

West Mountain Radio Rigblaster Blue Interface

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I can almost hear the sighs. “Not another review of a digital mode interface!”

Well, yes...and no. The West Mountain Radio Rigblaster Blue is far from being your run-of-the-mill interface. In fact, it proved to be almost 40 feet farther. Allow me to explain...

The “Blue” in Rigblaster Blue stands for wireless *Bluetooth* technology. It is the same technology that resides in everything from cell phones to wireless speakers. Bluetooth is perhaps the most popular short-range wireless technology on the planet. It allows you to place cell phone calls through a tiny earpiece while the phone itself remains in your pocket or in your automobile glove compartment. It allows home theater enthusiasts to place loudspeakers throughout their homes without the hassles of snaking wires under carpets or around baseboards. And in the case of the Rigblaster Blue, it allows you to operate your transceiver at a distance without a rat’s nest of interconnecting cables.

With the Rigblaster Blue you can participate in your weekly phone net from the comfort of your easy chair — the one in the downstairs family room. Or, with a laptop computer or a tablet, you can control your radio and operate digital modes from that same easy chair.

Cables and Jumpers

The Rigblaster Blue is compact at only 1¼ × 6¼ × 4 inches. You can power it from the wall cube power supply included with the interface, or connect it to your own 13.8 V dc supply.

The interface is designed to be compatible with as many different transceivers as possible. To that end, the Blue comes with a collection of pre-wired “jumper blocks.” You just pick the block that matches your radio, open the top of the interface enclosure and pop the block into place. In the event that you have a rig that is incompatible with the jumper blocks, West Mountain Radio also provides a set of jumpers and instructions for a custom configuration.

The Rigblaster Blue includes a cable with an eight-pin microphone plug at one end



and an RJ45 plug at the other. You use this cable to connect the interface to the microphone jack of your transceiver for PTT (push-to-talk) keying and transmit audio. Another cable is provided to pick up receive audio from the speaker output jack of your radio. Of course, you can create your own alternative wiring configuration if, for example, you prefer to feed transmit audio to your transceiver’s accessory port and obtain receive audio from the same port. The Rigblaster Blue has input jacks to accommodate just about any configuration you desire.

If the software you’re using at the remote computer has the ability to control your radio (to change frequency or other parameters), the Blue offers both a DB-9 port for an RS-232C serial connection to your transceiver and a ¼-inch jack for Icom CI-V or Yaesu CAT rig control. For this review I chose the RS-232C connection to control my Kenwood TS-2000.

With the cables connected to the radio, all that remains is to screw the flexible Bluetooth transceiver antenna onto the rear panel.

Front Panel Controls and “Pairing”

The Rigblaster Blue offers three front-panel controls that you should rarely have to adjust after the initial setup. The XMIT LEVEL control sets the transmit audio drive level to your radio. RCV LEVEL adjusts

audio level sent to your headset or computer. VOX DELAY sets the “hang time” between transmit and receive. The interface uses a voice-operated switch to key your radio when it senses audio coming from you via the Bluetooth connection (in other words, whenever you speak or when the digital mode software on your computer starts sending transmit audio.)

Before fiddling with these knobs, however, you must first establish the Bluetooth connection by “pairing” the Rigblaster Blue with whatever Bluetooth device you are using — whether that is a headset, laptop or tablet. Without going into great detail (the Rigblaster manual offers step-by-step instructions), it is essentially a matter of pressing whatever buttons are required to put your device into “discovery” mode. You do the same to the Rigblaster Blue. It may take as long as 60 seconds, but eventually the interface and your device find each other, exchange greetings and strike up a conversation (so to speak).

In my first test I paired the interface with an old Plantronics earpiece I had in my junk box. About 30 seconds later I was greeted with the sounds of 40 meter sideband flooding into my ear. When I cleared my throat, the red LED on the Rigblaster’s front panel glowed and my TS-2000 jumped to the transmit mode. Good thing I had the output set to 5 W!

Enjoying Wireless Wirelessly

In the wake of my brief Plantronics adventure, I paired the interface with a Bluetooth over-the-ear microphone/headset combo. After parking my transceiver on a special-event SSB pileup, I retired to an honest-to-goodness easy chair (a recliner) about 20 feet away and began tossing out my call sign. I broke through on the third attempt

Bottom Line

The Rigblaster Blue is a Bluetooth radio interface that cuts the cord and allows you to control and use your radio from a computer or wireless device elsewhere in your house.



Figure 6 — Rear panel view of the Rigblaster Blue interface.

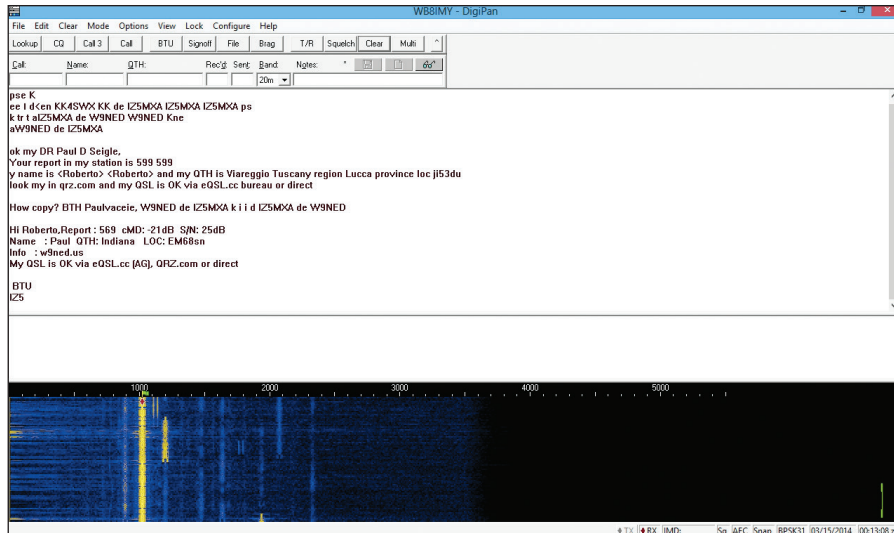


Figure 7 — Working PSK31 with *DigiPan* on a Toshiba laptop while connected to the Rigblaster Blue via a USB Bluetooth adapter.

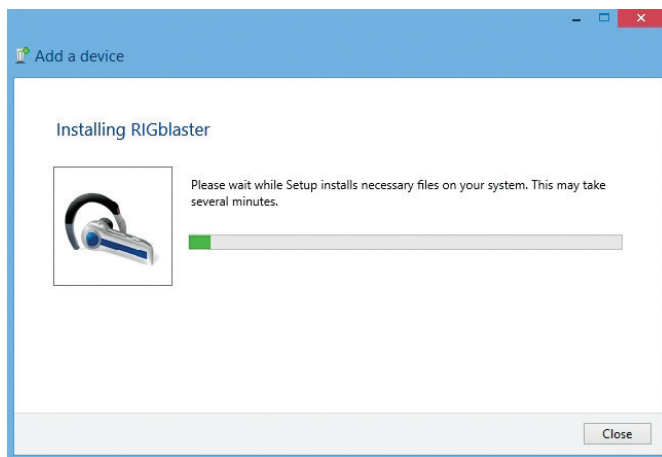


Figure 8 — I highlighted the USB Bluetooth icon in Windows' Control Panel, and then selected ADD DEVICE. My laptop began scanning. Within seconds it picked up the Rigblaster Blue's signal and started the pairing process.

and asked for a quick audio report. The operator pronounced my audio “super.” While continuing to listen to the pileup, I took a stroll into the backyard and kept walking until the Bluetooth connection failed. I’d estimate the maximum range at about 40 feet.

For the next test I decided to go digital. My Toshiba laptop did not have Bluetooth capability, so I had to purchase a \$10 USB Bluetooth adapter. Pairing and setup was a bit more complicated because I had to configure my digital mode software to “see” the Rigblaster’s Bluetooth audio

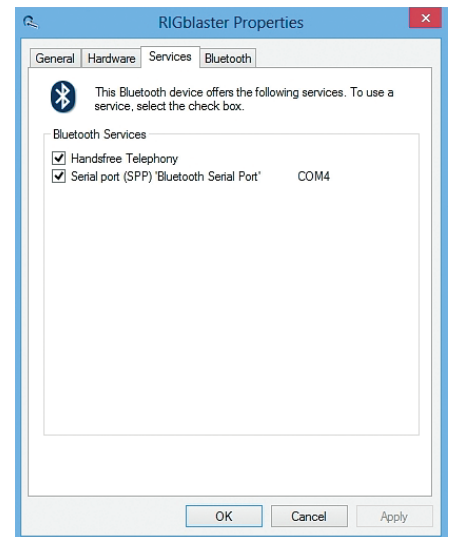


Figure 9 — Once it is paired, the Rigblaster Blue provides a COM port (COM 4 in this example) for transceiver control from your computer.

streams and treat them the same as the sound device in the laptop. I also had to enable COM port functionality so that the software could control the transceiver VFO over the Bluetooth link. The manual covers all of these steps in detail.

Using *DigiPan* software, I was able to operate PSK31 from the back patio, which was a pretty neat trick. It is easy to imagine a sunny day under the shade of the umbrella, a cool beverage at hand and the laptop on the table, working PSK31 DX while birds sing in the background. Switching to *Ham Radio Deluxe*, I changed modes, frequencies and anything else I desired. In other words, I had complete remote control of my transceiver.

But what about smartphones and tablets? That’s where I hit a snag. I own an Apple iPhone and iPad. While I have PSK31 and RTTY apps on both devices, none of the apps were capable of utilizing the incoming or outgoing Bluetooth audio streams; they send and receive audio strictly from the internal microphone and speakers (or interfaces plugged into the headphone jack).

Apparently this Bluetooth snafu is inherent to many iOS apps. As a result, the Rigblaster Blue manual offers no instructions concerning use with iOS devices. Instead, the manual recommends operating with Android phones and tablets. So, I had to borrow an Android tablet from a friend and try it with the Blue using *DroidPSK*

software. Of course, it worked perfectly.

Freedom to Roam

The Rigblaster Blue offers an easy path to remote station control — at least up to a few dozen feet away. And while it provides an extra dimension of operating pleasure

for those who desire the freedom to literally step out of the traditional station environment, the Rigblaster Blue also has the potential to benefit amateurs with disabilities. Hams who cannot be positioned in proximity to a radio could still get on the air with a simple Bluetooth headset, or perhaps a

lightweight tablet computer. That would go a long way to opening a whole new world.

Manufacturer: West Mountain Radio, 1020 Spring City Dr, Waukesha, WI 53186; tel 262-522-6503; **www.westmountainradio.com**. Price: \$199.95.