

VINTAGE RADIO

By JOHN HILL



Collectables & non-collectables

One problem that confronts the vintage radio enthusiast is knowing which radios are worth collecting. Some radios are well worth the effort of restoration but others definitely are not.

Collectors of old radios have different ideas as to what is worth collecting and what is not. Personally, I prefer pre-war models although there were plenty of good radios made up until about the early 1950s.

I classify valve radios into three categories: very collectable, collectable and non-collectable. Collectability has only been touched on briefly in this column in the past so it's time to delve into the subject more deeply. Of course, the following are purely my own impressions of the subject so readers will have little choice other than to agree or

disagree with my comments.

Radios in the "very collectable" category are collectable because they are comparatively rare, not because they are particularly good radios. Naturally, the receivers in question are the very early types from the 1920s era. These ancient radios can be lumped together to some extent as they have many things in common.

Firstly, they will have squarish, coffin-like cabinets of either timber or pressed steel. They will most likely be battery operated, use a separate loudspeaker (probably a horn speaker), have a complement

of triode valves and use a reaction type circuit.

There are also a few variations on the theme. Some may be of the console type with turned legs and a built in horn speaker. The odd one may even be an early superhet and operate on AC power.

As far as I'm concerned, the "very collectable" category dates from 1923 to 1930. No doubt other collectors would differ on this point and many would perhaps suggest 1928 as a cutoff point for these truly vintage receivers.

They could well be right because that was a time of great change, marking as it did the beginning of the superhet era. However, I like to conveniently round things off so I'll stick to 1930.

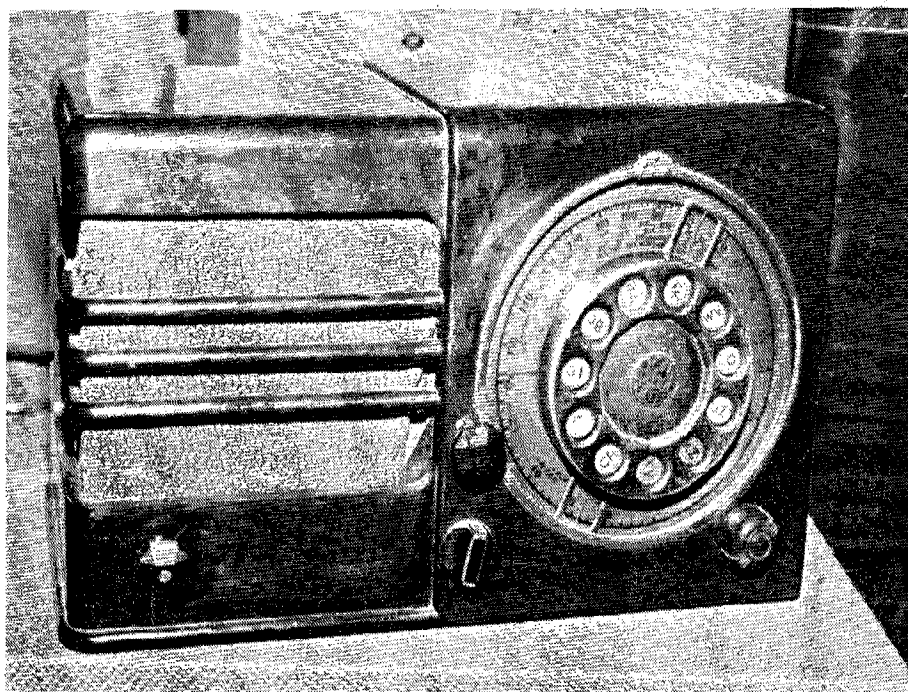
Any radio that is pre-1930 is really a valuable item but finding such a receiver is another matter. Those who own old radios usually wish to keep them.

The 1920s-style battery operated receivers present a few problems to restorers as usable valves are hard to come by and most sets no longer have their original speakers. Finding a 90 volt "B" battery is also a problem if one does not have a "B" battery eliminator. Even when fully restored and going, the sound reproduction is so poor they really are a pain to listen to and one soon tires of the thin, metallic sound of a horn speaker.

But love them or hate them, going or not going, these early receivers are very collectable and always make an interesting display.

Superhet receivers

The "collectable" era, as far as I'm concerned, covers from about



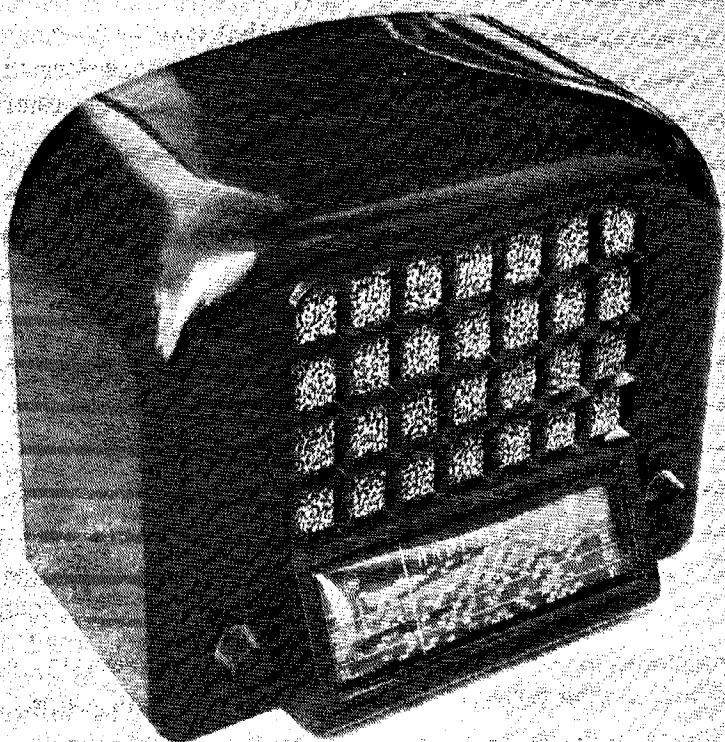
Unusual features such as a "dial a station" dial make this old Astor receiver a collectable item. (Photo courtesy "Orpheus" Radio Museum).



Early receivers from the 1920s era are in the "very collectable" category. Shown is a 5-valve Astor of about 1927 vintage.



Early loudspeakers are also valuable collectors items. This photograph shows an early Amplion horn speaker of about 1926 vintage.



This odd looking early post war Radiola has survived well because of its durable Bakelite cabinet. Bakelite cabinets were far superior to the plastic cabinets which superseded them.

1930 to the mid 1950s or thereabouts. This period is characterized by several things — the total changeover to the superhet receiver, the use of wood veneers as distinct from solid timber, and the introduction of synthetic cabinet materials for the smaller mantle and table models.

Many of these old sets restore so well that they outperform some

modern receivers to quite a considerable degree. A valve radio may not be anywhere near as power efficient or reliable as a transistorised radio but when it comes to sound quality, some of those oldies are remarkably good.

Of course not all of them turn out as well as just intimated. Some sets were lacking a little in design and speaker quality and odd ones were

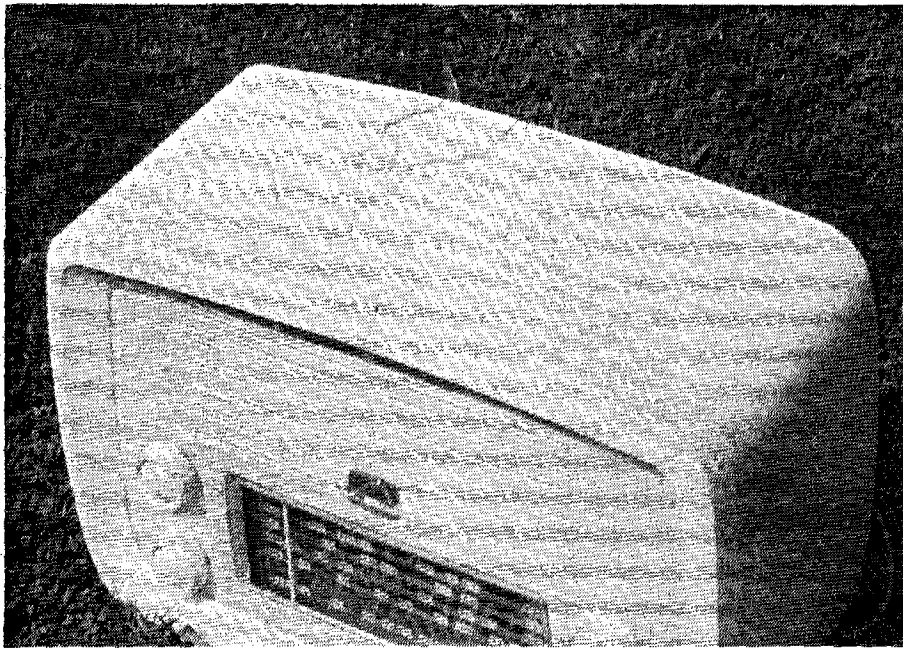
so austere that they never even had automatic gain control. Then as now, there was a range of goods at varying prices, with quality being proportional to price.

The 1930s saw the first of the Bakelite radio cabinets and Bakelite proved to be a material that performed well in this role. Bakelite had been in use since the early days of radio where it was used in sheet form, as well as for valve bases, control knobs and other small electronic components.

Bakelite is a very long lasting material. There are several Bakelite radios in my collection that are more than 50 years old and despite this considerable time span, their cabinets are in very good condition. Provided a Bakelite cabinet is not dropped it will just about last forever.

Age has a dulling effect on Bakelite cabinets but the original sheen can be easily restored by rubbing down the surface with a metal polish such as Brasso, or an automotive paint cutting and polishing compound.

One of the big advantages of Bakelite is that it is impervious to moisture. Often one sees an otherwise good timber cabinet radio with



This particular model HMV cabinet always cracks above the hot rectifier and output valves. Despite this, the receiver still works well.



This Radiola 5 is a popular receiver from the mid 1950s. Although the author classifies it as "uncollectable", it is nevertheless quite a good receiver.

the plywood separated and the outside veneer blistered, lifted or broken away.

With the exception of radios with badly damaged timber cabinets, most receivers from the 1930s and 1940s survive the years fairly well. Generally speaking, the majority of sets manufactured in this era were well made and can be restored to a high standard. If properly restored, they will continue to work for many years to come.

Bakelite vs. plastic

The last category of receivers is what I call the "non-collectables".

The radios in this category were usually made in the 1950s or early 1960s, have plastic cabinets and have very little aesthetic appeal. No doubt some readers may object to my classification but I'm sure a lot will agree with me wholeheartedly.

Compared to pre-war radios, radios from the 1950s and 1960s were built to a price rather than to specifications. Competition between manufacturers must have been intense at the time and many cost cutting exercises are fairly obvious when these radios are examined closely. In simple terms, the last generation of valve radios were

fairly cheap and nasty.

These radios were not all bad, however. From a performance point of view they went OK and were generally a little more reliable than their earlier counterparts. But (and it's a big but), from a collector's point of view, they simply lack the appeal of the older pre-war models. Plastic had almost completely taken over from timber and Bakelite and this in itself makes them far less attractive.

Now readers have taken me to task before about this Bakelite and plastic technicality, claiming that both materials are plastics. Of this fact I'm well aware, but as a collector of old radios I view these supposedly similar materials quite differently.

Bakelite is a thermosetting type of plastic that is formed under heat and pressure and when cooled it stays that way — permanently! In other words, once formed into a shape it cannot be remelted or reshaped.

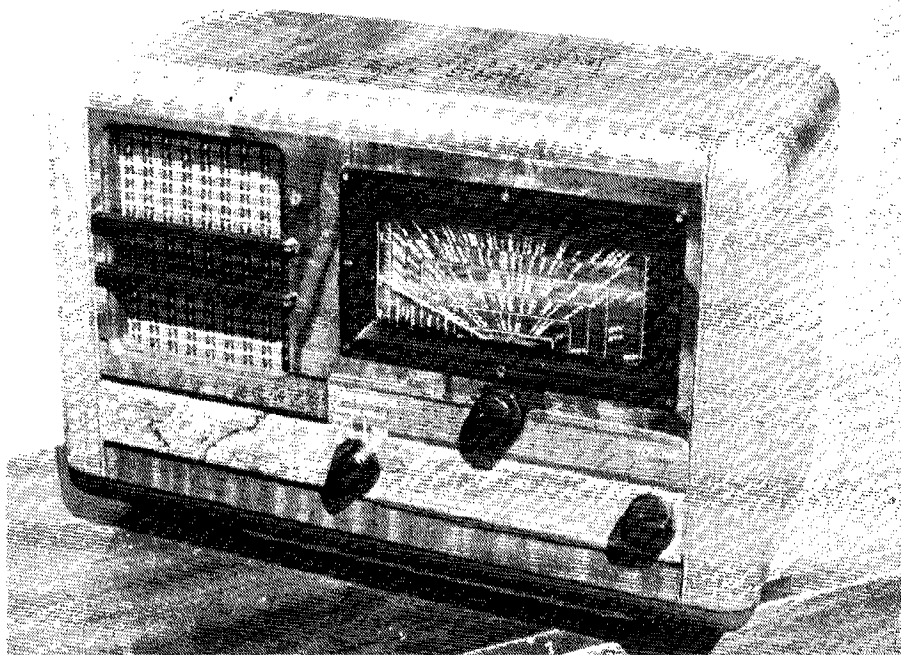
Plastic radio cabinets (as distinct from Bakelite) are made of various thermoplastic materials which can be remelted and reshaped after they have been initially formed. It is this type of plastic that has proven to be relatively unsuitable for radio cabinets when viewed in a long term perspective.

Hence I refer to Bakelite and plastic as being two different materials. Technically speaking, they can be lumped together under the broad heading of "plastics" but as far as I'm concerned, Bakelite and plastic are not to be compared because they are so different. One lasts; the other does not!

Early radios also had metal or Bakelite dial escutcheons that usually survived the years without casualty. Their plastic counterparts haven't done so well, even though only half the age.

Likewise with control knobs. The old Bakelite variety often had brass centres and hardened steel set screws to secure them to the shaft. Even the cheaper ones without the brass centres gave very little trouble.

On the other hand, how many readers have experienced the frustration of removing old plastic control knobs, only to have them



Radios with timber cabinets make very worthwhile collectors' items. This 4-valve HMV receiver uses several different timbers and has been fully restored.

separate into many pieces. The centre piece frequently pulls away from the rest of the knob.

The plastics used in the radios of 30-40 years ago were quite OK at the time. In fact, some of those receivers appear to be surviving reasonably well whereas others simply fall apart. It would be interesting to know their past history. Maybe the ones exposed to years of sunlight crack up sooner than those which lived more sheltered lives.

Heat plays a significant role in the life of a plastic cabinet and many such cabinets develop cracks in particular places; usually over the hot rectifier and output valves. In some instances, the heat even softens and deforms the cabinet.

Little Nipper

The HMV "Little Nipper" was a popular radio for many years and I have picked up about a dozen or so since I started collecting. Out of that number, only one has a crack free cabinet. Although I consider these late model radios as non-collectable, I have restored this particular Little Nipper because it is one of the few good examples of that model.

I recently wrecked an HMV tablegram only to find that the radio unit was nothing more than an upgraded Little Nipper. The upgrading bit amounted to the addition of shortwave, something I have

yet to see on a Little Nipper mantle set.

Now I might knock these so called non-collectable radios a bit but that tablegram chassis has turned out to be one of my favourite radios. After giving it the full treatment, including a 3.5mm mono socket to accept an 8-inch wall mounted speaker, the result was quite amazing. It might not be much to look at but it performs really well.

This is the unfortunate aspect of this last generation of valve radios. The radios themselves were OK; it was the plastic cabinets they were placed in that is the main cause of the trouble. They simply weren't designed with longevity in mind and do not stand up to the passing of time as do the older receivers.

Although I refer to late model valve radios as non-collectables, I must confess that I also have a plastic cased "Astor Mickey" and a mid 1950s Radiola. The occasional good one is still worth preserving. However, if ever I have a sale, it will be the non-collectables that go first.

Well, we have run out of space again which is a good thing really because I have become depressed talking about all those non-collectable radios. I will have to go into my den and have a look at my collectables in order to get myself all enthused again so I can write something for next month. 