

# VINTAGE RADIO

By JOHN HILL



## It's time to start collecting

**If you're going to start collecting vintage radios, there is no better time to start than now. Unrestored treasures lie waiting in houses, antique shops and garages, and can generally be picked up for a few dollars.**

Collecting is a well recognised hobby which has many adherents. Collecting not only gives the collector a purposeful interest but also consumes his spare time in a most pleasant manner.

Unfortunately, some forms of collecting can cost heaps of money, megabucks in fact. If your interest happens to be veteran cars, antique clocks or rare postage stamps, then you will need a very thick wallet if you are going to build up a worthwhile display.

As I write this I am surrounded by my collection of radios and looking around, I see that I paid \$40 for one (got ripped off there), a number

of others which cost \$20 or less and ten that were given to me. There are also a few horn speakers that average out at about \$59 each.

I mention this to give readers some indication of how relatively inexpensive collecting old radios can be. Admittedly it does cost money but in my case, I can comfortably finance my hobby with my pocket money and have done so since I started collecting about three years ago. Some people spend more on cigarettes than I spend on radios.

### Collecting old radios

If you are thinking about collec-

ting old radios there are a couple of things you will soon find out. First, if you look in the right places there are heaps of old valve radios around just waiting to find a new owner. Second, you need not outlay large sums of money because \$25 will buy a good many of them.

Now if you are serious about getting a vintage radio collection together and have done nothing about it, then you had better get going. Even during the short time that I have been collecting, I have noticed that the more collectable items are becoming scarcer.

Actually there are quite a number of valve radios that are still in everyday use. The oldest set that I know of that is still going strong for its 78-year old owner is a 1939 "Airzone", a very stylish console model. Although most operational sets are not that old, many have been going for years and may go many more before they finally stop working.

When that fateful day comes it will be the point of no return, for suddenly the radio will become useless and almost worthless. The reason for this is that under most circumstances, the set cannot be repaired. Almost no radio/TV repair shop can service valve radios anymore. They have neither the desire or the necessary parts to repair them. In some cases, they may even lack the know-how.

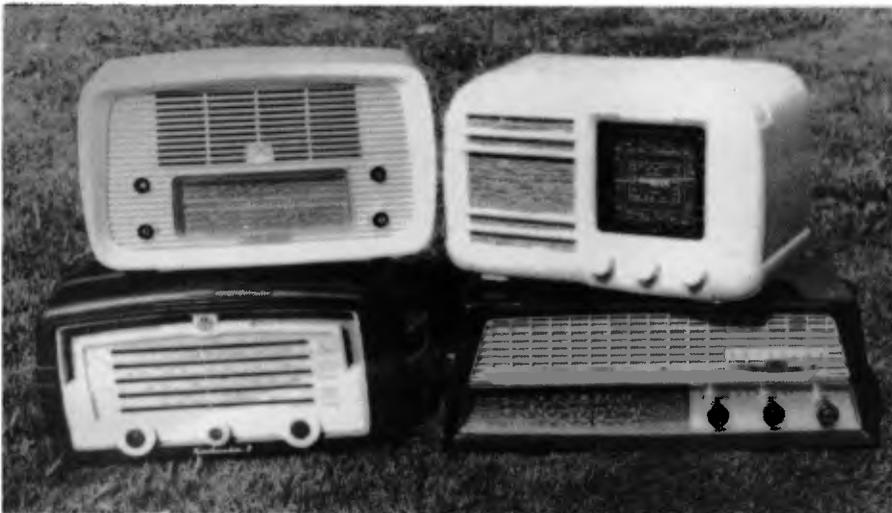
This is the type of radio that the vintage radio collector is likely to pick up. It will either be given to him or be bought very cheaply. It is this type of radio that is seen at flea markets, garage sales and in junk shop windows. They usually don't work and a very fine line separates them from the rubbish tip.



Sets that can't be restored should be stripped for spares. If you're a serious collector, those parts are going to come in handy.



This neat little Radiola was produced in both bakelite and plastic and is a fairly common radio from the early post-war years.



Three of these four plastic cabinet radios are in the process of cracking up. While they were reasonable radios in their day, they have little appeal to most serious collectors.

These pre-loved radios will most likely be relatively late-model valve sets and may only be about 25 years old. (Valve radios were still being sold in 1966). To a collector, such a radio is rarely considered a good collectable item, mainly because the last generation of valve radios lack the enduring qualities of the earlier sets. They just haven't got the same appeal.

### Different categories

In order to explain further, now would perhaps be a good time to place these old radios into categories. One way of classifying

them is to place them into groups according to their age. I see these groups as follows.

Any radios that are pre-1930, and have separate speakers and reaction circuits, would have to be genuine antiques. As stated elsewhere, these are very collectable items.

The next category is pre-war (1930 to 1940). This is also an interesting era for radio because receivers improved so much during that decade. They came from being relatively primitive to quite sophisticated.

Next was the post-war period to

about 1955, a period where valve radios were perhaps at their best — good receivers with excellent speakers. Many of the radios in this age group are what I consider to be very collectable; old enough to be interesting, yet modern enough to sound really good.

Finally, there was the plastic era when plastic began to replace Bakelite and timber. While these radios are interesting in some respects, they are not satisfying from a collector's point of view. Unfortunately the plastics used in these radios are inclined to self-destruct after 20 years or so and they simply weren't built to last as were their predecessors.

Valve radios can also be classified into various types of receivers such as 240-volt operated; battery operated; battery vibrator; battery portables; mantle radios; table models; consoles; radiograms and even car radios.

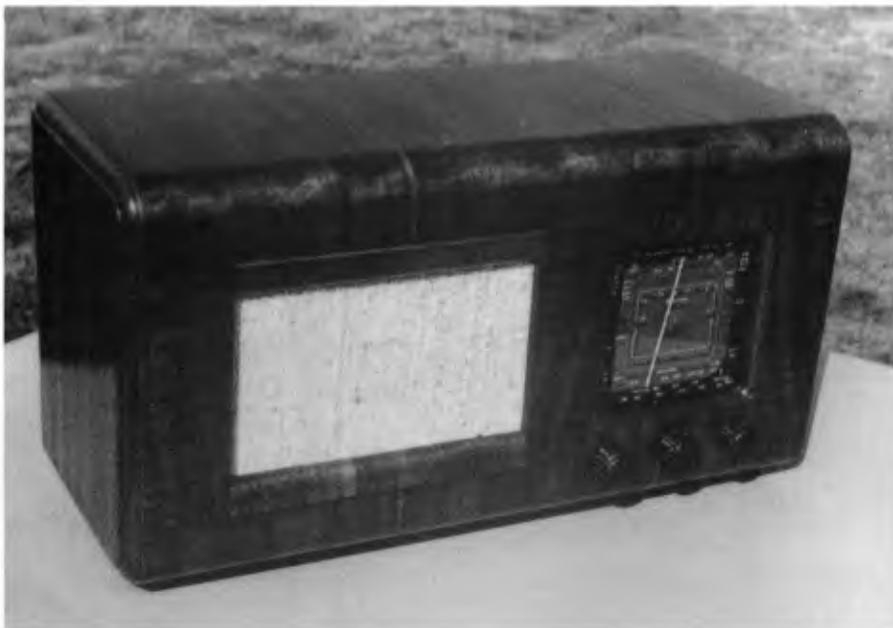
Collectors have plenty to choose from but most seem to concentrate on one or two particular categories. In my case, I collect radios from the 1920s to the 1950s. I do not collect radiograms for the simple reason that they occupy so much space; I cannot accommodate them. I also have a few battery sets and operate them on a combination of rechargeable batteries and a "B" eliminator.

Generally speaking, battery-operated valve radios are only mediocre in their performance and usually fail to compare favourably with their 240-volt brethren. Some of the early "permag" speakers were only fair and this could be one of several reasons why battery sets are a bit lacking in sound quality.

### The 1920s era

In my opinion, the really collectable radios are those from the 1920s era. These are the most expensive to buy and the most difficult to locate. They sound terrible but from a display point of view they are quite unique and therefore very desirable.

I have only one genuine late 1920s receiver and it in extremely good condition. As this set only cost \$20, I consider myself most fortunate to have bought it at such a



**A 1941 model Radiola; timber cabinets have much more appeal than plastic or Bakelite.**

reasonable price. I would like to own others and am prepared to pay whatever they are worth. However, most people who have these ancient receivers want to keep them.

### **Where to look**

Anyone making a start at collecting should consider everything as collectable. They should not miss a single opportunity to pick up any valve radio. Collecting need not be restricted to valve radios for some collectors wish to include transistor radios in their collections.

Sometimes junk is the only word to describe some of the "treasures"

one collects and it is incredible that these neglected old sets have not been dumped long ago. However, any wrecked radio, no matter how derelict, usually has a few usable parts that are worth salvaging.

The logical places to look for old radios are in junk shops, opportunity shops, used furniture stores, auction rooms, school fetes, white elephant sales, garage sales and antique shops. Regarding the latter: the better class of antique dealer doesn't sell old radios. It's the antique-cum-junk shop that is more likely to carry a vintage radio treasure.

While old radios can often be picked up at reasonable prices at any of the above-mentioned places, some secondhand dealers put ridiculous prices on their wares. These seemingly high prices are usually negotiable as the following story indicates.

I was in an antique shop looking at a large table model radio that was in very good external condition. It was a 6-valve Philips, with dual wave coverage, a timber cabinet and a tip up dial. The price tag was \$32. After finding out that the set didn't work, I commented that it seemed like a lot to pay for a bung radio. I was immediately offered the set for \$10 which was a far more reasonable amount. Actually, I would have paid up to \$20 but I didn't argue over the price.

If the truth was known, that set had probably sat there for a considerable time without a single enquiry and it must have seemed like the ideal time to sell when I showed an interest in it.

On the other hand, a radio in good going order must command a better price. What's more, if it's going, there is a lot less risk involved. It could well suit come collectors to buy this type of radio. It may cost more but at least it's a goer and you know what you're getting.

One must always keep in mind that buying from shops is probably the dearest way of obtaining old radios. Shopkeepers have overheads and that puts up the price of the items they sell. However, there



**Bakelite radio cabinets are more durable than plastic. This Kreisler of about 1948 vintage has survived 40 years quite well.**



**Old radio service equipment is also worth collecting. Shown is a "University" radio frequency generator.**



**Typical unrestored treasure; incomplete, doesn't go, but soon will.**



**A Radiola console model from 1940; these larger radios usually have a very mellow tone.**

are other ways of getting into vintage radio sets.

Old radios can be found in peoples' homes, sheds and garages; in farmers' barns and cow sheds; as well as a few other less likely places such as factories and offices. In many instances their owners are quite happy to give them to anyone who can put them to good use. The fact that the radio will be restored and placed in a collection is very pleasing to many owners, particularly those who have some sentimental attachment to the set.

Therefore, the first priority when collecting is to tell others of your interest, being careful not to bore them with too many details. I have made a point of telling just about everyone I know or come into contact with that I collect old radios and most of these people keep me in mind. I often get a phone call about a radio that is collecting dust in somebody's shed and, in many instances, it is only a matter of picking it up and it's mine.

A couple of months ago I had a phone call from an old acquaintance who I have only seen once in

the last 20 years. During that meeting I found out that he had become interested in amateur radio and he learned that I was dabbling around in vintage radio. The phone call was to tell me that he had found a heap of old radios if I was interested in collecting them.

To cut a long story and a 300-kilometre trip short, I ended up with a whole car full of radios, including an oscilloscope and a radio frequency generator for a mere \$180. So there is just one example of how it pays to advertise amongst those whom you know.

Most radio collectors, unless they are particularly rich, will have to be content with collecting whatever they can find. It is all very nice to want a roomful of 1920s style radios in perfect condition, but they simply aren't available to collect. These sets were comparatively rare in the 1920s and very few have survived the ravages of time.

I find it more realistic to collect more recently made receivers and I'm particularly fond of those pleasant sounding console and large table models. The majority of these radios have timber cabinets which

makes such sets a triple bonus. They have good sound, good looks and are a pleasure to own.

Summing up, if you haven't started collecting and wish to do so, then now is the time start — before it's too late.

### **Spare parts**

My approach to collecting valve radios is to buy just about anything I can lay my hands on. I restore what is restorable and wreck for spare parts what is not. My score at the moment is two dozen restored sets with about the same number in the garage waiting their turn. I also have a good supply of bits and pieces including a quantity of valves.

Collecting old radios, or anything else for that matter, is really good fun. There is nothing quite like the feeling of getting onto a nice "new" treasure. However, collecting radios is only half the fun. The other half is the repairing and restoring process.

Next month we get stuck into the finer points of restoring these ancient and often defunct radio receivers.