The buttons on Zenith’s original ‘clicker’ remote were a mechanical marvel

The Zenith Space Command, one of the first wireless television remotes ever to exist, is a monument to a time before we took the remote for granted. It also just so happened to contain one of the most influential and intriguing buttons in history.

a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin [&>a]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-white”>Button of the Month In today’s digital age, it sometimes feels like hardware has taken a back seat to the software that drives our devices. Button of the Month is a monthly column that explores the physical pieces of our phones, tablets, and controllers we interact with every day.

If you’ve ever heard someone refer to a TV remote as a “clicker,” it’s because of Robert Adler’s 1956 creation. The elegant *Star Trek*-esque gadget pioneered a durable, clicky action for controlling gadgets and a simplicity of form that has since been naively abandoned.

When Zenith first started experimenting with wireless remote controls, it used beams of light that the television could receive to communicate a command, eventually debuting the Flash-Matic in 1955. It only took a year in the market for this idea to be abandoned due to its sensitivity to full-spectrum light from the sun and lightbulbs. So Zenith’s engineers tried an even simpler approach that didn’t require batteries at all, using sound instead of light.

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>*You can make out the aluminum rods through the grille on one end.*
a:hover]:text-gray-63 [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63 dark:[&>a]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray”>Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

I found my Space Command, the 1970s model one you're seeing in our photos, in a bin of leftover remotes from my father's TV repair business. It's mostly been a retro-futuristic tchotchke on my shelf, but sometimes I pick it up and play. Pressing down a button on this tuning fork contraption gives you beautifully clicky (dare I say chalky?) feedback, almost like you're trying to ignite a flame on an outdoor grill.

The buttons stand tall and stiff, so there's little room for error. Though you don't hear the ultrasonic frequency they emit, you do hear (and feel) the clack of the hammer against the aluminum rods and a simultaneous clink of confirmation when your finger hits the body of the remote. The button-pressing experience is slow and literally clunky, but it gives you a feeling of accomplishment, even if it is just to increase the volume on the TV.

Just click this video and take a listen:

Why ultrasound? In Adler's own words, from :

> *It was clear to all of us that we couldn't use radio. We had a bunch of radio engineers here, there wouldn't have been much of a problem, but the radio went through walls. And it would work on the next door neighbor's set, or if you lived in an apartment.*
>
> *Now today, of course, you say, well, why don't you encode the*

> *signal? We can't encode the signal because we can't use 100 vacuum tubes. It was a trap. And I came up with ultrasound because I knew that ultrasound in the air would not go through walls, so it was like ordinary speaking…*
>
> *That part was logical. I didn't want it to be heard, so it had to be either subsonic or supersonic. Subsonic didn't make sense from a technical standpoint, so there you are. It had to be ultrasound.*

Zenith's mechanical Space Command lived on for a quarter of a century as the default way to control a television. Even today, some people still call their remotes "the clicker." It did have its flaws: people found that jingling keys or coins could be picked up by the TV's microphones and accidentally change the channel, and the high-pitch frequencies from the remote were discernible by pets.

Eventually, after more and more functions were added to the TV-watching experience from menus, cable, and VCRs, TV companies started to develop remotes with infrared blasters and advanced circuit boards. We ended up with dozens of squishy buttons placed sporadically over slabs of plastic that are glued together — mostly an afterthought and often tossed into the junk drawer at home.

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Modern universal remotes can be messy and complicated to the point some people started taping over large parts of the device to avoid confusion. But in the age of Roku, streaming devices have largely stripped the TV remote down to the new

essentials: play, home, volume, and voice control. We’re back to a minimalist aesthetic for the quintessential coffee table gadget, embodying some (but not all) of the values the early Space Command delivered.

Note to future TV manufacturers: consider a blocky device with four strong buttons that won’t fall between the couch cushions.

https://www.theverge.com/23810061/zenith-space-command-remote-control-button-of-the-month