

Some of My Favorite Test Gear Comes from China

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Introduction

The genesis of this paper and presentation was a workshop presentation that the author attended at the most recent (2017) North East Weak Signal Group (N.E.W.S.) conference. The workshop, presented by Donald Twombly W1FKF, Michael Seguin N1JEZ, and Paul Wade W1GHZ, was titled *Microwaves Without a Wheelbarrow of Dollars*. Among the items the author saw was an inexpensive VHF-UHF RF Impedance Analyzer (“Antenna Analyzer”) rated to an upper frequency limit of 2.7 GHz. He was also intrigued by a RF signal source good to 4.4 GHz for only \$65.

Some of the pieces of equipment covered during the workshop were already on KB1JEY shack workbench. The author was also struck by coincidence that all of the inexpensive items were sourced from China. He had hoped that the workshop authors make a similar presentation at the Mid-Atlantic VHF Conference. When it was apparent that this would not happen for the 2017 Mid-Atlantic VHF Conference, this author offered to prepare the following presentation, supplementing it with additional pieces of test gear in my possession that might be of interest to weak-signal VHF enthusiasts.

Pre-Chinese Gear



Figure 1
Heathkit “5280” Gear



Figure 2
KB1JEY Test Rack

The author's interest in inexpensive test gear goes back to the 1980s when he assembled some of the Heathkit "5280 Series" test gear shown in Figure 1. The author built the RCL (Resistance-Capacitance-Inductance) bridge and the audio and radio frequency signal generators. Being interested in "completeness", he subsequently added the matching VOM and signal tracer. While the author enjoys looking at these instruments, one would have to use imagination to figure out applications for them in the weak-signal VHF world.

Over recent years, the author has acquired some test gear that is more useful to a weak-signal VHF enthusiast. If you look at the equipment rack displayed in Figure 2, you will see a spectrum analyzer, a pair of frequency counters, a RF signal generator, and a network analyzer / sweep generator. These items were patiently acquired at hamfests, conferences, and through the kindness and foresight of fellow Packrat members. The author believes that all of this equipment from Tek and HP was assembled in the United States. While the "patient" acquisition approach worked for him and some other amateurs, it is not a good approach for someone just entering weak-signal VHF with a limited budget.

Affordable Test Equipment

At the previously mentioned 2017 N.E.W.S. conference, the following list of test equipment was offered as useful to the pursuit of weak-signal VHF:

- Power meter or at least a detector
- Frequency counter
- Signal generator or some signal source
- Attenuator
- Spectrum analyzer
- Network Analyzer
- Noise Figure Meter

To this list, the author would add a digital oscilloscope. Digital oscilloscopes can display RF waveforms without using a demodulator probe. Thanks to the Fast Fourier Transformation (FFT) feature in many digital oscilloscopes, they can double as limited spectrum analyzers. You can add an "octopus" circuit to display voltage across a component to permit the oscilloscope to function as a curve tracer. The value of the feature of digital oscilloscopes to graph voltage across time cannot be overestimated.

At the N.E.W.S. conference, it was observed that the following items, when purchased as "state of the art" new equipment often would cost more than the cars that most amateurs might drive. While the author is still looking for a noise figure meter and more importantly, the knowledge to use the above gear to its fullest extent, the rest of this presentation intended is to give fellow weak-signal VHF enthusiasts some ideas on how to fill the empty spots on their test bench without incurring the wrath of the XYL or depleting their savings completely.

AAI N1201SA UHF-VHF RF Vector Impedance Analyzer

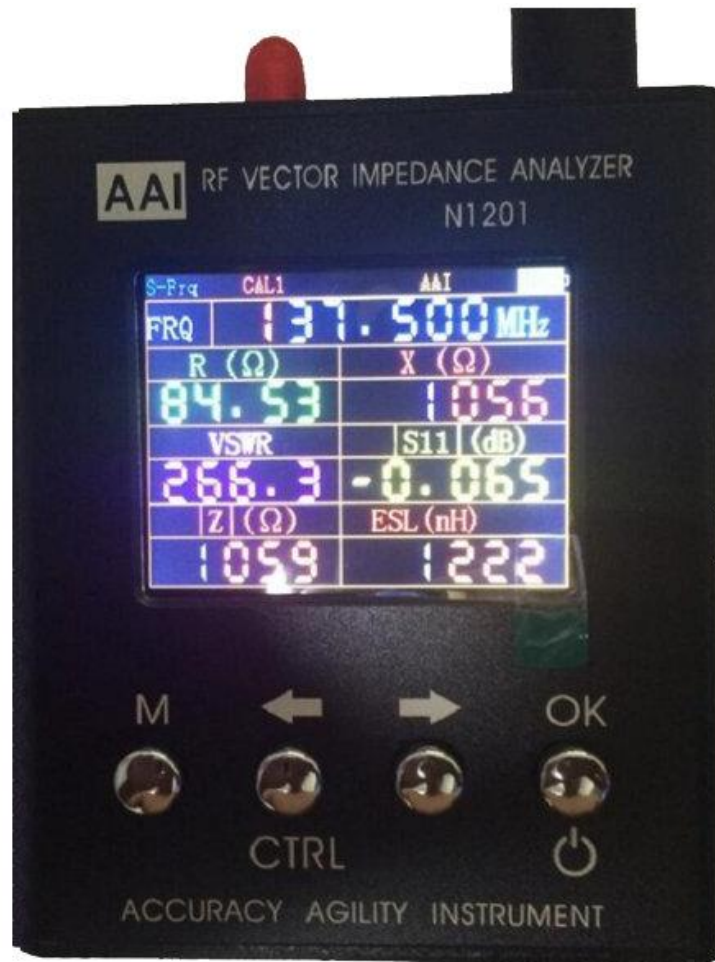


Figure 3
N1201SA Analyzer

The author first held one of these analyzers through the courtesy of Paul Wade at the N.E.W.S. Conference in 2017. His quip: "It is cheap enough to drop from a tower." At \$165, one arrived shortly at the KB1JEY QTH. When fellow amateurs hold one and learn that the frequency range goes up to 2.7 GHz and that it has the ability to graph the impedance response, they have to have one, too.

Note to those who refuse to consult user manuals. You have to hold CTRL button while simultaneously pressing the power button to turn the N1201SA on. While the specifications indicate that frequency range goes up to 2.7 GHz, the lower frequency limit of N1201SA is only 140 MHz (2 meters). Thus the author's MFJ-269 analyzer, which covers HF bands and also measures cable loss, will not be offered for sale at a hamfest anytime in the near future.

The N1201SA+ model frequency range goes down to 37.5 MHz, which would allow one to analyze 6 meter antennas. It is offered for about \$250. It has been reported that there is an N1201SAC model which allows one to read data from the USB port and to measure transmission line impedance. The

author has never seen a N1201SAC offered for sale. At the time this presentation was written, one could only purchase the N1201SA from vendors who will ship orders from China, such as Banggood.com. You can review the manual from their website:

<https://img.banggood.com/file/products/20160922213704N1201SA%20-%20USER%20MANUAL.pdf>

RF Explorer Signal Generator



Figure 4
RF Explorer Signal Generator

At Dayton Hamvention 2016, Tom Frederiksen KA3FQS and the author spotted the handheld RF Explorer Signal Generator (Model RFE6GEN) available from SEED Studio at a modest “Dayton discount”. We were both intrigued by the specifications: generated frequencies up to 6 GHz and the ability to sweep. We each ordered one to be shipped to our homes.

SEED is probably better known for their handheld RF Explorer spectrum analyzer, which was described in the previously cited N.E.W.S. Friday workshop. The specifications for the RF Explorer spectrum

analyzer indicate that it is capable of displaying frequencies up to 2.7 GHz. At a price of about \$280, it could be a good choice for some amateurs. Since the author “scooped up” a gently used Tek 492A spectrum analyzer earlier during Dayton 2016 Hamvention, it did not make a lot of sense to double-up on spectrum analyzers. As a personal note, the RF Explorer weighs much less than the 42 pound Tek 492A.

The author’s RF Explorer Signal Generator has stayed mostly in its shipping carton. However, Tom put his on a lab-grade spectrum analyzer. Some of the graphs are reproduced below.

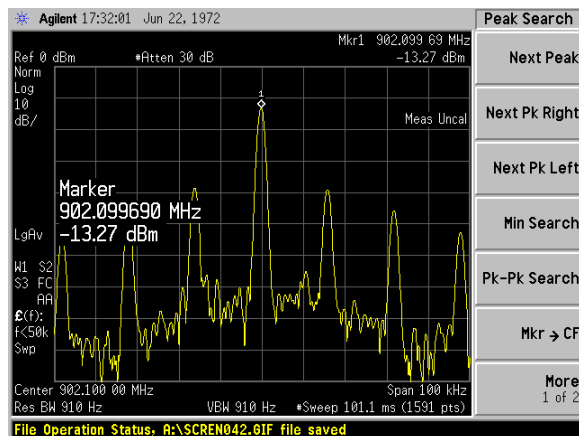


Figure 5
Marker at 902 MHz

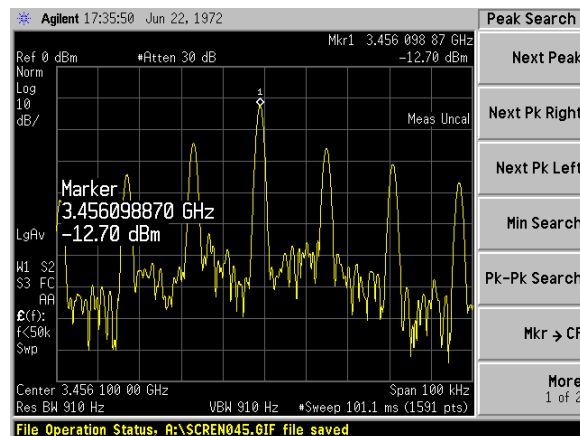


Figure 6
Marker at 3.4 GHz

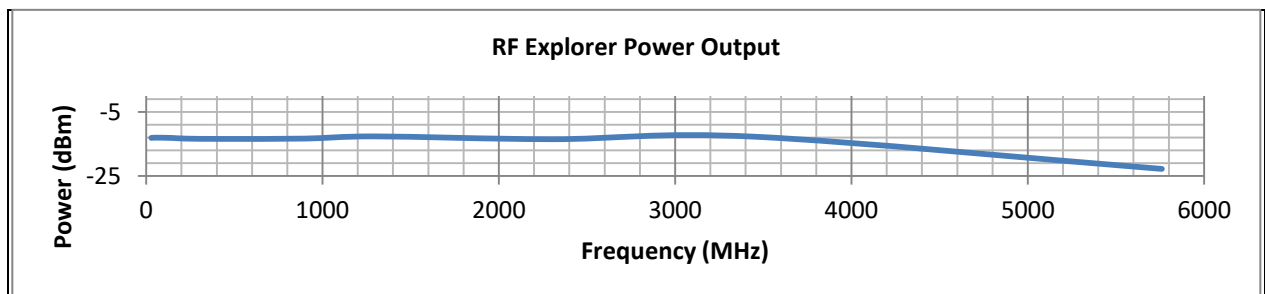


Figure 7

Tom’s first impression: “Not great but for under \$200 not horrible”. The basis for his comment is that there are a good many spurs and the measured power drops off significantly at the 4-5 GHz region. Neither Tom nor the author has tested the RF Explorer’s sweep feature as of this paper.

The manual for the RF Explorer signal generator can be found at the following link:

<http://j3.rf-explorer.com/download/docs/RF%20Explorer%20Signal%20Generator%20User%20Manual.pdf>

Velleman HPG1 1 MHz Pocket Function Generator

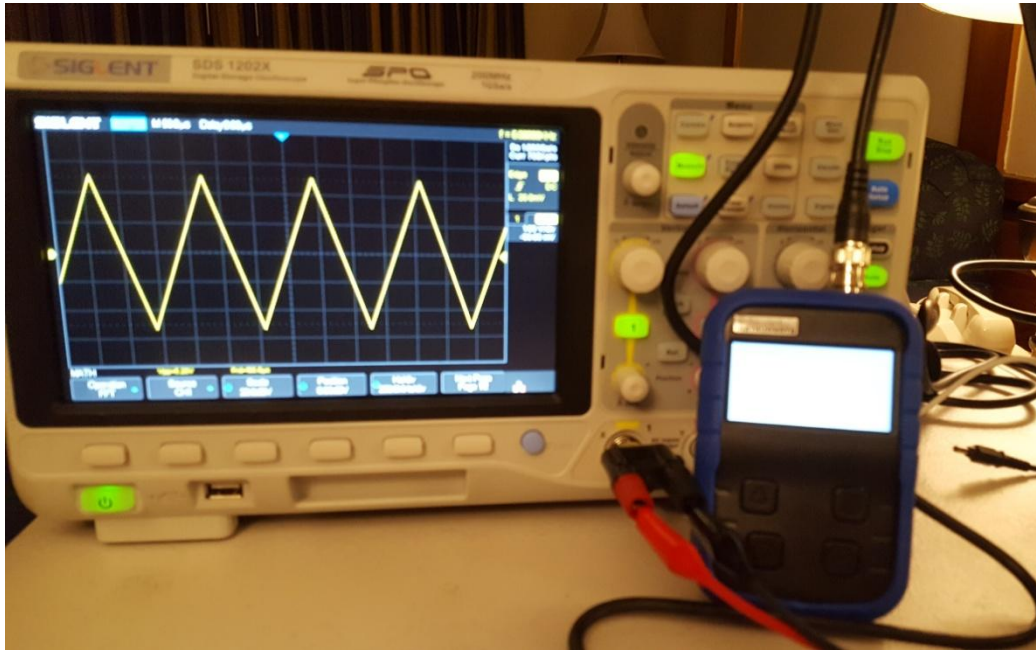


Figure 8
HPG1 Generated Triangle Wave

Sometime after the author bought a digital oscilloscope, he saw a promotional offer for the Velleman HPG1 pocket function generator. The price was well below \$100. Retail and mail order prices for this function generator are often as high as \$250. The author has happily owned a Velleman VOM for years. So he ordered it.

Most weak-signal amateurs can live without a function generator. They are probably most useful for testing audio amplifiers and filters. But if one decides to acquire one, accepts that it is a pocket instrument, acknowledges that it is good only to 1 MHz and that it has flexibility limitations, then the HPG1 might be a good purchase. Pictures and more details about the HPG1 can be found at the following link:

<https://www.vellemanusa.com/products/view/?id=525983&country=us&lang=enu>

Yaeger FC-1 Handheld Frequency Counter

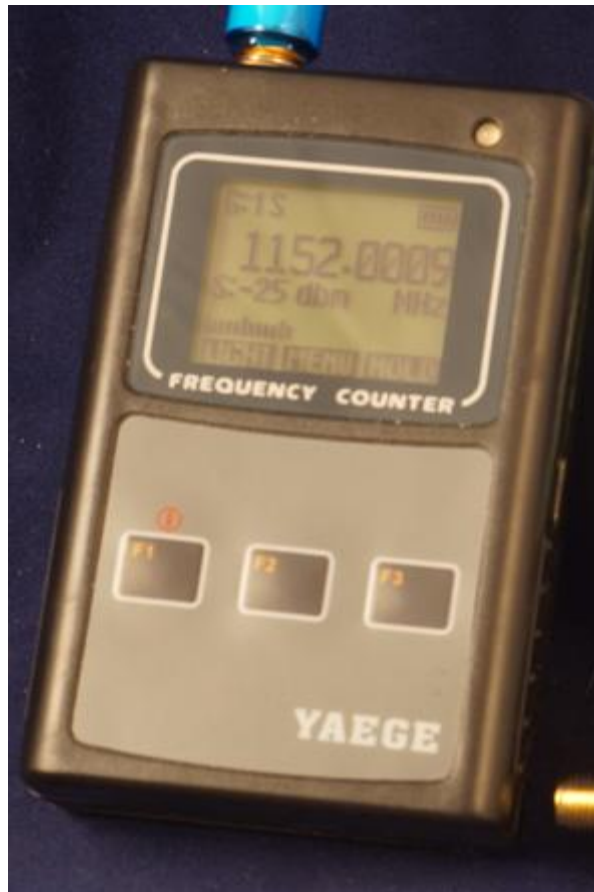


Figure 9
Yaeger FC-1

Several years, the Packrat radio club organized a group purchase of Yaeger FC-1 frequency counters. The FC-1 was originally offered for sale in 2010. It FC-1 offers the selection of two ranges: 10 Hz to 50 MHz and 50 MHz to 2.6 GHz. It is powered by a rechargeable Li-Ion battery. You can trim it to match your handy calibrated time base.

When researching this presentation, the author noted a blog post from Julian Moss G4ILO from 2010 that offered the observation that unlike many frequency counters, the Yaeger FC-1 offers a signal strength reading calibrated in power ratio in decibels (dBm) units. Thus the FC-1 could be used as a rudimentary digital field strength meter, useful for making antenna comparisons.

At about \$45 on eBay the Yaeger FC-1 remains a good value. Yaeger also offers an FC-2 model, available for about \$35-\$40. Unlike the FC-1, the FC-2 has a single frequency range, 10 MHz to 2.6 GHz. The Yaeger FC-2 is powered by a pair of Ni-MH AA cells instead of the Li-Ion battery of the FC-1.

Excelvan Capacitor Meter (Model M6013)



Figure 10
M6013 Capacitor Meter

Somewhere in author's shack is a vintage Heathkit IT-2250 handheld digital capacitance meter. He is certain to find it sometime soon. So when the author opened the January 2017 issue of QST magazine, read the review of the Excelvan M6013 meter, and learned that it could be had for less than \$30 from Amazon, he ordered one. Its upper measurement range is good to 470 mF. The M6013 read the values of a sample of spare capacitors correctly.

So how did the Excelvan M6013 make it into this review of inexpensive test equipment for the weak-signal VHF enthusiast? Besides originating from China and living on the author's test bench, even weak-signal VHF enthusiasts need to check the condition of capacitors before they get soldered into gear and to verify the markings. Also while some DMMs (Digital Multimeters) also measure capacitance, their upper range is usually not as high as that of the M6013.

Excelvan MESR-100 ESR Capacitance Ohm Meter



Figure 11
Excelvan MESR-100

While examining the box in which the Excelvan M6013 arrived, the author noticed that it was the same box used for the MESR-100 ESR Capacitance Ohm Meter, depending upon which checkbox was blackened. The next question was “What is an ESR Capacitance meter?” It is an instrument used to measure the equivalent series resistance (ESR) of capacitors, even when in-circuit. The author decided to add the MESR-100 to his test bench. He ordered the MESR-100 from a vendor on the Newegg portal for \$51, including shipping.

Using the MESR-100 is a two-step process. First, connect it across the capacitor of interest (after discharging it first !!) and note the reading. Then consult the table at the bottom of the MESR-100. If the reading is higher than the value given in the table, the capacitor is not filtering “ripple” properly, is probably damaged, and should be replaced. Because the MESR-100 is so easy to use on capacitors in-circuit, a good practice is to inspect other nearby capacitors in circuit to catch them before they fail badly enough to cause issues.

Rike RK-88 Frequency Counter



Figure 12
Rike RK-88

This handheld frequency counter is not particularly helpful for weak-signal work but is in this paper for a few reasons. What was the author's motive for acquiring it? Another Packrat, John Taylor K3DMA, had bought a similar one and showed how it would decode CTCSS (Continuous Tone-Coded Squelch System) and DCS (Digital Code Squelch) tones used with most repeater systems. It never occurred to the author that one could buy a piece of equipment with this feature so he bought the RK-88.

The price of a new Rike RK-88 should be about \$35. This model is billed as having an upper frequency limit of 2.4 GHz. However, when Tom Frederiksen KA3FQS tested it with a lab-grade signal generator, he reported that the specified upper frequency limit is probably optimistic. Besides, if you are interested in acquiring a frequency counter with the CTCSS / DCS tone decoder, there is a better choice.

Surecom SF401 Plus



Figure 14
Surecom SF401 Plus

The Surecom SF401 Plus can replace the functions provided by the Rike RK-88. It is available on Amazon and from other sources for just a little bit more (\$40-\$45). Unlike the Rike RK-88, it features an attractive color display. The SF-401 frequency counter is often available from new equipment vendors at hamfests. Here is the link to this unit on the Surecom website:

http://www.surecom.com.hk/surecom01_product.php?id=114911

You will want to get the Plus model. It can be used to read the frequency of analog radios, plus digital handheld radios such as DMR (Digital Mobile Radio) transceivers that are becoming more popular. The Plus model also features a switchable (and unmarked) 10 db attenuator. While the given frequency range is 27 MHz to 3 GHz, the Surecom website cautions that the function of the SF401 is not guaranteed between 27 MHz to 100 MHz. The SF401 Plus comes with two BNC-mount antennas. It appears that the longer antenna is the one that is tuned for UHF work. Surecom suggests that if one is not getting good measurements, to hold it so that the SF401's antenna is at an angle relative to the transceiver's (handheld's) antenna.

Coming Attractions

As noted throughout this paper, the author was inspired by a Friday workshop that he attended during the 2017 N.E.W.S. conference to explore inexpensive test gear from China. In particular, he was impressed with two items:

1. A signal source that covers 137 MHz through 4.4 GHz. It is powered by an ADF4350 chip and includes a Phase-Lock Loop board and a 128x64 LCD display. The generated harmonics allow it to be used to create usable higher frequencies in the 10-24 GHz range. Best of all, it can be purchased on eBay for only \$65.
2. A power meter that covers up to 8 GHz with a four-line OLED display. Directly, it can measure power levels from -55 to -5 dBm. It is also available from eBay for \$34.

Both units can be powered by USB power supplies (mini USB for the signal source, micro USB for the power meter). They appear very useful for weak signal VHF, UHF, and microwave applications. The author purchased both items for himself from eBay, along with a couple of other interesting boards. The only problem is that with the lack of documentation and shortage of time, he was not comfortable including them as "favorite" test equipment from China for this paper. However, there is a very good chance that they can and will be presented at a future Packrat monthly meeting.

Cautions When Using Chinese Test Equipment

Amateurs accustomed to using robust test equipment from manufacturers such as HP/Agilent, Tektronics, and Bird Technologies may need to change their expectations when using test gear from China. Some of the Chinese gear is nicely packaged and is accompanied by modest instructions. By contrast, items such as the just mentioned signal source and power meter are just small boards supplied with no instructions. For such items, only experimentation or hints from a mentor will yield how they are operated.

Even the nicely packaged test gear from China may have menus that are even more cryptic than menus for domestically sourced test gear. Also, the least expensive items are sold and shipped directly from China. You often have to wait for them to arrive from the overseas factory. As an example, if you purchase the AAI NS1201SA from Banggood, it will take about two weeks for it to wander into your QTH. Plan accordingly.

Last, some Chinese gear may not have the overload and other protections to which amateurs may have become accustomed. Coupled with non-existent documentation and cryptic menus, sometimes not written in English, amateurs should be very careful to not release the “magic smoke” prematurely.

Conclusion

One of the most common questions we field about the amateur radio hobby is “how much does the needed equipment cost?” The cost of equipment is often more problematic when one leaves the world of HF and VHF/UHF FM gear and ventures into weak-signal VHF/UHF/microwave. Judicious acquisition and use of test gear from China may be part of the answer to keeping the cost of one’s amateur radio hobby within budget.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Paul Wade W1GHZ for sharing two slide decks originally presented during the 2017 N.E.W.S. Conference Friday Workshop. One was titled ***Cheap Test Equipment 2017*** and the other was titled ***Microwaves Without a Wheelbarrow of Dollars***. The workshop was a collaboration of Paul with Donald Twombly W1FKF and Michael Seguin N1JEZ

The test results for the RF Explorer Signal Generator and the Rike RK-88 were courtesy of Tom Frederiksen KA3FQS