crane WiFi radio. This came as a pretty big surprise, since it seems to be almost standard on most other WiFi radios I have looked at, and many users run audio from their portable

RATINGS

Audio Quality – 4 out of 5 stars

For the size of the speaker in this radio, the audio is surprisingly good and is adequate for nearly any bedside or home office. Let's face it, though, no walls will rattle as a result of your listening with this radio.

Performance – 4.5 out of 5 stars

It is a Reciva-based system, so navigation and finding stations is a breeze. The minimalistic design on the unit itself is compensated for by a full-function remote control, that is one of the better remotes of any WiFi radio on the market.

Features – 3 out of 5 stars

No color screen, no app support, no FM radio, no battery power for portable use – those would have been nice to include. Beyond that, this is a WiFi radio, pure and simple. You buy this because you want to listen to streaming radio stations without having to use your computer.

Design/Appearance – 3.5 out of 5 stars

I don't want to hit the C.Crane too hard on this portion, because there is something to praise about the simplicity of the basics. Next to your bed, or on a shelf in your office, you will actually appreciate the small footprint of this radio.

Overall Rating – 4 out of 5 stars

No auxiliary input, no FM radio and no battery power hurt the rating of this unit, but not much. If you want a flashy, app-driven WiFi radio experience, then look elsewhere. If you want a bulletproof WiFi radio that will reliably give you access to the world, the C.Crane WiFi radio is truly an amazing tool that comes in a small package.



music device through their WiFi radio.

The inclusion of the remote control was a welcome addition, and during the course of using the C.Crane WiFi, I found myself using the remote control almost exclusively. The remote control has buttons to turn the radio on/off, control the volume, or mute the speaker, and provides one-button access to nine preset stations and easy access to up to 100, among other features.

As I was unpacking and setting up the radio, my skepticism was starting to be countered by the thought, "but maybe big things really do come in small packages?" Powering on this little WiFi

wonder confirmed what I was already starting to suspect.

❖ Performance Test

Looks can be deceiving, and in this case, they are a page right out of Houdini's playbook.

Powering on the C.Crane WiFi radio, the unit instantly found my wireless network. The interface is through a green LCD screen. Though basic, like all of the features on the C.Crane WiFi radio, it just works. I entered my secure passkey (which was incredibly easy, compared to other WiFi radios I have tested) and after about 20-30 seconds, I was connected and ready to get started. The C.Crane handles both WEP and WPA encryption, and the instruction manual includes a very handy troubleshooting section, should you need it. In my case, it was nearly plug and play, with no hiccups to speak of.

My first test of any WiFi radio is to tune in BBC Radio 1. This is a high-quality stream, with a 48 kbps .wma file stream. It took about 30 seconds for the buffering process to complete before I was listening to the latest hits from the U.K. With such a high-quality stream, it is a perfect test for the included speakers.

There are 28 steps as you turn the volume knob from dead silence to full volume. The first 10 seem to be adequate for basic low-volume listening. Beyond that, turning up the volume leads to little audible distortion until you get to about 25 or more on the volume knob. Still, the audio doesn't get terribly distorted, even listening to music with a lot of bass. The 1.5 watt, 2.5 inch speaker seems to handle just about anything you can throw at it. It isn't as good as a full-stereo system with large speakers, but it does what it needs to do: let you listen to audio content. It compares favorably with my Logitech Squeezebox or the Pure Evoke Flow I reviewed last month.



Tuning In

I then wanted to try some other stations out. The next station I usually tune in is WWL-870 AM in my old hometown of New Orleans, Louisiana. To get to another stream, all you have to do is hit the back button, push in the volume knob to select “Stations,” and choose how you want to search for your station (Location, Genre, Search or Live365).

I usually use Location, as this seems to be the easiest for me. I first have to choose the geographic region of the station I am trying to find, in this case, Americas. Then I choose USA by State (Louisiana), and then WWL. This is a 32 kbps mp3 stream, so the audio quality isn’t as good as BBC Radio 1, but it still sounds very good through the C.Crane WiFi radio.

From there, I usually try to pick stations in a variety of countries and continents, just to get a feel for how well the radio will perform at quickly finding and changing streams. The C.Crane WiFi radio handled it very well; stations were easy to find and quickly buffered for nearly instant listening.

A note as you begin using the C.Crane WiFi radio: The volume knob is sensitive to how forcefully you turn it. A quicker and deeper turn will result in a much quicker scroll through menus. If you want a more finely tuned scroll, a shorter and more shallow turn will help you to one-click through menu choices.

And Beyond

I quickly found out that Internet radio streams weren’t the only features you could access on the C.Crane WiFi radio. Since the radio uses the Reciva streaming service to access streams, you can access many of the features you can add to your Reciva account. Services such as Pandora, My Aupeo, podcasts, and Live365 can be accessed through the C.Crane WiFi radio, as long as you have enabled these services on your Reciva account and added this radio to your account.



Unlike the Pure Evoke Flow I reviewed last month, you can have a completely satisfactory streaming experience without ever having to interact with a computer: the radio flies solo quite nicely. But I suggest you register an account with Reciva anyway, so you can set up favorite stations and take advantage of the additional features.

In addition, the C.Crane WiFi radio will allow users to stream audio files from their PC or Mac. Setting up your PC to share music folders is fairly simple: you must make sure the files you want to share are in your “shared music” folder and sharing is turned on. To share files on a Mac, you will need third party software to use your computer as a UpnP server. The manual explains this process in easy-to-understand details.

have been a no-brainer to include. But, again, I am not buying the C.Crane WiFi radio for playing my iPod, I am buying it to listen to Internet radio streams.

❖ A Keeper

This is the third WiFi radio to grace my home. My first was a large Sangean WFR-1 with big, booming speakers and a beautiful wooden case. The second is the ultra-modern Logitech Squeezebox Radio. With a color display and lots of features, it has made a nice addition next to my bedside.

So where does that leave the C.Crane WiFi radio? It lacks the big speakers or elegant style of the Sangean, and doesn’t have all of the



❖ The Final Word

Overall, I found the performance of the C.Crane WiFi radio to be just what I was looking for. Sometimes, it is easy to get lost in all of the frills and design of today’s ever-trendy gadgets and the basic functionality of what you are trying to do suffers as a result. You won’t have to worry about that with the C.Crane WiFi radio. It just works. If you want to listen to Internet radio streams, the C.Crane WiFi radio handles that more than adequately. The audio is impressive for the speaker and cabinet size, the footprint is small which makes it perfect for office or bedside use, and the interface is intuitive.

If you have any experience with a WiFi radio, you will be flying through the menus in no time. For our newcomers to the technology, the learning curve is very small and the included documentation should get you going quickly.

I would have liked to have seen a few other features included, which wouldn’t have distracted from the simplistic design of the unit. An FM radio would have been great for those times when the power goes out. A battery compartment or some sort of rechargeable pack would have been nice to make it easy to take the radio outside.

I really am stumped at the lack of an auxiliary jack; to me that would

flashy features or pretty display of the Logitech. So what is it about this radio that blew me away and made me decide to make it a permanent addition to my WiFi radio collection?

I am a huge fan of simplicity. I like having devices that, when you turn them on, they just work. I put the C.Crane WiFi radio in my home office, set it on a bookshelf and it just worked. In my office, if I want to listen to my iPod, I have speakers or my computer that let me do that. If I want to update my Twitter feed, I have my iPhone or my computer. If I want to listen to Internet Radio streams, I now have my C.Crane, and I couldn’t be happier about it.

The small footprint was perfect in my cramped office. The speaker is just loud enough at reasonable volumes that it doesn’t have to be right in front of me for the audio to be decipherable. It has no issues connecting with my WiFi network, which is separated by more than four walls and a lot of electrical equipment.

The bottom line: If you want a reliable, moderately-priced WiFi radio that doesn’t require a doctorate in technology to operate, the C.Crane WiFi radio is a perfect choice for you.

Purchase Information

C.Crane’s WiFi radio is \$139.95 from C.Crane Company, Inc, 1001 Main Street, Fortuna, CA 95540; 1-800-522-8863 or visit www.ccrane.com/radios/wifi-radios/cc-wifi-radio.aspx