

RTL-SDR Blog V3 Datasheet



The RTL-SDR Blog V3 is an improved RTL-SDR dongle. RTL-SDR dongles were originally designed for DVB-T HDTV reception, but they were found by hardware hackers to be useful as a general purpose SDR. The standard dongles are okay for DVB-T reception, but are just barely suitable for SDR users/experimenters. The RTL-SDR Blog V3 was redesigned with SDR user needs in mind, instead of DVB-T HDTV users who typically have more relaxed requirements.

Purchase at: www.rtl-sdr.com/store

Quickstart setup guide available at: www.rtl-sdr.com/qsg

Basic Information

- **Bandwidth:** Up to 2.4 MHz stable.
- **ADC:** RTL2832U 8-bits
- **Frequency Range:** 500 kHz – 1766 MHz (500 kHz – 24 MHz in direct sampling mode)
- **Typical Input Impedance:** 50 Ohms
- **Typical Current Draw:** 270 – 280 mA

Required Computing Hardware

Same requirements as a regular RTL-SDR. Compatible with Windows XP and above (SDR# requires Win 7 or newer), Linux, MacOS and Android. A dual core machine is recommended.

Single board PCs like the Raspberry Pi, Odroid, C.H.I.P are also supported with most command line apps.

RTL-SDR V3 Improvements over generic models

TCXO

The V3 uses a 1PPM TCXO for excellent frequency stability. The temperature drift is around 0.5 – 1 PPM, and the initial offset is 0 – 2 PPM. This means that the signal will not drift on the spectrum as the dongle or ambient temperature changes. Also, the frequency offset will be close to zero. Standard dongles have a PPM offset of up to 100PPM, and tend to drift a lot. Using a TCXO solves these problems.

SMA Connector

Typical RTL-SDR dongles use a relatively obscure MCX RF connector. The V3 uses commonly used SMA connectors, so it is easy to obtain adapters, connectors and antennas for the unit. SMA connectors also last longer.

Aluminium Enclosure

Unlike standard RTL-SDR's, the V3 comes standard with an aluminium enclosure. The enclosure has two purposes. The first is to help block any RF interference from entering through the PCB. The second is to act as a heatsink to the PCB.

Improved Heat Dissipation

Typical R820T/2 RTL-SDR dongles tend to lose PLL lock in L-band at around 1.5 GHz and above, causing a loss of reception to those frequencies. The reason is due to the high heat generated by the R820T2 chip. The V3 uses a thin thermal pad to thermally bond the PCB and metal enclosure together. This allows the metal case to work as a heat sink, which solves the PLL lock problem. Ideally the thermal pad should be as thin as possible to enhance maximum heat transfer, and we have designed the enclosure so that the thermal pad only needs to be 3mm thick.

The V3 also uses a larger ground plane on the middle layers of the PCB which also helps with heat dissipation.

R820T2 Chip

Older RTL-SDR units used the R820T chip. There is a newer R820T2 which has slightly better manufacturing tolerances. The R820T2 is produced in a factory with higher quality silicon which allows for more reliable chips. A side effect of the better silicon is overall slightly better and more stable sensitivity across manufacturing runs compared to the R820T, and less PLL lock problems at L-band frequencies.

Improved ESD protection on the RF front end

The BAV99 diode which is used on most RTL-SDR dongles is not a true ESD rated diode. We have added a real ESD rated diode for better protection. The BAV99 remains in the circuit as it works as a strong signal clipper, which prevents damage to the R820T2 from overly strong signals. Please remember that not even this will save your radio from a lightning strike or huge ESD impulse, and any permanently outdoor mounted antenna system must have its own lightning and ESD protection. To help avoid lightning damage unplug your antenna during a storm and when the dongle is not in use.

Improved front end circuit

The standard matching circuit on the RTL-SDR was designed for DVB-T use, and tends to attenuate signals above ~1 GHz. The new matching circuit has less attenuation above 1 GHz and similar performance below. We have used high quality, high SRF, high Q inductors in this circuit.

Software switchable 4.5v bias tee.

The V3 makes use of a low noise LDO and one of the GPIO pins on the RTL2832U to provide a 4.5V bias tee that can be activated in software. The bias tee can pull about 180 mA continuously so is suitable for the majority of 3-5V powered LNAs that are popular with RTL-SDR devices. The bias tee is protected against accidental short circuits at the LDO level, and with a thermal auto-resetting PTC fuse. See 'Activating the Bias Tee' for more information on software for activating the bias tee.

This bias tee is great for powering a remote LNA (like Adams PSA5043+ based LNA4ALL) or something like the SpyVerter upconverter.

Bias Tee Warning: The bias tee thermal fuse or LDO could be damaged if you short circuit the bias tee for long periods of time. Before turning on the bias tee, ensure the circuit to be powered is not shorted, or that the RTL-SDR is not connected to a DC shorted antenna!

Lower Voltage Operation

The V3 uses an LDO that has a much lower 'dropout' voltage compared to the typical AMS1117 LDO used on most dongles. Hence the V3 should run better on long USB extension cables.

Long USB cables tend to drop the 5V USB voltage down to lower levels. Below about 4V the AMS1117 stops working. The LDO used in the V3 works almost down to 3.3V.

Of course, with low voltages from long USB cable, the bias tee will be unable to put out 4.5V. At low voltages the bias tee LDO will revert to a non-filtered voltage slightly under the supply.

Reduced noise with a modified PCB design

Typical RTL-SDR dongles use 2-layer PCB designs and route signal lines improperly. The V3 uses a modified 4-layer PCB design which helps to significantly reduce clock spurs and noise pickup.

The V3 also adds a USB common mode choke on the USB data lines to reduce USB noise, adds SMD ferrite chokes on the PCB power lines, and uses a lower noise LDO.

HF direct sampling circuit, diplexed out from the SMA connector

The idea behind direct sampling mode is that an antenna can be connected directly to the ADC pins of the RTL2832U, and this can enable HF reception. This is useful because the R820T/2 tuner can only tune down to about 24 MHz at the lowest. On typical R820T RTL-SDR dongles one can enable direct sampling mode by soldering a wire to the Q-branch pins of the RTL2832U. The RTL2832U samples at 28.8 MHz, so 0 – 14.4 MHz, and 14.4 MHz – 28.8 MHz can be listened to.

The V3 has direct sampling mode implemented in hardware already, so no hardware mods are required to listen to HF via direct sampling.

To split the HF signal out at the SMA connector, a diplexer tuned to 25 MHz is used. A 10dB buffer preamp sits after the diplexer which helps to boost the signal and overcome losses in the subsequent filter and impedance transformer. After the preamp is a 24 MHz low pass filter and then an impedance matching and single to double ended transformer. The addition of the preamp, filter and transformer ensures good direct sampling performance.

The result is that 500 kHz to about 24 MHz can be received in direct sampling mode.

Direct sampling could be more sensitive than using an upconverter, but dynamic won't be as good as with an upconverter. It can overload easily if you have strong signals since there is no gain control. And you will see aliasing of signals mirrored around 14.4 MHz due to the Nyquist theorem. But direct sampling mode should at least give the majority of users a decent taste of what's on HF. If you then find HF interesting, then you can consider upgrading to an upconverter like the SpyVerter (the SpyVerter is the only upconverter we know of that is compatible with our bias tee for easy operation, other upconverters require external power).

If you search on YouTube for "RTL-SDR V3", you will find several videos showing what you can get in direct sampling mode. Most people are surprised at how good it can be, but also many users will need a broadcast AM filter to reduce overloading. We sell a suitable broadcast AM filter on our store www.rtl-sdr.com/store.

Expansion pads on the PCB

Access pads for the unused GPIO pins, CLK in/out, 3.3V, GND and I2C pins have been added. The CLK input/output is disconnected by default. Access pads for the I branch have also been added as some users and industrial customers are using these in special projects. These pads are only for advanced users who need them for special projects. Take care as these pins are not ESD protected.

Clock selector jumper

By soldering in a 4 pin 1.27mm pitch jumper header and removing the default 0 Ohm resistor, one can now easily select between the onboard clock, an external clock, or having the on board clock be the output for another dongle. This is for advanced users only who want to experiment with things like passive radar, and coherent receivers.

Corner mounting holes for those who want to stack PCBs.

Some customers have been building devices that require multiple RTL-SDR dongles, and these standoff holes should aid in stacking.

Feature Information

Feature 1: Direct Sampling HF Mode

This feature allows you to listen to HF signals between about 500 kHz to 28.8 MHz.

To use direct sampling mode first connect an appropriate HF antenna to the SMA antenna port (this is the same port where you connect your VHF/UHF antenna).

In SDR# select the Q-branch in the configure menu (the cog icon next to the play button). (If it is greyed out make sure you stop the SDR first, by clicking the stop button in SDR#)

Press Play and tune to 500 kHz – 28.8 MHz.

Device	R820T
Generic RTL2832U OEM (0)	▼
Sample Rate	2.048 MSPS
Sampling Mode	Direct sampling (Q branch)

VHF antennas like small discones or short whip antennas will probably not pick up HF signals very well, if at all. If you have no such antenna you *might* get something with the large telescopic antenna extended to its maximum length of 1.5m, but really this is still not long enough for HF. You can instead use the screw nut provided with the antenna base to clamp on a long wire antenna that is 5 meters or more in length. Ideally you should use a 9:1 unun with the long wire antenna for optimal reception but it is not totally necessary. Even more ideally you'd use an antenna tuner, though this is expensive.

Other software like HSDR and GQRX can also support direct sampling. It may entail setting a device string, and for the Q-branch, the value should be 2. In GQRX the device string would be "rtl=0,direct_samp=2" (without the quotes). Make sure that there is no space after the comma.

To go back to listening to frequencies above 28.8 MHz remember to change the sampling mode back to "Quadrature Sampling".

Note that this feature makes use of *direct sampling* and so aliasing will occur. The RTL-SDR samples at 28.8 MHz, thus you may see mirrors of strong signals from 0 – 14.4 MHz while tuning to 14.4 – 28.8 MHz and the other way around as well. If these images cause problems, then to remove them you will need to use a low pass filter for 0 – 14.4 MHz, and a high pass filter for 14.4 – 28.8 MHz. Either that or you can simply filter your exact band of interest.

Feature 2: Software Selectable Bias Tee

The V3 RTL-SDR introduces a bias tee which can be enabled easily in software.

WARNING: Before using the bias tee please ensure that you understand that you should not use this option when the dongle is connected *directly* to a DC short circuited antenna. Although the bias tee circuit is dual protected against accidental shorts with a PTC automatically resetting fuse and overcurrent protection on the LDO, short circuiting the bias tee for an extended period (hours) could damage the LDO or fuse permanently. Only use it while connected to an actual powered device, like an LNA, active antenna or the SpyVerter.

To make things clearer: DC Short Antenna -> LNA -> Coax -> V3(bias tee on) is fine. What's not good and makes no sense anyway is DC Short Antenna -> Coax -> V3(bias tee on). DC Short Antenna -> Coax -> V3(bias tee off) is fine.

To enable the bias tee in Windows:

1. Download and extract all the files in the zip file downloadable at <https://github.com/rtlsdrblog/rtl-sdr/releases/tag/v1.1> into a folder on your PC. It contains two batch files that can be run.

2. Next make sure that all SDR software like SDR# / HDSDR / SDR-Console etc is fully closed. If there is another program accessing the RTL-SDR the bias tee software will not run.
3. Run the `biastee_on.bat` file to turn the bias tee on. It will run and open a CMD prompt that will briefly say "Found Rafael Micro R820T Tuner". The CMD prompt will close soon after upon success.

The bias tee is now on. To turn it off repeat steps 2 & 3, but instead run the `biastee_off.bat` batch file. Alternatively, simply disconnect and then reconnect the SDR to turn the bias tee off.

If you have multiple dongles connected you'll need to edit the batch file to specify what dongle's bias tee you want to activate. Open the bat file with any text editor, like Notepad, and add the dongle selector "-d" flag. For example, to activate the bias tee on the dongle that was plugged in second you'd need to change it to "`rtl_biast -b 1 -d 1`".

If you get a Smart Screen message, click on More Info, and then on Run Anyway. Also note that some versions of Windows may fail to run batch files due to misconfiguration or aggressive antivirus software. If you cannot fix these problems with Windows or your antivirus, run the command manually on the CMD line.

To run it manually on the CMD line first browse to the directory where the bias tee software is stored using "cd" (e.g. `cd C:\SDR\bias_tee_folder`), and then run:

ON: `rtl_biast -b 1`

OFF: `rtl_biast -b 0`

If needed select a particular RTL-SDR device with the -d flag.

In Linux or MacOS download the source from git, compile it the same way you do the regular RTL-SDR drivers, and then run `./rtl_biast -b 1` to turn the bias tee on and `./rtl_biast -b 0` to turn the bias tee off. The procedure is:

```
git clone https://github.com/rtlsdrblog/rtl_biast
cd rtl_biast
mkdir build
cd build
cmake ..
make
cd src
./rtl_biast -b 1
```

If you want to be able to run the bias tee program from anywhere on the command line you can also run "sudo make install".

If you have trouble running the bias tee use a multimeter to check if there is 4.5V at the SMA port, and that your powered device is actually capable of receiving power. Remember that not all LNA's can accept bias tee power. We recommend Adam 9A4QV's LNA4ALL, as you can order this from his store with the bias tee power option enabled.

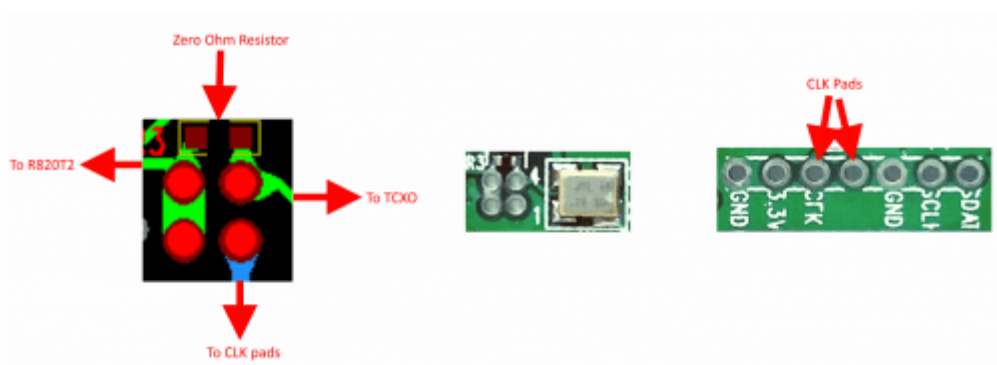
Feature 3: Selectable Clock & Expansion Headers

This is for advanced users who need to daisy chain clocks together for coherent experiments, or need to access other ports. You can either bridge the clock selector the directly with a solder bridge, or solder on a 1.27mm 2x2 header pin jumper.

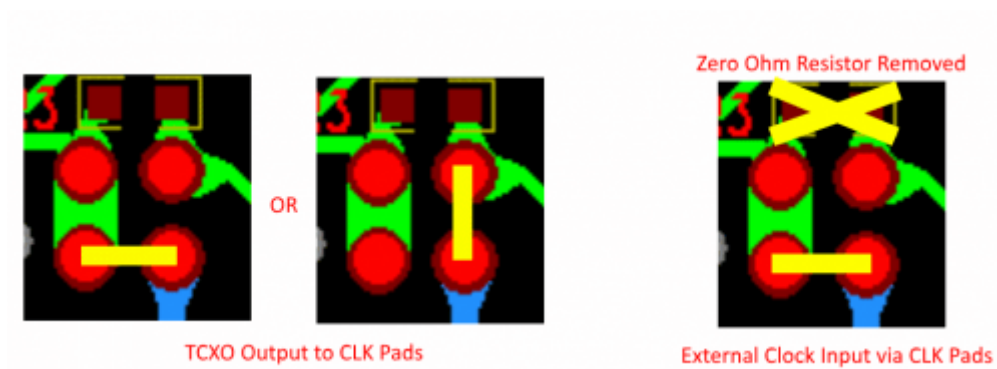
1. To add a jumper to the CLK selector header.
2. Carefully remove the 0 Ohm resistor.
3. Very carefully solder a 1.27mm 2x2 header onto the clock selector pads.

You can now select your clock input.

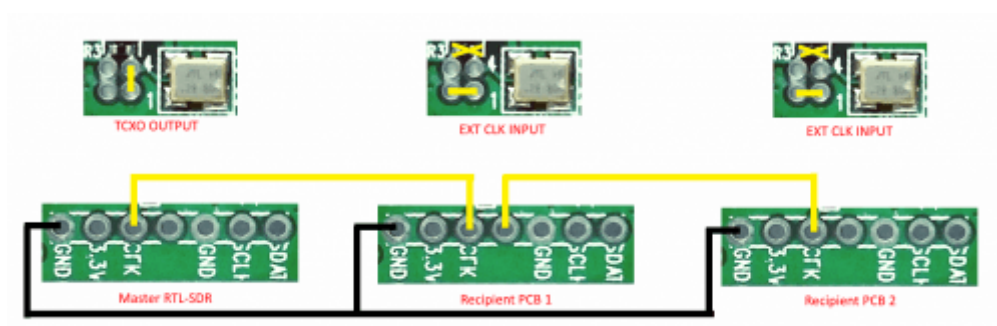
How to connect the CLK jumpers:



The first position allows you to output the dongles clock to the CLK pads. The second position allows you to input an external clock.



An example of CLK daisy chaining is shown below. One dongles TCXO is connected to two other dongles who have disconnected clocks.



LF Improvement / Bias Tee Disable Mod

If you want to improve the performance at LF/MW and do not require the bias tee, then you can remove the bias tee inductor at L13. Of course, remember that if you are really interested in VLF/LF, then it might be a better idea to use a VLF/LF compatible upconverter like the SpyVerter, which can be powered by the bias tee on the dongle. Obviously if you remove the bias tee inductor, the bias tee will no longer function, and so you'd have to power the SpyVerter externally via a USB cable.

