

CRYSTAL SETS TO SIDEBAND

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Chapter 16

ANCIENT MODULATION

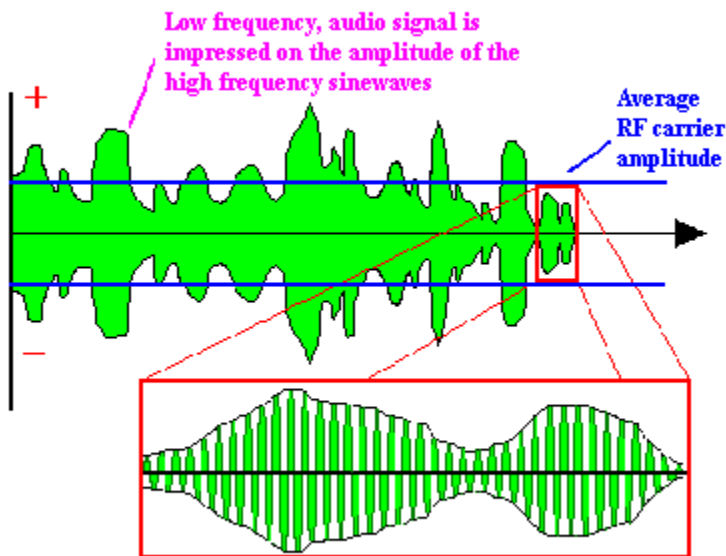
And other topics

When I got back into ham radio 5 years ago, my ham friends told me that AM was extinct. I had the impression that SSB was the only mode of HF phone permitted. Later I learned that AM isn't actually illegal and there are a few diehards using AM on the 75 and 10 meter phone bands. I've also heard AM stations on 15 and 160 meters. In short, you might find a use for it. Besides, it's an interesting challenge to AM-modulate a transistorized transmitter.

Homebuilt AM

Back in the vacuum tube days many of us built our own AM transmitters. My first AM transmitter was a Heathkit DX-20. That was a 50 watt, CW, kit-built, vacuum tube transmitter to which I added a homebuilt AM modulator. Unlike SSB, AM could be added onto an existing CW transmitter. Rather than generate a low power AM signal and then amplify it with a linear amplifier, in the old days the usual method was to AM-modulate the final amplifier of the CW transmitter.

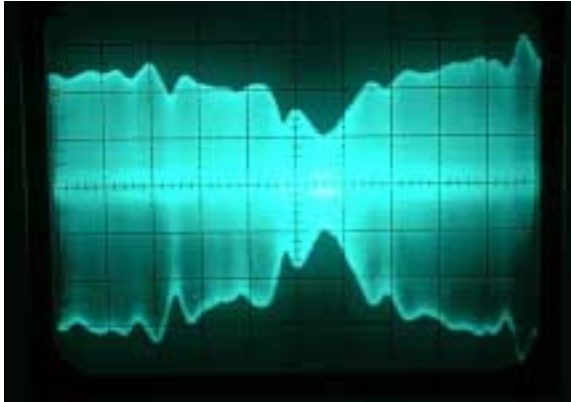
AM Modulation



On an oscilloscope, the hallmark of AM is that, when you are **not** speaking, the RF carrier wave runs continuously at an average power. That is, in AM the highest peak power and zero power only occur at the very highest voice peaks. Although I could see these transient peaks on the scope, when I tried to catch one with a storage scope, they are statistically rare and I

2. Chapter 16, Harris

couldn't catch a zero power level. The waveform below was typical of what I saw.



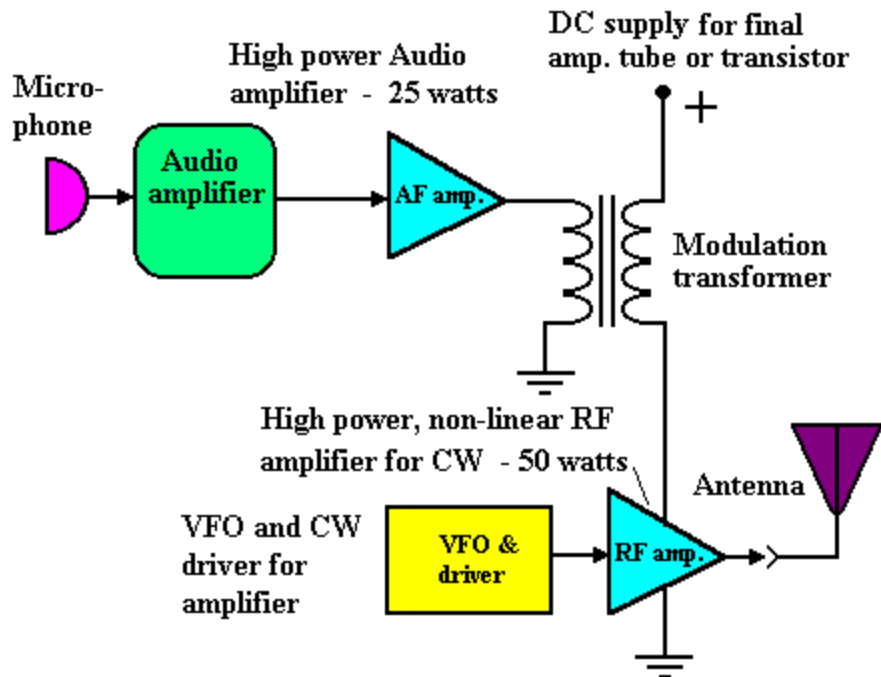
In contrast to AM, the RF output amplitude in SSB is always **zero** whenever you aren't talking. Notice in the SSB oscilloscope picture below that each RF blip representing the audio starts from zero. It doesn't start from a halfway, continuous carrier level.



Plate, screen and cathode modulators

Formerly, there were three common methods of AM modulation. The "Cadillac" method was to use a "plate modulator transformer." The transformer impressed the audio signal onto the DC supply current. That is, as you talked, the DC input current rose and fell around the level of what it would be for a CW sinewave. For a 100 watt transmitter, this transformer was about the size of a softball, weighed a ton and cost like crazy. The transformer was driven with a big audio amplifier that put out at least 50% of the CW carrier power. In other words, the plate modulator was nearly as large and expensive as the rest of the transmitter.

"PLATE" OR "COLLECTOR" MODULATOR



The "Ford" and "Yugo" approaches to AM modulation were to modulate the gain of the final amplifier tube by impressing the audio on the screen or cathode, respectively. Screen modulators usually sounded pretty good. Cathode modulation, sometimes called Heizing modulation, tended to produce "down modulation" which meant that power decreased whenever you talked. It sounded OK, but was inefficient use of RF power output. These methods required less audio power than plate modulation and were easy for a high school kid to afford and build.

Modern AM construction

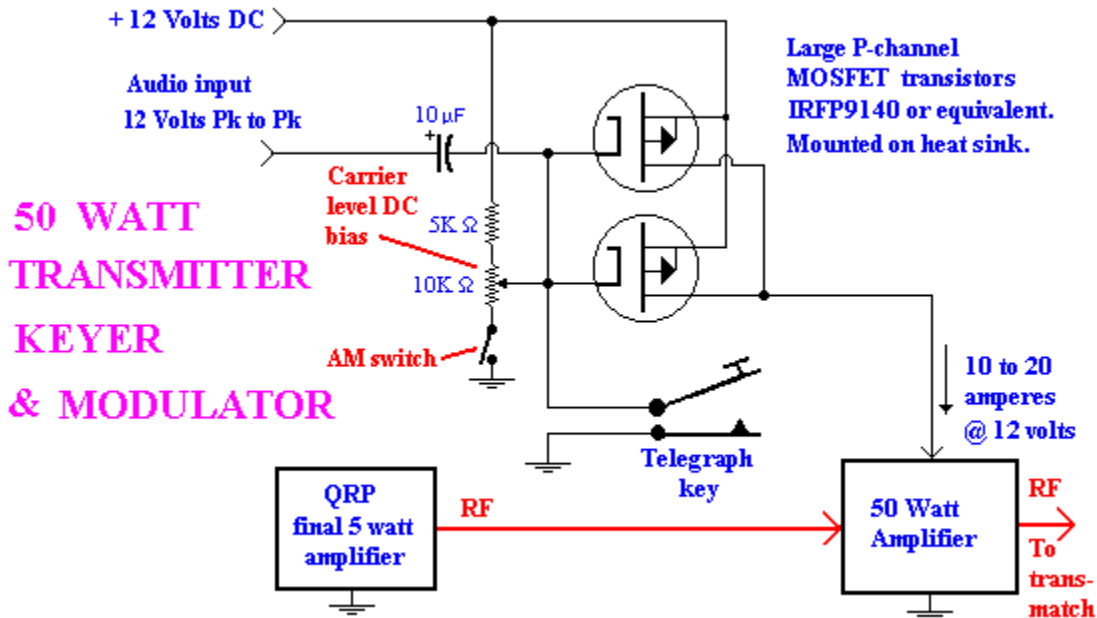
Now forward to 2003. Most modern SSB transceivers have the capability to generate AM modulation. To get into this mode, you read your manual for 20 minutes, bring up menu #26, push button numbers 14, 7 and 12 and you're done. That wasn't hard, I guess. But did you learn anything?

Let's suppose that you're a homebrew fanatic and wish to scratchbuild your own AM rig using transistors. Is that hard? Hmmmmm. Well, for one thing, transistors don't have cathodes and screen grids. Emitters are analogous to cathodes but, as explained above, cathode modulation wasn't all that great. Another difference between tubes and transistors is that, for the same power levels, *the final amplifier transistor has DC currents about 50 times larger*. So for DC supply modulation, you must impress 10 or 15 ampere audio signals onto the 12 volt DC power supply line. The modulation transformer will have to be just as large but it will need a super low impedance output winding.

Modulating a transistorized 50 watt CW transmitter

I have a 25-watt, "plate modulator" transformer from the 1960's designed for use with a transistorized modulator. Since it had low impedance primary windings, I thought I could "run it

backward" and supply enough audio current drive to build an AM "collector modulator." I used an old 10 watt tube hi-fi amplifier and kludged it together. Sure enough, even with music it sounded great when I broadcast into a dummy load. However, it only modulated about 30% of the carrier amplitude. That is, I was wasting most of my RF power. I could have built a 25 watt audio amplifier, but I had a more modern idea. Why not use my MOSFET CW keyer as an audio modulator?

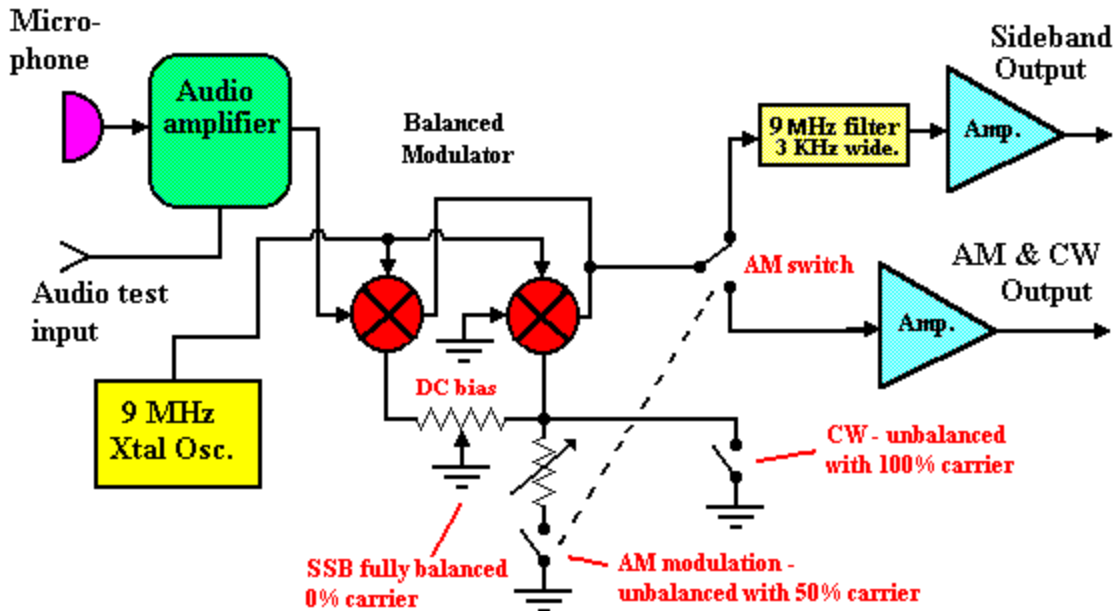


The above keyer was originally designed to turn the DC power to my final on and off with a telegraph key. My AM modulation scheme was to turn the MOSFETs half-on with a simple DC potentiometer, then modulate the gates with a 12 volt P-P audio signal. This simple scheme worked pretty well, but it was extremely tweaky. It was easy to have too much bias or too little and too much modulation or too little. The problem is that the gate voltage versus drain current transfer characteristic is rather non-linear. With feedback and a more sophisticated drive circuit, I believe this method can be made to work well.

The SSB approach to AM

At this point in my R&D, I had not yet succeeded in building a practical SSB transmitter. So rather than invest more time on "obsolete modulation," I went back to work on SSB. I figured that, if I ever got the SSB working, it would be easy to downgrade my SSB generator to AM. This turned out to be true. I tried out several variations. However, *the method that was simplest and worked the best was bypassing the SSB crystal filter with a switch and unbalancing the balanced modulator circuit using a circuit that resembles the CW switch.*

BALANCED MODULATOR



AM resembles CW in that a sinewave carrier is generated continuously. However, the same "unbalance" switch used as a SSB/ CW mode switch can't be used for AM. When modulation is applied, the instantaneous power must rise above and below the no-speech carrier level. Ideal AM modulation drives the carrier alternately between zero and 200% of the carrier level. Because there is only so much signal amplitude to work with, *the carrier must be set to 50% of the level used for CW*. This gives the range available to modulate +/- 100%. A separate AM mode, double-pole switch bypasses the SSB filter and unbalances the modulator 50%. The AM switch is in series with an adjustable 5K ohm resistor that unbalances the modulator just enough to produce the 50% carrier.

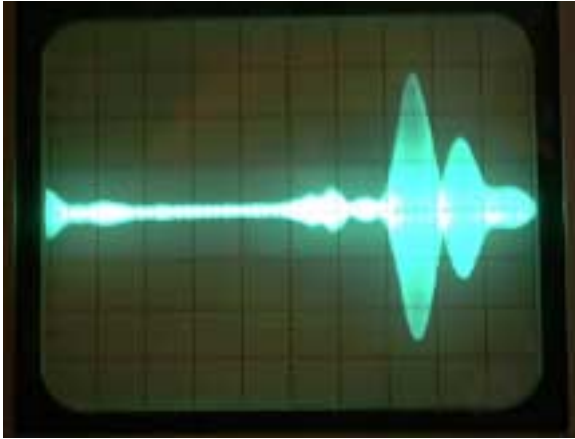
The audio gain pot and your voice level should be adjusted to produce voice peaks twice the carrier level. Compared to SSB, you'll find that AM modulation is quite HI-FI. While testing the generator and transmitter on an 80 meter dummy load, music retransmitted from a walkman was quite acceptable. In contrast, when using SSB, speech sounds OK, but music is really terrible. The principle difference is that the sideband filter greatly attenuates frequencies below 300 Hz whereas AM preserves the low frequencies. In contrast, speech transmitted on SSB can sound like the person's normal voice, but music on SSB is truly terrible. It's just as well. The last I heard, ham music is still illegal.

COMPRESSION BY ACCIDENT

Or, sometimes we get lucky

A modern single sideband generator processes the amplified audio from the microphone before the audio is fed into the balanced modulator. This "*compression*" process attempts to equalize the voice peaks so that as many voice elements as possible are transmitted with full Peak-Envelope-Power. Without this process, most of what you have to say will be transmitted

with far less than the nominal peak power. When most of your sentences are reduced to QRP muttering, your intelligibility suffers.



In other words, without compression, the single sideband RF envelope of a spoken word is close to zero most of the time. It would look something like the waveform shown above. A compressor circuit attempts to leave the peaks alone while proportionally amplifying the subtle, low voltage waveform wiggles near the horizontal axis. I guess the latest transceivers use digital processing to accomplish this feat. However, 15 years ago a compressor circuit usually performed the following tasks:

1. It amplified the whole audio waveform.
2. It clipped off the highest audio peaks.
3. And finally, it filtered the clipped audio with a 300 Hz to 3KHz bandpass filter.



After compression, the same RF sideband waveform might look something like the above picture. The idea is that all the tiny stuff near zero has been expanded. (These waveforms aren't actual before-and-after pix, but they illustrate the principle.) After transmission some modern receivers "re-expand" the waveform to try to restore the original waveform. This entire process is called "**companding**." However, for me, building a homebrew SSB that worked at all seemed plenty difficult. Therefore I didn't worry about secondary issues like "companding."

A crystal filter does more than clip the unwanted sideband

On the other hand, I was afraid my RF signal might be too wide. So, because it was relatively easy, I built a 3 KHz audio low pass filter. It turned out that I didn't need it. Once I had passed the 9.000 MHz RF double sideband signal through the crystal filter to cleave off the unwanted sideband, I found that the filter had also removed virtually everything above 3 KHz anyway. Also, when I adjusted the original sinewave frequency to get rid of every trace of the carrier, I found the filter had also clipped off the lower 300 Hz of the audio. It's remarkable how normal a voice can sound without the lower 300 Hz. Music sounds awful, but voices are quite lifelike. In any case the crystal filter accomplished the same filtering that the ARRL Handbook specified for the audio compressor. Interesting!

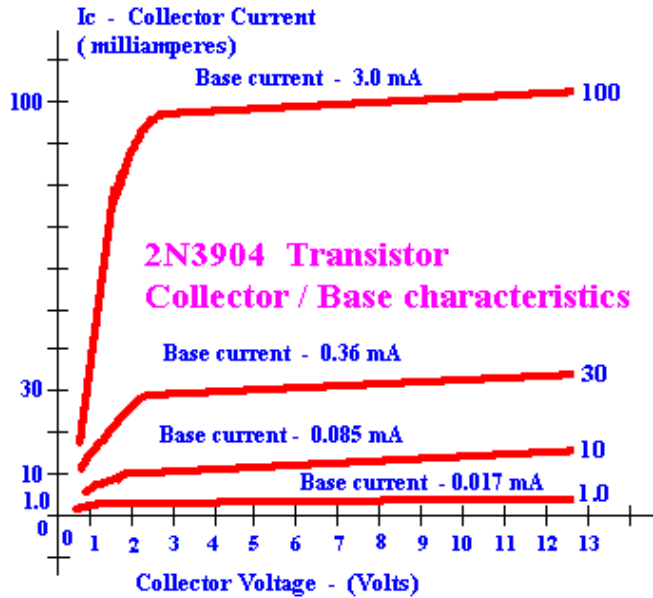
An SSB transmitter has several linear amps in series

After the SSB RF signal has been generated at a milliwatt level, the signal must be amplified and converted to the desired hamband. Including the mixer, this meant that my SSB signal had to pass through 5 stages of amplification to get to 100 watts peak. Each linear stage is forward biased so that even tiny signals will be amplified. Without this bias, all you hear are the voice peaks. In other words, an unbiased amplifier cuts off all the little audio signals a compressor tries to accentuate. I knew that the linearity of all these stages in series couldn't possibly be "perfectly linear." But since it sounded good, I didn't worry about linearity.

Where has all the AM modulation gone?

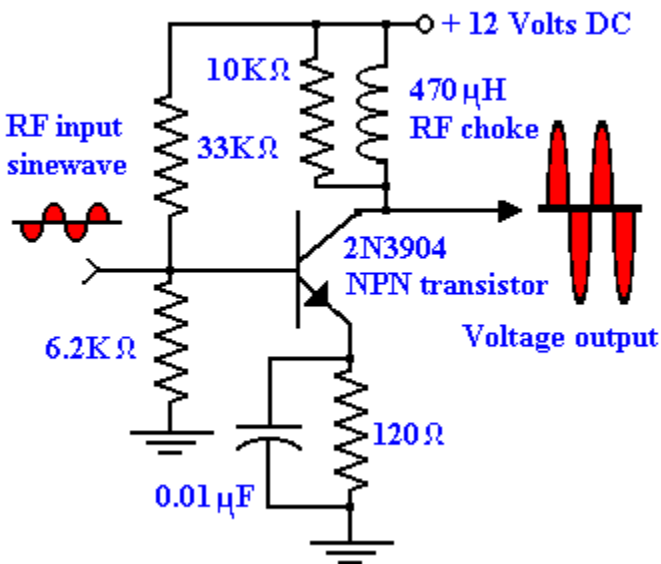
I didn't realize that my RF amplifiers were significantly non-linear until I added an Amplitude Modulator mode to my SSB generator. I listened to my little 9 MHz AM generator in the receiver and it sounded fine and looked like 100% modulation on the scope. Next I fed the signal from the 9 MHz AM generator into my 80 meter "linear" QRP module which put out about 3 watts on 80 meters. Yes, it worked, but the signal was nearly all carrier. Instead of 100% modulation, on 80 meters I only had about 5% modulation. Where did that huge carrier signal come from? What happened to my modulation?

Transistors aren't linear



"Linear" implies that big signals will be amplified just as much as the small ones. However, if the raw output of the transistor covers most of the collector operating range, then small signals will be amplified more than big ones. I have two 2N3904 transistors in my chain of amplifiers, so the Base/ Collector current characteristics for this transistor are shown above. Notice that one milliampere of collector current requires 0.017 milliamperes base current. But to get 10 milliamperes of collector current takes 0.085 milliamperes. That's 5 times more base current to get 10 times more collector current. But if you want 100 milliamperes of collector current, you need 3.0 milliamperes of base current. That's an additional 35 times more base current. Sure looks non-linear to me. **BEHOLD, A NON-LINEAR COMPRESSOR!**

Transistor Amplifier



9. Chapter 16, Harris

The "linear" amplifier above illustrates an accidental compressor circuit. The 33K resistor biases the transistor ON so that even tiny RF signals will be amplified. (By the way, the 10K resistor across the inductor keeps the amplifier from oscillating when there is no input signal.) The main reason for the 120 ohm resistor is to provide negative DC feedback to make the amplifier thermally stable. Without the emitter resistor, the amplifier works, but the transistor runs extremely hot. The emitter resistor also makes the amplifier more linear than the transistor characteristic would suggest because the feedback restricts the transistor to a narrower range of operation. However, 120 ohms feedback makes it a long way from linear. 470 ohms is much better, but still far from perfect.

Oh, well, why fight it? To fix my AM mode, I reduced the imbalance of the balanced modulator to just a few percent of voice peaks. This gives me roughly 50% carrier by the time it arrives at the final amplifier. And as for the SSB, it already works well. Apparently I had a pretty darn good compression system all along and I didn't even know it. Imagine! A happy accident! They sure don't happen often.
