



Model Railroad Hobbyist |

DCC IMPULSES

column

BRUCE PETRARCA MMR



[Click here for
reader comments](#)

My favorite iPhone apps for DCC

Ok, I was not an early adopter of smart phone technology. I frequently said that I didn't want a phone smarter than I am. I clung to my clamshell phone without messaging and with a crummy camera for a long time.

Finally, about 18 months ago, I stepped up to the plate with an iPhone 4s. No, that was not cutting edge, but it was a start. Now, I'm hooked. Last Christmas, I asked Santa for an iPhone 6s Plus.

A friend just got his first iPhone, so, in discussing with him the apps that I've added in the last 18 months, I thought that would be a good subject for a column. These are not all DCC related apps. They are the ones I have on my iPhone that I feel relate to model railroading.

There are iPad and iPhone versions of most of these apps. I will focus on the iPhone versions as that tends to be the device at my fingertips.

No, this will not be a "fair and balanced" analysis of all variants of the apps for all operating systems (i.e.: Android). I am still struggling to develop the level of comfort I desire with my iPhone. So, I only speak iOS.

Those of you with other devices may want to check out the apps I like on the iPhone and see if you can find similar (or identical) apps for your device. Please share them with the rest of us in the on-line blog, by clicking on the "reader comments" link above or at the end of this column.

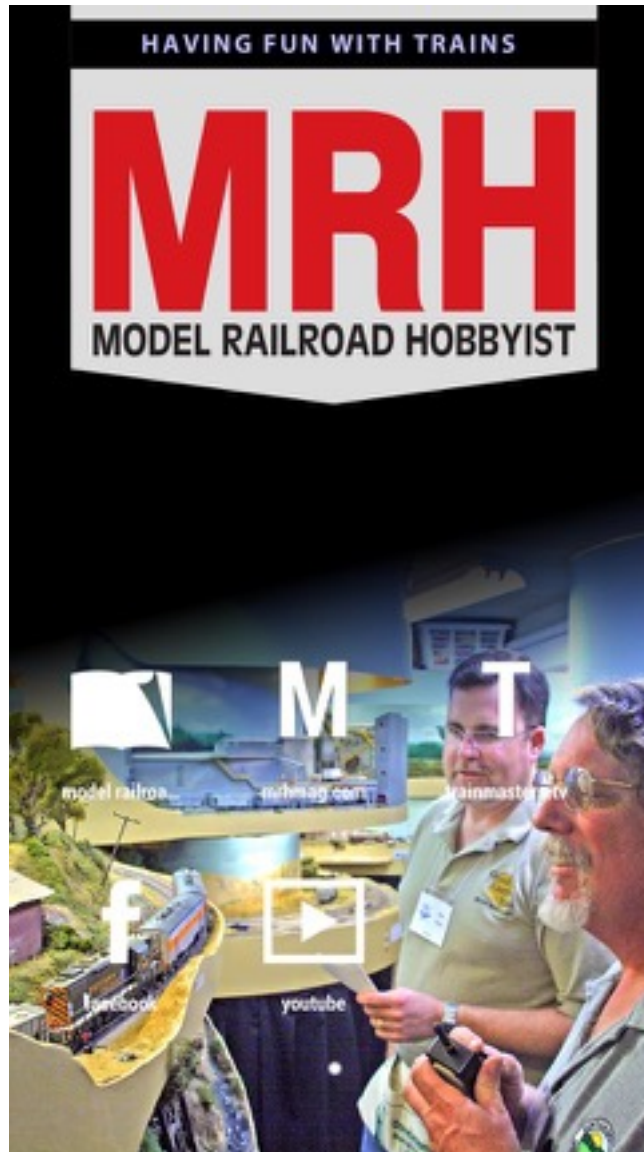
There are probably lots of fun things for model railroaders in these apps that I haven't used or researched. Let us know your favorite things, too.

So, go to the App Store on your iPhone and find these gems and enjoy.

The MRH app

Of course, I want easy access to my columns and all the other fun things on MRH. Early on, I used **Good Reader** (\$5) to read the downloaded columns. Then I got into the MRH app [1]. So much easier. I leave the magazine on the web and just call up what I want when I need it.

1. MRH App - leave the magazine on the web and read what you want when you want it. The app is free.

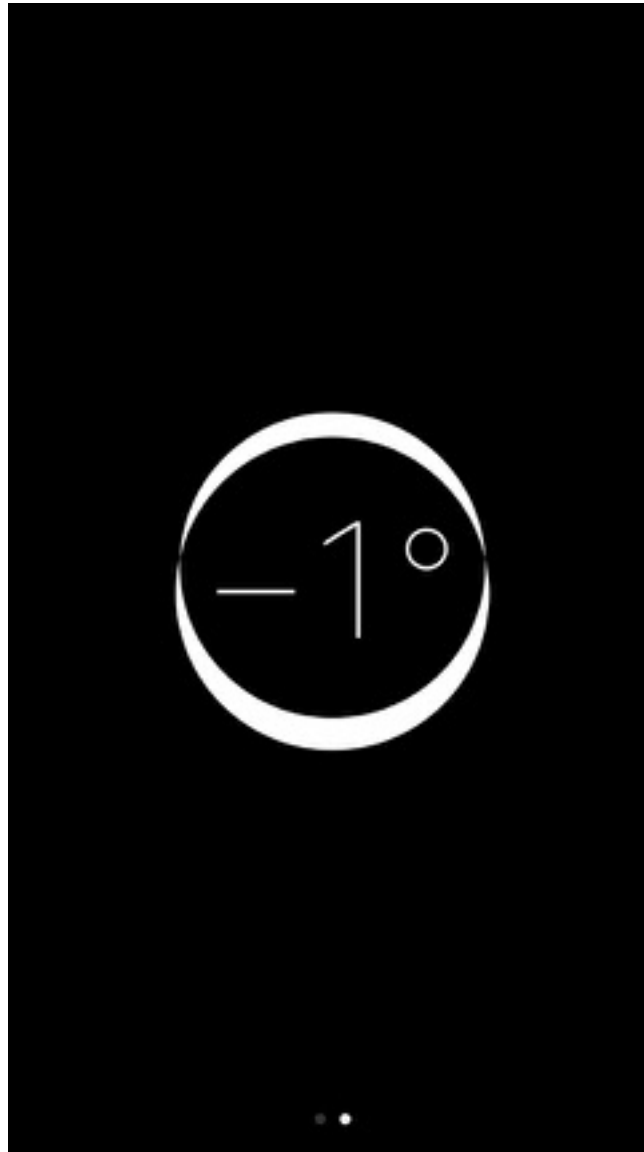


If you are a Trainmasters.TV subscriber, you can have access to all your content through the MRH app, too. All you need is an internet connection with enough bandwidth and you are good to go.

Compass

Compass is an iOS component that has been around for several revisions. The main screen has lots of helpful information about heading, coordinates and elevation. However, swipe to the next screen and you have a marvelous level [2] that will tickle the hearts of model railroaders.

2. The level as displayed in the Compass app. The app is included with iOS.



Decibel 10th

This is a convenient and free app to turn your iPhone into a sound level meter. Okay, I splurged and paid 99¢ to eliminate the advertisements on my version [3].

3. Decibel 10th screen with ads removed. The app is free, removing ads costs 99¢. If you have ads, they cover part of the top banner, where it says "Avg Quiet Street" in this screen shot.



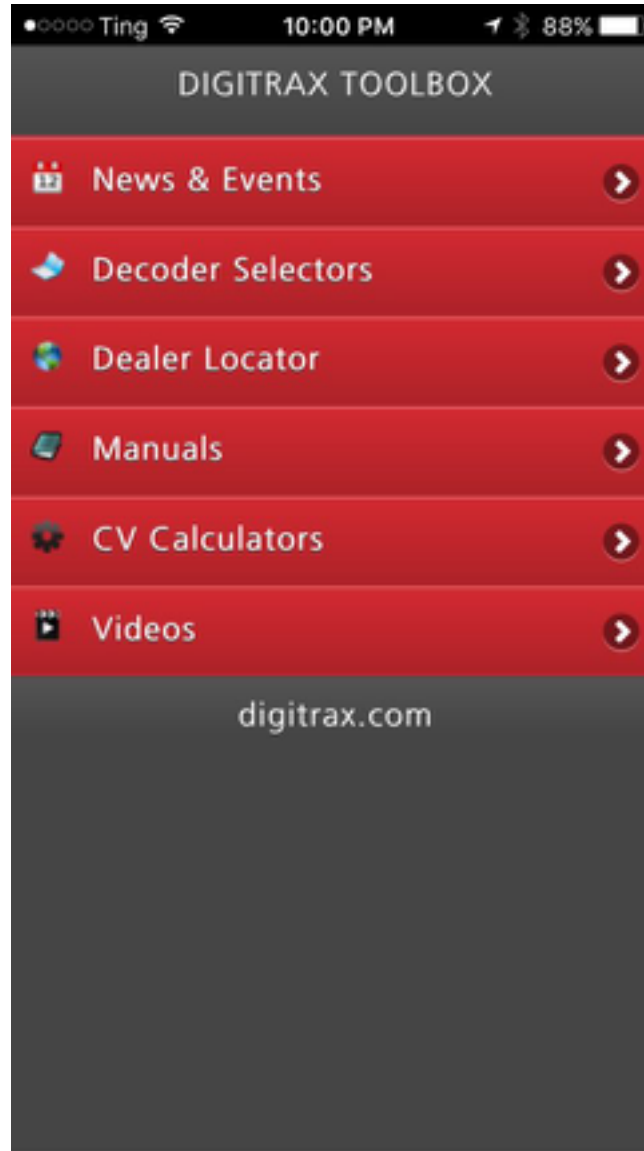
The display shows the history of the sound level over time in the top graph. The dB meter shows current sound level. The bottom display shows the current, maximum and peak sound levels. No, I don't have a precise definition about what the difference is between maximum and peak sound level.

I use this app to fine tune sound decoders. It also helps test speakers. In the field, I've used it to verify the level difference between the motor and the horn or bell of locos. Great app.

Digitrax Toolbox

This app [4] allows you access to the data on the Digitrax.com web site, but customized for your iPhone display.

4. Digitrax Toolbox allows easy iPhone access to the data from the Digitrax.com web site. The app is free.



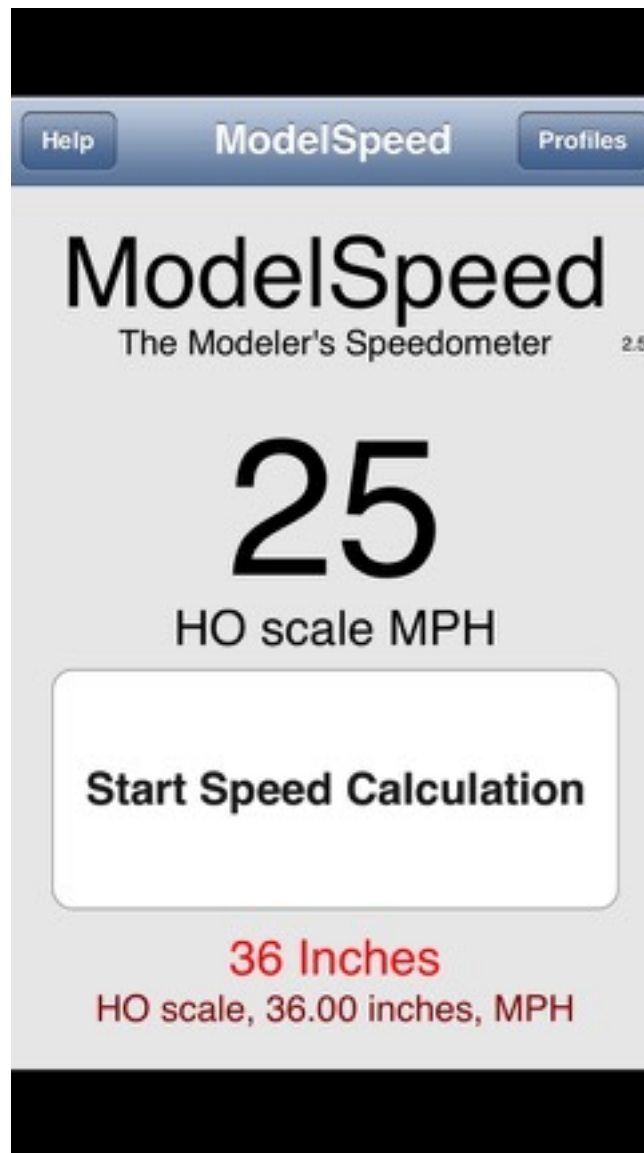
ModelSpeed

This is not a free app. It costs 99¢. This allows you to store a bunch of profiles, bring them up at will and use them.

Here is the **HO scale 36 inch** profile [5] that I created. I lay a yard stick beside the track and bring up the app. Tap the button when the loco is

opposite the first end of the yard stick. Tap again when it is opposite the other end. The iPhone will display the average scale speed through that distance.

5. ModelSpeed app to calculate scale speed through a set distance by measuring the elapsed time. Costs 99¢.



This app handles fourteen scale ratios from 1:1 to Z-gauge.

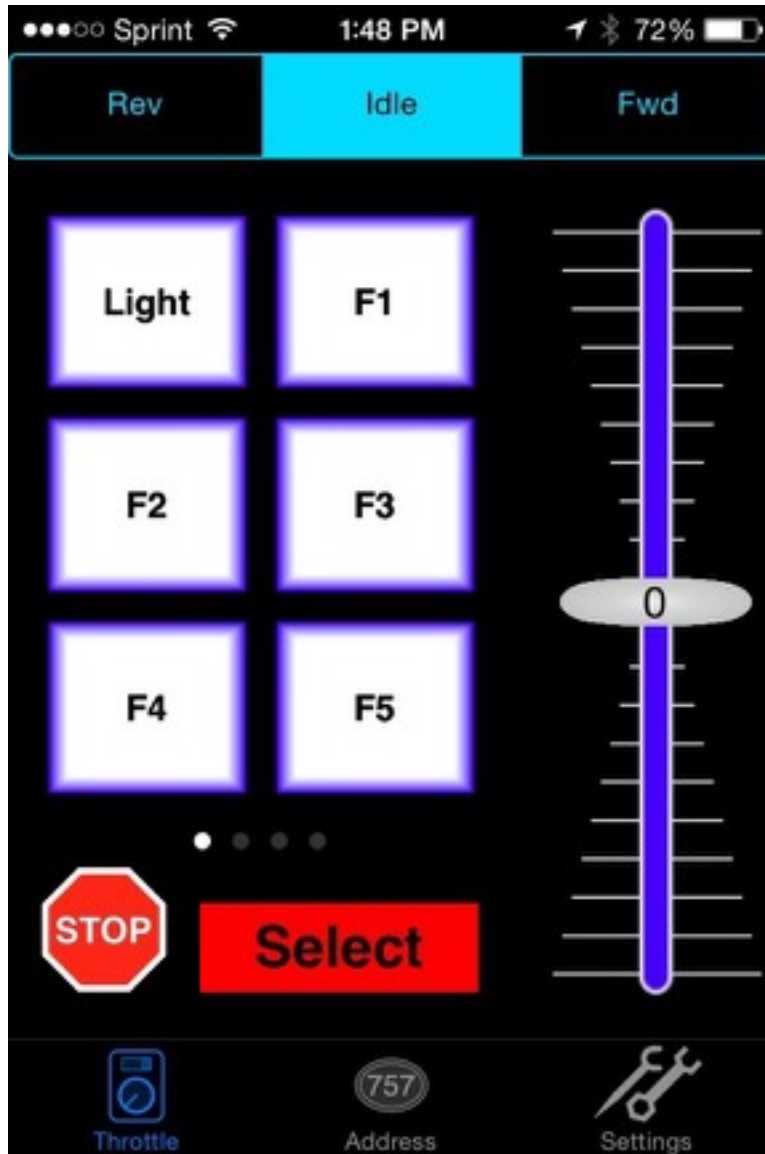
WiThrottle

One of the most widely used model railroad apps on the iPhone is the WiThrottle suite.

I say suite because there are two versions:

- WiThrottleLite [6] - which is free
- WiThrottle - which costs \$9.99 and can be purchased as an "in app purchase" from the WiThrottleLite version

6. WiThrottleLite running a loco. The Lite version is free.



Okay, what do you get for the ten bucks? The paid version allows the control of two locos at the same time and easy consisting of the locos (à la the DT40x series Digitrax throttle). In addition, it provides revenue for the folks who wrote the software.

Either version requires the DCC system be connected to a computer running JMRI. The computer must be connected to a WiFi router. The remote phone must be connected to the same WiFi node as the computer.

WiThrottle will show a list of locos from the JMRI roster on the computer. Just select the loco(s) on the iPhone or iPad and go. I hesitate to mention iPad in this context, as I feel that even the iPad mini is too large to use as a hand-held throttle. However, the smaller iPhones are fine.

One complaint about WiThrottle is the fact that speed control is by a slider. I prefer a knob but find that the slider isn't as bad a compromise as I originally thought. Try it, you may like it.

Some folks purchase iPhones that are no longer usable as phones for such service. These are available on eBay and, sometimes, a local retailer. They only need to have the WiFi portion of the phone functional. They will need internet access to download the app and any updates to the app.

Where else can you get a wireless throttle for your DCC system for a few bucks?

BlueRail Trains

The folks at BlueRail Trains have created an app for wireless train control that sends proprietary commands (not DCC compatible) from your smartphone to their control board in a loco. Their first offering was an iPhone app for the locos that Bachmann was marketing as having E-Z APP [7] train control.

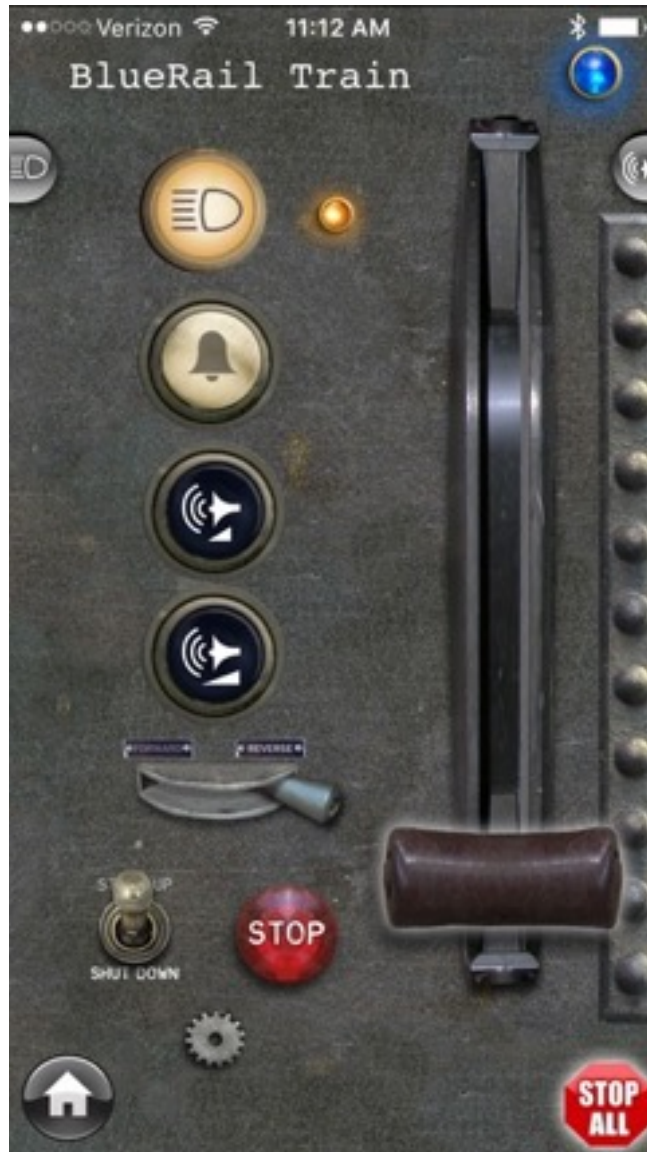
Once again, speed control is via a slider. The presentation is more pleasing than the WiThrottle screen, to me.

7. Bachmann's E-Z APP train control screen. The app is free.



Recently, the BlueRail Trains folks have started shipping their own modules and have created their own apps for both the iPhone and the Android system. Either app will run either the BlueRail board or a Bachmann loco. The BlueRail app has control features, like for ditch lights, that are not available on the Bachmann locos. And the look of the control board is more authentic than either the Bachmann app or WiThrottle.

8. BlueRail Trains app showing the loco control screen. The realism is indicative of the attention to detail by the BlueRail Trains folks. The app is free.



Cameras

The camera on the iPhone is the most widely used camera in the world today. That's an amazing statement, considering that Apple is not a camera company. Why is the camera so popular? It is always with you and gives good to very good photos and videos.

The quality of the video and photo work varies with the hardware. Each generation gets better.

My hint as a photography instructor: use the phone in horizontal [9] or landscape orientation. I know this runs counter to many apps, such as most of those mentioned in this column, that force you into vertical orientation.

9. Horizontal orientation of the phone gives more pleasing photos than vertical most of the time. Frequently there is better framing, too.



The iPhone camera is not enough, in my opinion, to shoot still photos of models on the layout. A Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) camera delivers significantly better depth of field. However, to achieve that result, requires good to excellent lighting, a tripod and a stationary subject. Stopping down to f-stops in excess of f/29 gives excellent depth of field. Even with a lot of light, the resulting exposure will frequently exceed a second. Ken Patterson discussed this in his column in the June 2016 issue of MRH. Check out the article and his photos at model-railroad-hobbyist.com/magazine/mrh2016-06-jun/whats-neat.

10. Vertical orientation (portrait) of the same photo as [9] gives less of the subject and more of the unwanted background.



Ok, if you aren't that picky and don't mind having foreground items out of focus while the main subject is in focus, the iPhone may be your ticket. Besides, you already have it and will probably have it with you.

There you have it: a suite of model railroad apps for under \$20.

How did we model before smartphones? With much more difficulty, is my mantra.

Please share your experiences, ideas and (especially) non Apple apps. Just click on the Reader Feedback icon at the beginning or the end of the column. While you are there, I encourage you to rate the column. “Awesome” is always appreciated. Thanks.

Until next month, I wish you green boards in all your endeavors.