

A PRACTICAL COMPARISON OF THE UNIDEN BCD396XT and GRE PSR-500 HANDHELD SCANNERS

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As promised here are my thoughts on these two scanners. Just for review, my first digital scanner was the Uniden BC296XLT which came out in the winter of 2003. My experiences with this scanner were mostly positive ones, but I was somewhat of an outcast since (for reasons mentioned in previous e-mails) many chose the GRE made Pro-96. When the next generation of scanners came out, I chose a PSR500 over the BC396T. I had talked to a few people who had been dissatisfied with their BC396T so I have never regretted my decision to go to the GRE made radios. I also purchased a Pro-197 in December of 2008 which runs almost constantly at my home.

Just last week I had an opportunity to help Jim Baker program and use his BCD396XT. The first thing that I did was to read as much as I could off of the Internet about this scanner. What I found was that the BCD396XT was a great improvement over the previous model. From what I have read, Uniden tried very hard to listen to customers who asked for certain features and improvements. I read about many features that were included in the scanner, but no matter how much one reads, it isn't until one gets a chance to actually touch the radio that one can really understand the way it works. I went to Jim's house with two software programs loaded into my trusty old laptop, along with a file that I had obtained from Joshua Sanders (thanks). I had made some minor changes to help make listening in NKY easier, but full well expected to program the scanner, give a little demonstration on how to operate it and then leave.

Unfortunately, life never works as one would expect. For some reason, I could not get the laptop to communicate to the scanner at Jim's home. I did take about an hour to bring Jim up to speed on scanners in general and shared as much knowledge as I could.

Jim was a gracious host and I promised to read up a little more and return. Jim and I had gained each others trust to a point that he was willing to allow me to take his scanner home to work out the details of programming. After trying to give Jim one of my scanners as a show of good faith, I finally agreed to take the radio with me and return when I was really prepared.

Again, I returned to the Internet and this time figured out quickly how to get the scanner and computer talking to one another. After taking about 5 minutes to upload the file I was able to begin playing.

First some observations. I am going to assume that most readers are familiar with the PSR500/Pro106 type scanners. With that in mind, I will attempt to contrast the GRE made handhelds with the BCD396XT. The first thing that I noticed was that the 396 was significantly smaller than the 500. Though about 3/4 the size, the 396 is very solid and felt good in my hands. There are two buttons on the side of the radio that would be in the same location as a PTT key on an HT. The top one is the FUNCTION key. Below it is the MENU key. There are 16 keys on the front panel with the display on top and the speaker below the key pad. On the top of the radio is a single scroll knob used for volume, squelch and a few other functions. At first I did not like this one button method, but once I got used to it, I began to appreciate the advantages. In order to adjust the volume, one pushed down on the knob, the display showed a line for the volume and as you adjusted the control, you could see the setting as well as hear the difference if the scanner was active. A push of the FUNCTION button along with pushing down on the knob gave you the same control over the squelch. What this prevented was any accidental changing of either of these settings (an issue that I do have with my 500).

On the back of the scanner is a large swivel type belt clip. Personally, I did not love this clip (I have the same thing on an ICOM HT). What I don't like is that with the clip installed, it doubled the depth of the scanner. Without the swivel clip, the radio will fit easily into almost any pocket which is my favorite method of carrying a scanner. I would have preferred a small metal belt clip on the back, but that is a personal preference.

A push of the power button (all of the buttons have multiple functions) and the radio comes on. In my case it started with all of the banks active. I quickly realized that scanning the entire contents of memory was a bad idea. The 396 has lots of memory (can hold 25,000 items). All of these can be placed into up to 99 banks which can be toggled on and off as needed. For experienced users, one can divide a system into separate banks and sub-banks which can be turned on and off with a pre selected key stroke. I placed most of everything that I carry in one of my V-Folders in my PSR500 and it only took up about 12% of the total memory of the 396. As long as you can keep track of all of the different banks and sub banks, it can be a very powerful method of scanning.

I am sure that the most important question on my mind was how well does the scanner do at receiving P-25 digital signals. This will always be subjective. Side by side with my PSR500, I must say that the BCD396XT sounded very good. It was at least as good and maybe just a little better over all at giving a good undistorted sound. The 396 does lack a little in audio power, obviously due to the size and position of the speaker, but not to a degree where I could not hear it. I also found that in my car with an amplified speaker, the sound was never as powerful as I would like compared with the PSR500. Neither of these issues were major problems but worth noting.

I only compared the two scanners while using their stock antennas. The 396 uses the SMA type connector, which I don't love simply because most of my antennas are set for BNC. I had read that the 396 was a little less sensitive and very good at preventing overload. I would agree to both of those statements. Interestingly, while listening to the Butler Co system from Northern KY, I noticed that the 396 will still give a decent sound quality with a very weak (maybe one bar on the S-Meter) when my 500 would sometimes not sound as good with three or four bars signal. This is just a comment on the way that the S-Meters seem to be set up. Both seemed to be able to hear signals from different systems fairly comparably.

As far as features, the 396 has many. Too many for me to have become proficient at in the short time that I had to play with the radio. Some of these features include close call, band scope, service search, programmable search, NAC detect, CTCSS or DCS codes in analog mode etc. Many of these features can be performed in succession by being toggled on and off thru key strokes. Some features that sound interesting, but I did not try include GPS mode, the Fire Tone Out, or IF frequency exchange. I have only began to mention all of the things that this little radio does, and from what I saw, it does them very well. The owners manual (like the PSR500's) comes on CD and is about the size of a small encyclopedia (273 pages) when printed out. No wonder it is intimidating to most new owners!

One thing that I really like is the ability to set-up a "start-up key" for the 396. In addition to the radio powering on in the same mode that you turned it off, you can also set it up to come on with a pre-selected group of banks or other settings thru the use of this start up key. I used this option so that Jim (the 396's owner) could feel free to play with his radio, but can always return the radio to just his local systems (I had Cinti and Kenton County PD and FD) in this configuration. I believe that one can set as many as 10 start up key combinations. As far as the display, it works pretty well. I had some trouble seeing some of the smaller fonts, but not really any worse than on the PSR500. The display color can easily be changed to any of about 6 colored backgrounds. My daughter liked that feature ;-). One of my biggest disappointments was with the backlight options. I have gotten spoiled by the PSR500's ability to light up whenever there is traffic so I can easily see who I am hearing. The 396 gives several time options, including infinite, keypress, which all worked okay. There is also one for "squelch" which I expected to be like the PSR. I could not get it to stay on beyond a few seconds after the radio's squelch opened. I may have been doing something wrong, but I think I tried all of the settings and none quite matched the way the PSR works. Also, I am pretty sure that the settings are universal instead of selectable by object in the PSR. Again, this is not a show stopper, but worth mentioning.

Here is the bottom line. The BCD396XT is an excellent alternative to the PSR500 or the Pro-106. It has very good digital reception and is as good as or better in many features. Analog reception is very good as well. The radio is complicated but only due to the fact that it has so much power and capabilities. It is more closely set up to the way that most of us have traditionally set up banks in our scanners. The only downfall that I see is that there is not as much support locally for this radio. If you choose the 396 you will have to do a little bit of work on your own.

Keep in mind that there are several computer programs that are available for programming and running the 396. I tried two. One is called Proscan which has a 30 day

full trial. The other is a free program aptly called Freescan. Both worked well and I'd be hard pressed to select one as better than the other (each has advantages).

There is a great file in the Monix Files area that can be an excellent starting point (or in many cases the only one that you need). This is titled the "monixunidenproscan.txt". You will need to download the file, then the Proscan program and then take time to upload it to the scanner. Once this is done, you are ready to go.

I hope that this e-mail helps people make an informed decision between these two rival digital scanners.

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Below is the link to the file mentioned above:

<http://f1.grp.yahooofs.com/v1/IOWBS7qVefuHBOMDriA9pSJqoc5bDnMh2TX7n7opqnSHC07CtVIHMhvDJ0i8lu97i2z00Q9vJrykMewq4J4/Uniden%20Files/monixunidenproscan.txt>

Here is one web site that has a comparison between the two scanners. I cannot help but noting that the web site seems to be a BCD396 site. Interestingly, this site states that digital quality is better on the PSR500 especially on simulcast sites. I did not see that when I compared them. Actually, I gave a very slight advantage to the 396... I am certain that Radio Reference has many comparisons as well.

<http://bcd396xt.com/comparison.html>