

# DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

## “What’s the Frequency, Kenneth?”

In a previous column, we met my friend Kenneth Schaffer, N2KS. For those of you who missed it, here is a brief recap:

Kenny ... was, as far as anyone can determine, the first Westerner to figure out how to use TVRO receivers to intercept Soviet TV ... One of the challenges was geographical. Because of the northerly population distribution of the former Soviet Union, that region's television appetite is not well served from Clarke (equatorial) orbit, but rather from the Molniya highly elliptical polar orbit. However, TVRO antennas were mounted at fixed declination and variable hour angle, all aimed at the Clarke orbital belt, and thus not able to track Molniya birds. Kenny Schaffer figured out how to realign TVRO dishes, allowing him to watch Russian downlinks.

I ended that installment by promising you a look into Kenny's place in popular culture. We begin with a simple song title, which I have borrowed as the name for this column.

According to the album liner notes, the title of a 1994 hit by American alternative rock band R.E.M. alludes to “an incident in New York City in 1986, where news anchor Dan Rather was the victim of an unprovoked attack by one or two assailants who, between beatings, would ask, ‘What’s the frequency, Kenneth?’”

In this column, I will attempt to show that the “Kenneth” to which the attacker was referring is indeed N2KS, which raises more questions than it answers:

- Why was Rather assaulted?
- Who were the assailants?
- How does this particular ham's name relate to an unsolved crime?
- And, what has all this to do with SETI, the scientific Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence?

Stay tuned, as all will be revealed.

Kenny first experienced Soviet satel-

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*Kenny Schaffer, N2KS, and Marina Albee, a partner in his Orbita commercial communications venture, appear under a Molniya satellite downlink antenna in this 1980s photo. Symbolically, during the Soviet era, all the Molniya dishes were painted red.*

lite TV on his Manhattan apartment rooftop in 1983. In good ham radio fashion, he was motivated by the technical challenge rather than the programming content. Soon he recognized the educational resource afforded by his technological tinkering. One of the first places he set up Molniya receive terminals was at Columbia University's Harriman Institute for Advanced Studies of the Soviet Union. The institute's assistant director, Jonathan Sanders, and his graduate students would employ Schaffer's crude technology to secure an otherwise unobtainable glimpse into daily Soviet life, society, and culture.

Because Soviet TV broadcasts were generally unavailable in the U.S., the receiver Kenny set up at the Harriman Institute drew a number of visitors. Some, such as English rock musician Gordon Sumner (better known as Sting), were there to learn about the arts scene behind the Iron Curtain. (One of the first adopters of a wireless guitar amplifier developed by Schaffer two decades earlier, Sting was moved by the Molniya viewing experience to compose his popular song “Russians,” sung to a theme from the *Lieutenant Kijé Suite* by Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev.) Some of the visitors were American diplomats, hoping to

use the knowledge gained from the screen to ease international tensions. Others, including TV news anchorman Dan Rather, came to do what journalists generally do—learn about upcoming trends so they later could report on them.

Then there were the visitors from the shadow world, all wanting to know how Schaffer was pulling these elusive signals out of the ether. Kenny generally refrained from telling them, likely hoping to capitalize on his technology by keeping the details to himself. When asked about frequencies and modulation modes, he usually changed the subject.

On the October 1986 night Rather was attacked, he and Schaffer had just left the Columbia campus, where they had been watching Molniya video downlinks. "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" Rather was asked repeatedly while being pummeled by unknown assailants. Kenny Schaffer believes this was a simple (although painful) case of mistaken identity. The muggers followed the wrong man.

Thus, just who were the men who accosted Rather on the streets of Manhattan? CIA? KGB? Industrial spies trying to steal Schaffer's secrets? Up-and-coming rockers wanting to steal Sting's music? If Kenny knows, he's not saying, and Rather refused to speculate.

What we do know is history. Just three years later, the Berlin Wall came down. In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved. Today, Americans and Russians routinely watch each other's television programming, and it has brought the two peoples closer together. Russian television has also, one might hope, brought us closer to contact with our cosmic companions, for it is those same Molniya antenna mounts, capable of sweeping the Northern sky, that SETI radio telescopes around the world now use to sweep the heavens for evidence of distant technological civilizations. There's still much we don't know, forcing us to constantly ask ourselves, "What's the frequency, SETI?"

In the U.S., President Ronald Reagan is generally credited with ending the Cold War. In Russia, that distinction is bestowed upon Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev. I like to believe that the end of international tensions was facilitated by satellite television. Kenny Schaffer insists it was rock and roll that brought down the Iron Curtain.

I think Sting would tend to agree with Kenny.  
73, Paul, N6TX