



When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

The Car Radio Industry: Traps for the unwary, but a career for Vic Humphrey!

Old-style car radios are not dead; they can still be retro-fitted logically into cars of comparable vintage. But whereas the physical attributes of an older car may respond predictably to tender loving care, vintage car radios in particular can be pesky gadgets that may or may not fit readily — or work well — in restored vehicles. Having been a specialist in the field, Vic Humphrey's observations about the industry should be of interest to readers who like to listen while they drive.

If what follows betrays my own personal reservations about old, vibrator powered car radios, so be it!

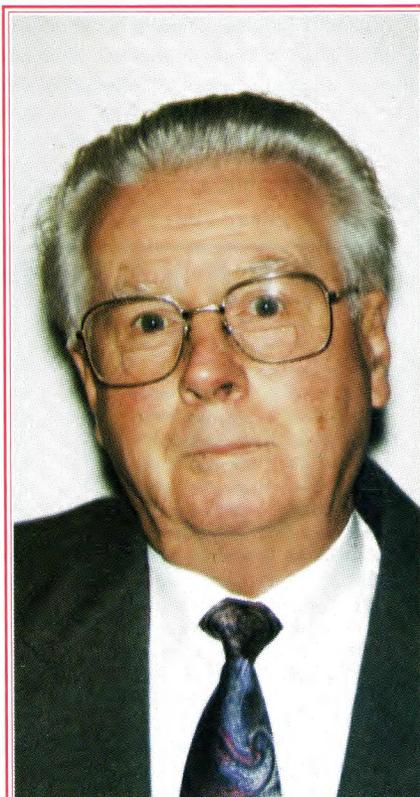
Over the years, I have derived considerable satisfaction from assembling all manner of domestic receivers, amplifiers and associated electronic what-nots. On a shelf or occasional table, or occupying pride of place against a feature wall, they have rested comfortably in the situation allotted them — a source of on-going satisfaction and an integral part of the domestic scene.

But unlike an ordinary home, yesterday's cars lacked a convenient, uniform environment for an on-board radio receiver. Installing them could be a real chore — especially in the days when the HT supply involved the use of a genemotor!

In a car, the driver had to be provided with a steering column, gear shift and handbrake, foot pedals, switches, buttons and instruments, all within easy reach.

By the time the planners had installed facilities for the passengers, their baggage and their needs, the space available for a radio was 'whatever happened to be left over' — not much, in a small car, and generally of indeterminate shape and position!

Likely as not, a 'general-purpose' car radio could end up as a chunky steel box crammed with components, and of dimensions such that it could hopefully be mounted somewhere. Or it might comprise two such boxes, and/or a separate loudspeaker.



Vic Humphrey — a recent photo. He spent the latter years of his career developing installation kits and literature to simplify the procedure for particular receivers and cars.

If the available space was inaccessible — horrible thought — the controls might even be grouped on an outrigger

panel, connected to the box by Bowden cables!

There was also a potential 'hash' problem to bear in mind, arising in part from the receiver's inbuilt vibrator HT supply, and in part from the vehicle's own ignition system. Both had to be sufficiently suppressed for the receiver to log distant stations, on its pitifully small on-board antenna!

Installation was essentially a young man's work — lying awkwardly on one's back, legs draped over the front seat squab and head against the clutch and steering column, while he/you grappled with brackets and cables up under the dash. Nor could he/you forget that the whole procedure had to be reversed, if the contents of the steel box(es) ever needed to be accessed for repair or adjustment. Yuck!

Our first car radio

As it happens, I was a much younger man myself, when we tackled the development and installation of the first *Radio & Hobbies* 'Karsset' for home construction (published in the May 1949 issue). At the time, I had been emboldened by detailed work on vibrators presented at the IRE World Radio Convention (Sydney, 1938) by the late Graham Hall; also an expression of interest by another friend, the late Doug Ferguson, to develop and market a line of vibrator transformers.

Having contemplated the disincentives and possible complaints from disillusioned readers, I was in two minds whether to publish the article at all. For-

tunately I/we opted for what we regarded as 'a step in the dark', discovering in the process that: (1) *R&H* readers of the day were keen to tackle a do-it-yourself car radio; and (2) they were not daunted by the possible problems outlined above.

Faced with this surprising reaction and with no back copies left of the original article, we even featured a second, updated version in the March 1952 issue — 'The 1952 Karset', developed by staff member (the late) Raymond Howe. Pictured here as Fig.2, it reflects much of the thinking that characterised general-purpose car radios of the period.

While we conceded that American style vehicles might accommodate a single unit receiver, such was not true of the commonly smaller British and continental models. This being the case, both *R&H* Karsets had occupied three smaller boxes: (1) the receiver proper, (2) the vibrator power supply and (3) the loudspeaker.

Hopefully, the receiver could be mounted by brackets to the under-lip of the fascia panel, so placed as not to tangle with the gear shift stick or the shins of a possible centre-front passenger. In a really small car it might even be mounted in, or in place of, the glove box. The power supply and loudspeaker box (again hopefully) could be bolted elsewhere to the engine bulkhead.

Conversely, for a large vehicle, the dimensions were such that the power unit could be attached to the rear of the receiver, to constitute in effect a single large box, with knobs and dial still accessible.

Of the 1952 Karset we claimed that, if constructed exactly as per the published diagram, there should be no problem with vibrator hash; while a properly installed telescopic antenna and the possible use of suppression measures should cope with ignition noise.

So said, the do-it-yourself exercise didn't seem quite as off-putting as it might first have appeared, and in the knowledge that members of the magazine staff had been through the exercise in detail on readers' behalf. Even so, as I suggested earlier, there was a lot more to the exercise than building a mains powered receiver, attaching a two-metre wire antenna, and perching it on the mantel shelf!

Car radio enthusiast

But how did I get started on this theme in the first place? Answer: because a long-time reader called Victor



The *R&H* 'Karset', as pictured in the March 1952 issue. It was assumed that the receiver could be supported under and behind the dash, with the controls accessible to the driver and/or the front seat passenger.

Humphrey remarked to me that his prime interest in electronics had been in car radios — "not just the later models using transistors, but the ones where we did things the hard way, using valves and vibrators"! He even enthused about how expert he and his contemporaries had become in reclaiming faulty vibrators!

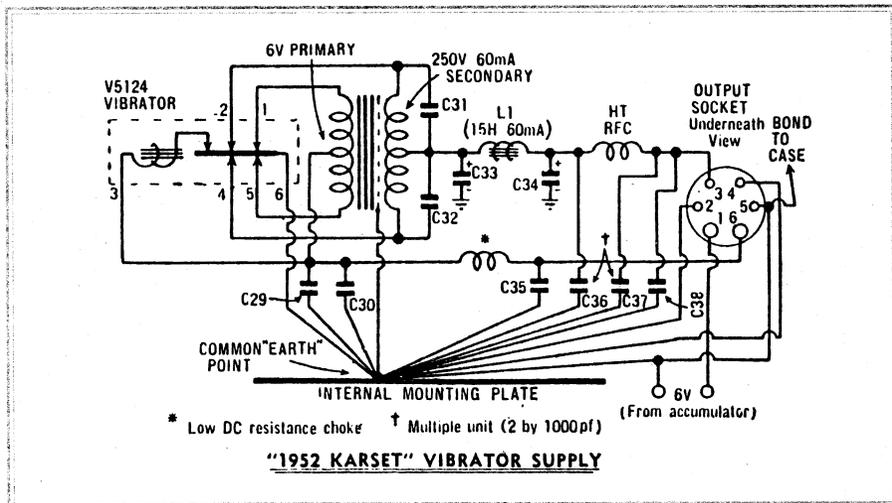
"Align and re-dress the contacts until no sparking was visible in the dark, and they'd work like a bought one!"

I was intrigued, to say the least. How could an old-time wireless enthusiast develop such an unusual partiality?

My first contact with Vic Humphrey

was a fax/letter passed on to me via the EA office, suggesting that the B&W Kelvinator TV receiver mentioned in this column for April 1995 was probably a re-badged HMV model F4. As a former HMV/EMI staffer, he was well aware of the re-badging arrangement between HMV and Kelvinator — 'TVs for fridges'.

Vic's address put him only a few blocks away from me and, contacted by phone, he said that he had never been directly concerned with television; his specialty having been in the car radio market. Although officially retired at age 74, he still dabbled in the field at in-



Reprinted from the March 1952 issue, this diagram emphasises the use of single point earthing within the vibrator power supply — a measure intended to limit the penetration of 'noisy' earth currents into the signal path.

living in suburban Roseville and working night shift in the city was no longer to his liking. So he bought a pineapple farm at Nambour, where he could spend his days with shorts, sun-hat and a tractor!

As for Sid Colville, he was also a licenced pilot and spent time flying with 'Smithy', while also experimenting with airborne two-way radio. A highlight for Vic Humphrey was when he was offered a flight out of Mascot on a RFDS (Flying Doctor) de Havilland Dragon, piloted by a man called 'Hughie'. Vic's job was to squat on a patient stretcher and lower a weighted copper wire antenna from a large fishing reel through a hole in the fuselage floor — reeling it in again prior to landing.

During this period, he said, Sid Colville was manufacturing small two-way radio equipment, genemotor powered, for the Flying Doctor, Forestry Commission, etc.

Sid found the going tough during the war and moved into smaller premises in 'Australia House' opposite Wynyard Park, where he continued to specialise in two-way radio equipment. Vic recalls that Sid Colville passed away at Glenbrook, NSW, in his 70's.

In the meantime Vic Humphrey himself had a chequered career, spending two years full-time at the Marconi School to complete a broadcast operator's course; held a part-time position with 2GB as a cadet engineer; worked as a service technician for Marcus Clarks and Nicholsons; and for two years (1943-5) as a final tester for Breville Radio. There, he was involved with landmine detectors and other equipment for the armed forces.

First encounter

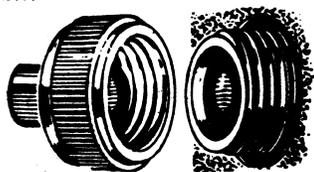
While all this seemed to foreshadow a broadly based involvement with radio technology, Vic's next move led to his 50-year career in car radio. It came about because, while employed by Nicholsons, he had encountered another technician called A.W. (Wally) Barrs, who had worked for Thom and Smith (Tasma).

At the time, Tasma had become involved in producing car radios and had done a deal with the Ford Motor Company, out of which came the Tasma-Ford car receiver — with a fortuitous blending of the two trade marks. Keen to do the right thing, Fred Thom had opened a depot in East Sydney, trading as 'Tasma Car Radio Sales & Service', managed by the aforesaid Wally Barrs.

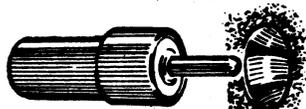
Unfortunately, due largely to wartime conditions, the depot proved more of a



TYPE AT145 SUITS: FERRIS, AUTOVOX, PHILIPS, PVE, WALBAR, TELECOND, ROADSTAR CAR RADIOS.



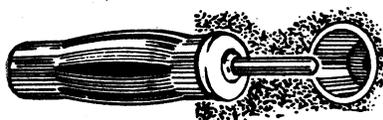
TYPE AT147 SUITS: AWA, MOPAR CAR RADIOS.



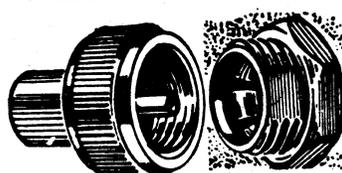
TYPE AT151 SUITS: ASTOR, AIRCHIEF, FORD, MOPAR, BMC, AWA, PHILIPS CAR RADIOS. AWA PORTABLE RADIOS.



TYPE AT150 SUITS: ASTOR, AIRCHIEF, FORD, MOPAR, BMC CAR RADIOS.



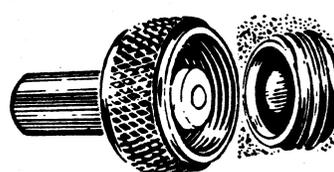
TYPE AT152 SUITS: HMV, PLAYMATE AND ALL JAPANESE CAR RADIOS. HMV, KRIESLER PORTABLES.



TYPE AT146 SUITS: AWA, MOPAR CAR RADIOS.



TYPE AT148 SUITS: AWA, FORD, WALBAR, AUSTRAL, TELEPHONE CAR RADIOS. STROMBERG CARLSON PORTABLE.



TYPE AT149 SUITS: ASTOR, AIRCHIEF, FORD, ECLIPSE, MOPAR, BMC CAR RADIOS.

It helps to have the right connectors on hand: a range of options advertised by Wally Barrs in *Mingay's Electrical Weekly*, October 11, 1963.

hindrance than a help to Tasma and Fred Thom decided to close it down. Wally Barrs, on the other hand, felt that the venture had a future and decided to take over and operate it as his own company: 'A.W. Barrs Car Radio'.

True to title, and with the support of Jack Purcell, Wally acted as an agent for Tasma, AWA and EMI — the last named handling British-made car radios intended mainly for Austin/Morris/Wolseley vehicles. For extra revenue, Barrs fitted police and other service vehicles with two-way radio and picked up a fair number of private orders for large, custom-built radio/amplifier systems for prosperous customers.

In 1945, Vic Humphrey was offered a position in Wally Barrs' company as a technician — a tantalising decision for a young man who, by then, had inherited responsibilities as the family breadwinner.

On finally accepting the offer, he found himself in the world of car radio — one where the receivers were often large and heavy and incompatible with the vehicle in which they had to be mounted.

Installation problems

Some even required the installation of customised angle iron mounting brackets; others relied on tenuous mechanical remote tuning via Bowden cables. Still others involved an audio/power unit in the engine compartment, with a 25mm (1") hole through the firewall for a multi-shielded connecting cable. It was a cruel environment for old-style electronic equipment, calling in some cases for a canvas cover by way of added protection.

It didn't take long for Vic Humphrey to appreciate the urgent need for manufacturers generally to 'tailor' both vehicles and radios to complement each other.

Back in the 1950s, however, the only off-the-shelf installation hardware comprised a few bits and pieces to suit a very limited range of vehicles and receivers, usually supplied by the receiver manufacturers. The Tasma-Ford arrangement was a rare example.

Ahead lay the job of developing and documenting the routines for fitting other receivers to other cars. The points to take note of: polarity, position, connectors, cables, brackets, fascia trim plates, fixing screws, etc. Such preparedness should reduce materially the frustration, tedium and wasted time of anyone tackling installations on an otherwise random, 'one-off' basis.

Vic must certainly have found the en-

vironment challenging, and I gather that he burned a deal of 'midnight oil' compiling information about cars and radios, and sketching bits of hardware that would facilitate and speed installation. It was to become a way of life!

Joining the staff as a technician, he was progressively promoted to service supervisor and administrator. In 1952 he moved to Brisbane, with a commission to found and manage a branch there. But largely for family reasons, he returned to Sydney where he became part of the management team, responsible for a new wholesale division.

EMI/HMV Car Radio

In 1953, Vic resigned from the Wally Barrs Group and joined EMI as field engineer responsible for car radio products, including the development of installation kits and literature. From there he moved to Manager of the Car Radio Division, becoming involved in sales. 1957 saw him promoted to National Sales Manager for EMI's Car Radio Division — a position that he held until 1969.

It was while Vic was at EMI that he saw the Company's expansion into television, and observed their arrangement with Kelvinator and its re-badging of EMI/HMV B&W TV receivers. He did a course in TV with the Australian Radio College, but while paying spontaneous tribute to the late Rex Lackey as a lecturer, decided to stay with car radio as a career.

Vic's on-going interest in documentation was evidenced in a conference on car radio, organised by the Sydney Division of the IRE in August 1963. During the preceding years, he said, a lot of effort had been directed into the development of mechanical push-button tuning systems, with many of the sets imprecise and difficult to install.

Vic pointed out that English cars were at the time gravitating towards a space in the fascia of 7x7x2 inches, which was restricting but at least a figure for receiver manufacturers to aspire to. Continental cars had tended to follow the English lead, but often required appropriate fascia trims to ensure a professional finish.

American cars provided more space, but used variously styled trims meant to favour the set-maker contracted by the car manufacturer; they also served, quite deliberately, to disadvantage rival set makers — thereby compounding installation problems.

Japanese and Australian car makers offered still further variations and the only logical way, overall, for Australian set makers to respond was to make their receivers as small and adaptable as possible, with a range of optional back-up installation kits to suit vehicles popular with Australian motorists.

The solid state era

By that time, transistors had taken over from valves and vibrators, revolutionising receiver design but still not avoiding the selective procedures to mate particular sets with individual car makes and models. (In conversation, Vic conceded that, while transistor sets were technically convenient, it took a while for them to catch up with the sheer station-to-station performance of the better valve models).

About this time, Vic sought the cooperation of Cummings Engineering in Balmain, to fabricate installation components for EMI. They did so, and later became a supplier to the industry of mounting hardware, trim plates, loudspeaker boxes, etc.

A typical EMI/HMV product leaflet dated 1969 lists three current transistor receivers, 70-odd cars to which they might conceivably need to be fitted, 10-odd antenna options, front and rear loudspeakers and a long list of installation kits appropriate to the various combinations.

In 1970, Vic resigned from EMI and accepted a job in Melbourne as Assistant Manager of the Car Radio Division of Electronic Industries (Astor), responsible for installation kits and literature.

On the assumption that there were alternative career paths at EMI, some questioned his devotion to car radio 'with all the fiddly bits' that he had had to worry about — brackets, leads, antennas and procedures. Vic's answer was that, once having come to grips with the 'fiddly bits', they added up to the very reason why he seldom had to worry about competition for his job. Few others were willing to face up to the complications!

To AWA and Sydney

Unfortunately, the move to Melbourne also proved to have its drawbacks at a family level and, within a couple of years, he transferred to AWA as their Victorian Car Radio Sales Manager, with an oblique involvement in automotive air conditioning.

More to the point, however, the move

provided an option of returning to Sydney as Assistant Commonwealth Manager (Car Radio) and Account Executive for Chrysler.

Amongst Vic's papers is a copy of an unusual personal letter from Ron Harris, a Director of EIL to John Bailey, AGM of AWA, commenting on the move. The final par reads:

I can only say we all believe you have acquired an excellent executive and we are sorry to see him leave. He has open invitation to return, so you had better be kind to him!

In fact, Vic completed the career circle in 1975 by rejoining A.W. Barrs as Merchandising Manager. When it later became the Walbar Division of Philips Car Radio (Rhodes, NSW), Vic became Manager, answerable to the GM in Melbourne. His job: responsibility for the manufacture of car radio products and accessories — including the 'fiddly bits' that he'd first envisaged at Wally Barrs in the forties!

But, come 1980, he had just celebrated his 60th birthday and how to manage his affairs in retirement was high on the agenda. That's when he formed Humphrey's Auto Sound Accessories Pty Ltd, and set up a small factory at Gladesville, NSW. He kept right on devising and manufacturing car installation kits for companies such as Philips, AWA and Eurovox, along with 'OE' (original equipment) components which were supplied to car assemblers for inclusion in the basic vehicle, to ready it for radio installation.

For good measure, he also organised vacuum-forming facilities to make housings for extras such as loudspeakers and stereo cassette players, to special order.

One thing Vic did NOT get involved in was the provision of high power audio systems in road vehicles. To him, the idea of replacing the rear squab with baffled woofers is ludicrous — along with a super-power amplifier and a battery bank which needs to be charged overnight, so that the occupants can deafen themselves prematurely, without waiting for old age!

With the calendar now reminding him that it's year 1995, Vic no longer owns a factory and he no longer needs to 'go to work'. Instead, he lives quietly at home with his wife, Joan, remaining accessible in an advisory capacity to his industry associates of other days — enough to assert that he's still active in the game! ♦