

# DON HOLGER AND RADIO ZARACAY

By Don Moore

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Mention the country of Ecuador to a shortwave listener, and the probable response will be about HCJB and visions of the high Andes mountains. Although The Voice of the Andes does overshadow everything else in the country, (at least to D Xers!), Ecuador is home to dozens of smaller shortwave broadcasters. For years, one of the easiest to hear was Radio Zaracay on 3395 kHz in the city of Santo Domingo. About a year ago Radio Zaracay sold its shortwave transmitter to the Santo Domingo branch of Ecuador's Radio Catolica branch. Radio Zaracay may not be on SW anymore, but it is very typical of many modest sized Latin American stations so let's take an in-depth look at the station.

## Santo Domingo

About halfway between Quito and the Pacific Ocean lies Santo Domingo. The Andes mountains are miles away - this is Ecuador's flat low coastal plain - banana and sugar cane country. Originally an agricultural center, today Santo Domingo is one of the boom towns of Ecuador because of its importance as a transportation center. The city is on the midpoint of the Quito- Guayaquil highway, linking Ecuador's two largest cities and other paved highways run to the port of Esmeraldas, on the north coast, and the fields of Manabí province to the west.

The official name of the city is Santo Domingo de los Colorados. Los Colorados refers to the Colorado Indians, who have lived in this region for hundreds of years. Once they were in the majority here, but today the few thousand Indians are a minority in their homeland. But, unlike many indigenous groups, they have political and economic power far greater than their numbers might indicate. The tribe is very well organized, and elects its own governor and council, who watch out for the tribe's interests. Most of the Indians own prosperous small farms along tropical streams outside Santo Domingo.

The Colorados are easily recognizable by the men's traditional dress: a striped cloth wrapped around the waist, and hair dyed and molded flat with a paste made out of achiote (paprika). A Colorado witch doctor was pictured on HCJB's March-April, 1984 QSL card. A local joke is that the Indians do this so that they can season their food by shaking their head over it.

## Radio Zaracay

In early 1985, my wife and I visited Santo Domingo while spending several weeks in Ecuador so that I could visit Radio Zaracay. Finding the station was no problem, I spotted it on the bus coming into town. Radio Zaracay is in a six story building, one of the city's tallest, and there is huge sign which can be seen all over the downtown on the roof. After we checked into a cheap pension, I made my way to the station's offices on the sixth floor of their building and explained my interests as a visiting D Xer to the secretary. She ushered me back a long hall to the entrance to a small studio.

Station owner/manager Don Holger Velasteguí was busy reading the afternoon comunicados. When he was done, the secretary introduced me. Don Holger invited me into his office, which was filled by a hue

desk of beautiful wood. The walls were paneled and covered with plaques and certificates that the station had received over the years. And on one side, near the ceiling, were two stickers. One was for “WRSC Radio 1390” in State College, PA, and the other for the Nittany Lion football team of Penn State, in the same city. I almost dropped over. I had sent those to the station a few years earlier, along with a reception report. Nothing else from overseas listeners was to be seen; only the stickers I had sent. It was an unbelievable coincidence.

Don Holger talked endlessly about the station and gave me a great tour. I saw that Radio Zaracay uses the top four floors of the building. That’s more room than they really need, so the offices and studios are huge. Radio Zaracay’s studios are among the most modern in Ecuador. The first floor of the building is rented out to small shops, and Don Holger and his family live on the second floor. With the boss so close, no one better be late for work! The programming on Radio Zaracay is typical of many Ecuadorian broadcasters, although it is probably more professionally done than most. Music, especially Ecuadorian folk music, forms the bulk of the programming. Otherwise, the station broadcasts news, sports, advertisements, and local announcements.

Probably one of the most unusual aspects of Ecuadorian broadcasting, to a North American is how provincial Ecuadorian stations, such as Radio Zaracay, get their news. In North America, listeners are accustomed to turning on the radio for late breaking news. Daily newspaper provides background details, but it’s the radio that keeps people up-to-date. In Ecuador, it’s a little different. Provincial stations don’t broadcast national and international news until the daily newspaper from Quito and Guayaquil arrive. Then the papers are rushed to the studio, and the announcer leafs through the paper, reading headlines and summarizing major stories for listeners.

Unusual, yes but, that doesn’t mean there aren’t good reasons. Small radio stations in Ecuador can’t afford to subscribe to wire services, even if they are available. The only alternative would be to continuously monitor the major stations in the capital, or the big international broadcasters on SW. That is done during crises, but on a day –to - day basis, it’s too time consuming.

The newspapers don’t mind, since people still buy the papers, to read the articles more in-depth, or maybe just to look at the ads. Most who don’t buy the papers, have very good reasons for not doing so. About forty percent of the population is illiterate. Obviously, they see no point in buying a newspaper. Also, Ecuador has no rural delivery, so people in small villages and farms can’t buy a paper unless they make a trip into a town.

A radio Zaracay, most mornings the first newscast is taken from the pages of Quito’s **El Comercio**, and read by Don Holger. In fact, it’s become a tradition at the station. Don Holger likes to tell a story which shows it may have become more of a tradition than he ever imagined. Once on a flight to the Galapagos Islands, he wasn’t feeling well, and began pacing up and down the aisle, holding a newspaper he had purchased before boarding. When someone asked him what was wrong, a friend’s voice piped up “He’s looking for a microphone, so he can read his newspaper”.

## Comunicados

The news isn’t the only thing on Radio Zaracay that North American listeners might find unusual. When Radio Zaracay broadcasts local announcements, they may seem far more personal than any broadcast on radio stations in the US and Canada. But in Ecuador, and elsewhere in Latin America, local announcements, usually called comunicados or anuncios de servicio social, take on a somewhat different role. They sound personal, because that’s exactly what they are meant to be.

Comunicados are the personal classifieds of the airwaves of Latin America. In most countries of Latin America, many smaller villages and towns have no phone service. Even in towns with telephones, many people don't have them because either they can't afford one, or there is a long waiting list and their name hasn't come up yet. So radio stations fill the gap with comunicados.

A comunicado is a personal announcement broadcast over a station. The person who wants to send the message pays to have it read over the air. It's a small fee, usually less than fifty cents. The message can be anything. Perhaps mom wants to take the kids and visit Aunt Elena in a nearby village this weekend. She doesn't want to surprise the dear old lady, so she sends little Antonio over to the local station with some money and the comunicado message written on a piece of paper. Even if Aunt Elena doesn't hear it, one of her neighbors surely will. Maybe Don Fernando wants to send a message to the workers on his plantation, but doesn't have the time to drive out today. He just drives over to Radio Zaracay to have them do a comunicado. Most stations read comunicados at specific times of day, usually over the meal hours. Everybody wants to listen to the comunicados. Even if they aren't expecting one for themselves, it's like a party line with all sorts of possibilities for juicy gossip.

Comunicados go out several times a day at Radio Zaracay. Don Holger likes to host the mid-afternoon airing. Reading comunicados helps him keep up with events in the community – and also gives him some interesting stories to tell. You never know what people are going to come with.

For example, there was the time a man came in with an urgent comunicado for his mother in Esmeraldas, 100 miles away. The message? It was "Mother, will you please come to Santo Domingo tomorrow. I am getting married. With much love, your son Rigoberto". Then there was the comunicado once heard on Radio Zaracay from a Jacinto Delgado to his wife, asking her to send another hen, as the last one flew out the car window! Another time, a listener dropped off an obituary to be read, which listed the names of all the survivors, but forgot to mention who died.

One of Don Holger's favorite stories is how once a pair of young lovers came to him and asked if, according to local custom, he would be the patron (godfather) of their marriage. He agreed on the condition that the marriage had been approved by their parents. They said it was, and gave him three hens as a gift, and Don Holger saw to it that the impending wedding was announced on the air. Later that day, the father of the girl sent a message to the Don Holger, saying that he was opposed to the union. A few days later, the no-longer-happy couple stopped by and asked for the hens back.

## **Rags-to-Riches**

The story of Radio Zaracay is the rags-to-riches story of owner and founder Holger Velastegui. He was born in the village of Quisapincha in Tungurahua province on December 30, 1934, the eldest son of his family. As a teenager, he walked thirteen kilometers each way between home and high school in nearby Ambato. Graduating from high school in 1953, he moved to Guayaquil, where he worked his way through college as an announcer for Radio Ortiz, and later for Radio Cenit. In 1957, he moved to Quito to continue his studies, meanwhile earning a living by working for Radio Central, Radio Nacional Espejo, and Radio Reloj.

In 1959, Don Holger finished his studies. One of his former employers, Senior Luis Rivera, manager of Radio Central, was considering expanding his operations into a provincial town that at the time had no radio station of its own. Rivera offered to help Don Holger set up a station in Santo Domingo de los Colorados.

With six years' experience, Don Holger certainly was no novice at radio broadcasting. Still, this was going to be, at least in part, his own station. He wanted it to be as professional as possible. In the 1950s, the most modern and professionally run radio stations in the region were in Colombia. Don Holger wanted to see first-hand how one of these Colombian operated. An agreement was made so that Don Holger would travel to Colombia while Senior Rivera took charge of equipping the new radio station.

In Cali, Don Holger found temporary work at one of Colombia's premier stations. La Voz del Rio Cauca. He spent two months learning everything he could at La Voz del Rio Cauca, and visiting other nearby stations, always looking for someone who would answer his questions on program production, studio operations, and managing a radio station.

When he returned to Ecuador, the equipment wasn't ready yet. There wasn't much Don Holger could do in the meantime, so he decided to get to know his own country. For the next two months, he traveled across Ecuador, visiting towns, villages, and rural farms. He talked to the people & asked them what they liked to hear on the radio. He found that the average Ecuadorian preferred his own folk music to any other type of music. Everyone liked to listen to the news, but people preferred news that reflected positively on mankind. Sports was very popular, and there was actually a demand for broadcasting volleyball games on the radio. Everything Don Holger learned helped him form his own philosophy of what radio programming should be.

When Don Holger returned to Quito, though, disaster struck; Senior Rivera backed out of the project. Without someone to bankroll the new station, Don Holger could never get in on the air by himself. But, the people of Santo Domingo wanted their own radio station. Maybe new support could be drummed up there. After several weeks of talking to leading citizens of Santo Domingo, several agreed to lend Don Holger money for the new station. Modesto Jarrin, owner of La Voz de los Lagos in Otavalo, agreed to rent them his twelve watt backup transmitter. Santo Domingo had no electricity in those days, but a local family agreed to rent them a generator to power the station. However small and makeshift, Santo Domingo, and Don Holger, would get a radio station.

## **Finally on the Air**

Using the name Ecos del Occidente, the new station finally made it on the air on August 29, 1959, and a month later, on September 29, it was officially inaugurated. Initially, the station only broadcast from six to ten pm daily, on 3485 kHz. But the townspeople were proud; Santo Domingo finally had its own station. Perhaps local pride in the station helped make it a success. Just seven months later, in March, 1960, Don Holger bought the station a new five hundred watt transmitter from the Rosenkranz shop in Ibarra. In those days, transmitters were known by who made them. This one was designed and built by Senior Segundo Obando.

With the raise in power, Don Holger decided to change the station name to something that truly reflected the region around Santo Domingo. Radio Zaracay was chosen, in honor of Joaquin Zaracay, who until his death in 1942 was tribal governor of the local Colorado Indians. He was still admired and loved by the people of Santo Doming. The new transmitter changed a few other things too. For the first time, the station became officially licensed. Also, the first of thousands of overseas reception began to filter in.

Not long afterwards, another important change happened at the Radio Zaracay; Santo Domingo was hooked up to the Quito area power grid and began to receive electrical service from 6-8 A.M. and 6

P.M. to midnight every evening. The generator was no longer needed, and transmission time could be increased.

In the 1960s, technical advancements came regularly. In 1962, medium wave was added on 965 kHz, using a 250 Tellco watt transmitter. In 1965 a new Tellco transmitter was purchased to increase the power on shortwave to one kilowatt. In 1966, the station was able to extend programming all day long when the power company began providing Santo Domingo electricity 24 hours a day. Of course, technical advancements at the station were only possible because of popular programming, which brought in advertisement revenue. Don Holger's philosophy of radio programming was paying off. In fact, Radio Zaracay has become so popular that a Japanese company contracted the name Zaracay for a brand name of radios to be marketed in Ecuador and southern Colombia. Zaracay radios are still sold there today.

In 1968 the shortwave frequency had to be changed to one in the sixty meter band when 3485 kHz became part of a band reserved for emergency aeronautical use. However a mistake had been made in Quito and Radio Zaracay was assigned the same frequency as La Voz de Esmeraldas, just 100 miles away. After a month of mutual interference, and numerous phone calls to Quito, Radio Zaracay was reassigned to its present 3395 kHz frequency. Apparently there were no hard feelings between the stations, as in 1970 La Voz de Esmeraldas' engineer, Al Horvath, built a new five kilowatt shortwave transmitter for Radio Zaracay.

On September 12, 1972, Radio Zaracay moved into its new, and present, location, the six stories "Coliseo Zaracay" building. The station continued to prosper in 1976 when a ten kilowatt CONTEL transmitter from US was purchased for 3395 kHz. It was installed at a new transmitter site five kilometers outside Santo Domingo. This gave the station truly national coverage. In 1981, a 12.5 kilowatt Ecuatronic transmitter was added for 965 kHz. This was a modulated pulse transmitter, which supposedly gave FM quality on MW.

## **Hemisphere's Highest Antenna?**

By the late 1970s, FM was the future of serious radio broadcasting in Latin America. Urban audiences were beginning to expect more quality than AM or SW could give. So, in 1979, Don Holger applied to a government for an FM license, under the name Estereo Zaracay. His application was turned down, because it involved putting the antenna on Bomboli Hill, just outside Santo Domingo. IETEL (the Ecuadorian telephone company) and the Ecuadorian armed forces already had installations on Bomboli Hill, and it was feared Estereo Zaracay would cause interference to them.

Undaunted, Don Holger decided to think even bigger. He reapplied, this time, with plans to put the FM transmitter site on the side of Mount El Atacazo, where it would be in line of site of Santo Domingo, Quito, and much of the northern half of the country. This time his application was approved.

However, there were already several other companies using the mountain, including IETEL, Texoco, and two television stations. These companies had a monopoly, which made them owners of all electrical service on the mountain. An agreement was worked out where Estereo Zaracay would be provided with electricity, only if the antennas were constructed several kilometers from the other installations, and at a much higher altitude. That would be no easy task.

The Ecuatronic Company was commissioned to study the possibilities. They chose a remote site on top of the mountain, at 4200 meters above sea level. Don Holger hired a Mexican oil company, with experience in building roads in rugged conditions, to build a road to the site. The equipment was

installed at 4,200 meters above sea level. Senior Velastegui says this makes Estereo Zaracay the highest radio station above sea level in the Western hemisphere. The new FM station was officially inaugurated on June 12, 1981. The transmitter on Mount El Atacazo is a 12.5 kw one, built by Ecuatronic. Additionally, ten repeater stations have been strategically placed on various mountains to receive the signal from Atacazo and relay it further. As a result, Estereo Zaracay covers all of Northern and Central Ecuador, and even a portion of Southern Colombia.

## Antenna Site

When the station visit was over, Don Holger offered to take Theresa and I on a tour of the area. I headed back to our room, and about 30 minutes later Don Holger came by in his jeep. First he drove us out of town for a first-hand look at the Colorado Indians. One of Don Holger's best friends was a Colorado witch doctor. We soon arrived at the witch doctor's spacious clean traditional thatch house which was surrounded by lush vegetation and flowering vines. It was a sort of Eden-like paradise. The biggest surprise, however, was the witch doctor –he and his wife are the two Colorado on the HCJB QSL card! For about an hour he explained his people's medicinal uses of the various plants around his house, as well as the incantations necessary to make them work. As we drove away, Don Holger confided that while he really found it hard to believe in much of what we had heard, he had seen a lot of it work.

After visiting the witch doctor we visited a few less climatic local attractions and stopped for some fresh picked pineapple. One of the many interesting things we learned while driving around was that Santo Domingo is a sister city with Bowling Green, Kentucky. On various occasions, officials and prominent citizens of Bowling Green had visited Santo Domingo, and those from Santo Domingo, including Don Holger, had visited Bowling Green. Don Holger, in fact, had been there on several occasions and one of his four sons was going to school at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. The others would go when they finished high school.

Lastly, we stopped by Radio Zaracay's brand new transmitter site. Radio Zaracay's AM and SW transmitters had just been moved to this new site, several miles outside the city. Part of the reason for the move was to put up a new SW antenna, directional towards the Galapagos Islands. Although Estereo Zaracay already had an FM repeater there, Don Holger wanted to be sure the inhabitants of the Galapagos had no problem hearing both of the Zaracay stations. Radio Zaracay on shortwave was the most popular mainland station in the islands. Many Ecuadorian families, who had relatives on the Galapagos, used Radio Zaracay whenever they needed to send a comunicado.

In place of remote control at the transmitter site, Don Holger employed an elderly man as a caretaker. His primary job was to turn the transmitters on and off. The old man had his own little apartment, furnished by Don Holger, in the transmitter building. The old man pointed out that he had a refrigerator, TV, and fan, so he lacked nothing except company. Few people come out to the transmitter site to visit him. He spent most of his time either watching TV or taking care of the corn he had planted under the antennas.

Our visit was over, and it was late when we got back to town. Don Holger dropped us off by our pension, and we waved good-bye. Early the next morning we were on another bus on our way to another town and another station. Because of Don Holger's immense hospitality, the visit to Radio Zaracay has also remained one of the most memorable of my station visits. In the years since, I would frequently tune them in on 3395 kHz and remember Don Holger sitting at the microphone, reading comunicados, or the old man at the transmitter site growing corn under the antennas. Radio Zaracay

may be gone now, its future in FM Estereo Zaracay, Ecuador's most popular station. But regardless of who is on the frequency, to me, 3395 kHz is always going to remind me of Radio Zaracay and Don Holger Velasteguí, the man who set out to make the best radio station in Ecuador and succeeded.

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