

VINTAGE RADIO

By JOHN HILL



Console receivers from the 1930s

Console receivers from the 1930s have a particular charm of their own and many are excellent performers. This month, we take a look at some of those old-timers.

Many months ago, I wrote a story about radio receivers from the 1920s era. It was mainly about the difficulties of locating early receivers and spare parts.

Although 1920s receivers and their accompanying loudspeakers are much sought after items, these particular radios do not give me a great deal of satisfaction for a number of reasons.

First and foremost is their cost. These truly antique radio receivers carry ridiculous prices considering how little one gets for the money.

Second is the almost non-availability of spare parts, either new or used. And finally, when they are made operative, their sound reproduction and general performance is poor to say the least.

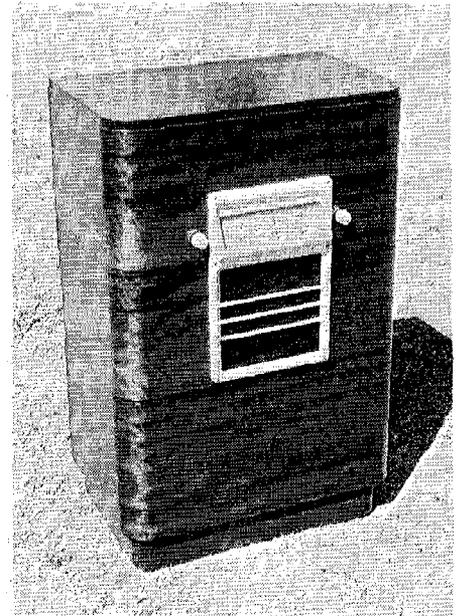
However, I must admit that a few early radios with their odd looking loudspeakers give a good balance to any vintage radio collection. But I don't get wildly enthusiastic about them!

Console receivers

My personal preference leans more to the console style receivers of the 1930s era. This particular decade encompassed all manner of radios, including regenerative detectors, TRFs, and superhets. Receivers from the 1930s range from simple 3-valve and 4-valve types to highly complex affairs boasting a dozen or more valves. Virtually all manner of radios were available in the 1930s – from the most humble to some of the grandest ever made.

The 1930s dawned in the midst of a world-wide economic recession. Yet despite this, many radio manufacturers remained in business and radio development accelerated at a quickening pace.

Due to the depressed economic situation, there were a wide number of options available to buyers. Although the superhet was well established at the time, TRF and simple regenerative receivers were also made in considerable numbers for these sets were



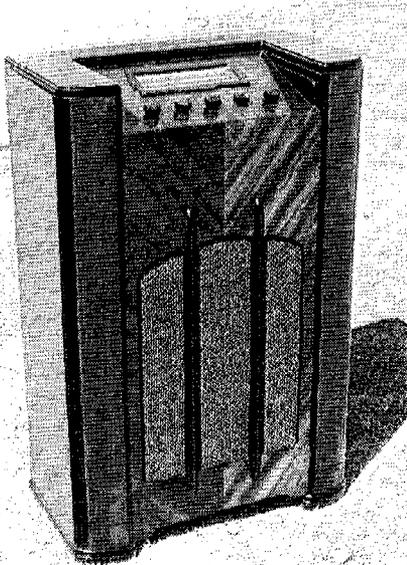
The chassis in this 1939 AWA Radiola is interchangeable with those used in some mantle sets. It is the first receiver that the author restored.

the "el cheapo" receivers of the depression years. They were often made to look pretty good but a quick peep in the back soon indicated which section of the market they were intended for.

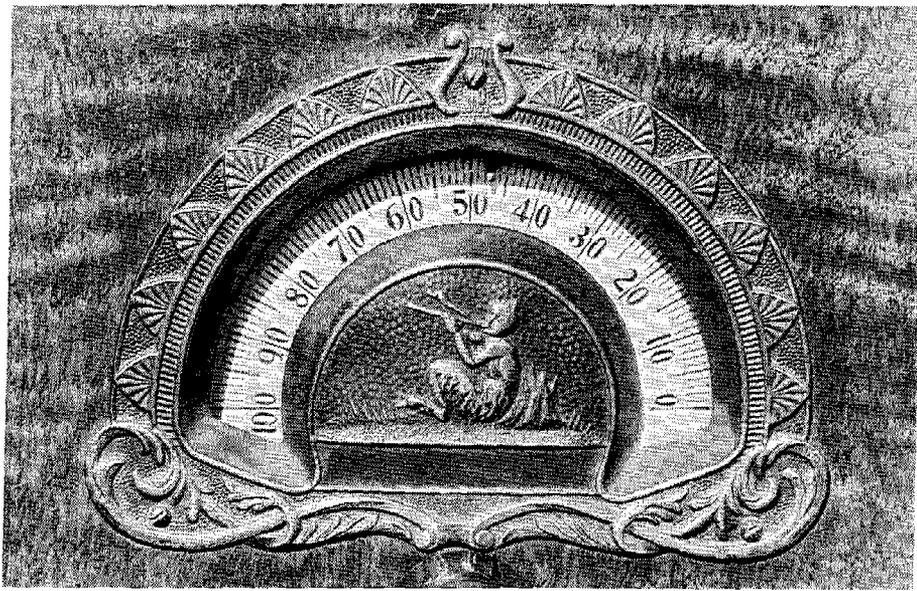
No-frills receivers

Many austere, no-frills console radios, including superhets, were also built in the early 1930s. These can be readily identified by their minimal valve complement and light weight due to the thinness of the plywood used in the cabinets. Other cost cutting measures included no lids on IF cans and no tone control or automatic gain control.

These sets were so impoverished that some carried a special notice explaining that the receiver was a cheap, budget-priced model that should not



This 1936 AWA Radiola is a 5-valve, dual-wave receiver. It is a good performer for its age and still retains its original loudspeaker.



A typical dial escutcheon with a blank name space. Many "no name" sets were produced in the 1930s and some retailers even had their own names engraved into the blank space.

be confused with more up-market models (see photo).

Despite their initial cheapness, many of these low-priced consoles are still around today and can bring a surprisingly good price at auction. These simple receivers are usually easy to restore and they work reasonably well considering the circumstances in which they were produced.

The console radio was indeed the most desirable form of receiver in the 1930s. Radio historian, John Stokes, claims that during the 1930s 60% of radios produced in Australia were consoles and that some manufacturers made only console models.

There were many large houses at the time with enormous lounge and dining rooms and a console radio looked very elegant in such a setting. Although very desirable, the console style radio was also considerably more expensive than its mantle model counterpart but there were ways of reducing this price difference.

The kit console

In keeping with the low-cost models mentioned earlier, the "kit console" was another alternative. The word "kit" is not used in its true context for these kits were bought in only three pieces: a factory built chassis, a loudspeaker and a fully finished timber cabinet.

Assembly of the kit involved little more than mounting the chassis and loudspeaker in the cabinet. Drilling

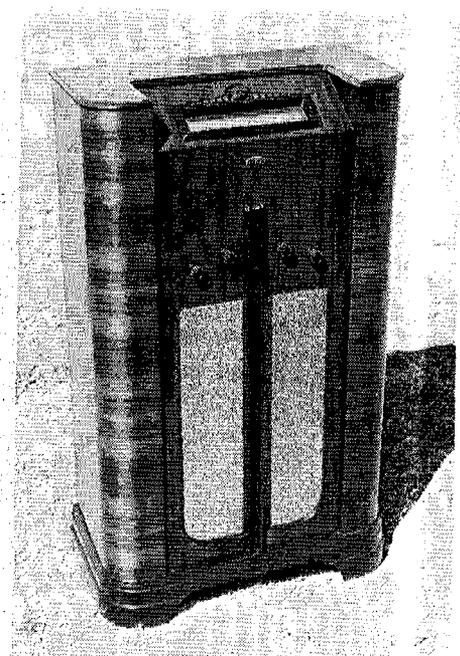
the holes in the front panel for the control shafts and cutting an opening for the dial escutcheon were the most difficult parts of the whole operation.

If you look closely at some of these "do it yourself" radios, you will find that the control knobs are sometimes positioned off-centre and that the escutcheon is often poorly aligned with the dial that fits behind it.

Most of these kit consoles are unbranded and usually have a blank space on the metal dial escutcheon where a name could be engraved if so desired. Smaller retailers who frequently assembled these sets often had their own trade names engraved in this space, so as to make the receiver appear to be of their own manufacture.

Actually, every unbranded console that I have seen has had an "Eclipse Radio" chassis in it. I have been told by a couple of old guys who were around at the time that anything that came out of the Eclipse factory was likely to be a bit cheap and nasty. Yet many of these old receivers are still working today – approximately 60 years after they were made – so they couldn't have been all that bad!

The better known brand names were also available as console models and names such as Stromberg Carlson, AWA Radiola, Airzone, His Master's Voice and many others were there for the buying. Perhaps these more up-market receivers came into their own towards the latter part of the 1930s



Some very elegant console models appeared towards the end of the 1930s as typified by this 1937 5-valve Airzone. Timber cabinets require a lot of restoration work but the end result is very pleasing.

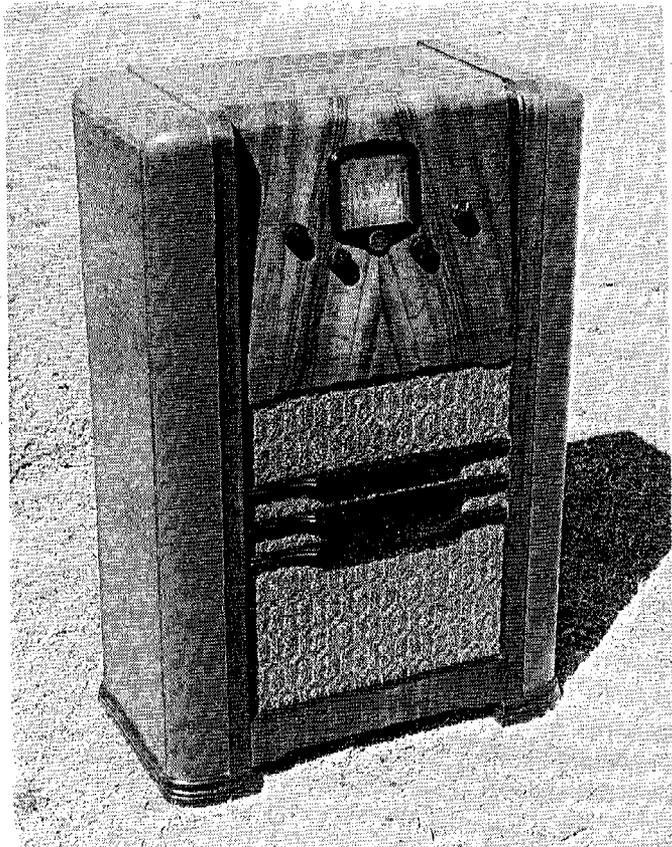


A 4-valve Howard receiver from 1932. This particular receiver is of the regenerative detector type and has an 8-inch electrodynamic speaker.

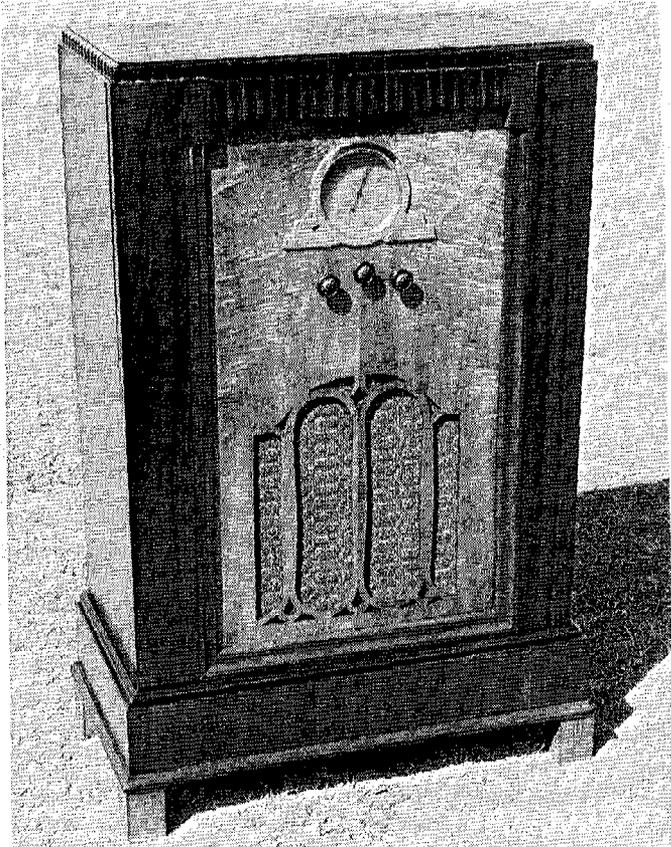
when the hard times of the early depression years had mostly passed.

Console advantages

I like console style receivers for two reasons: they look good and they sound good. The large timber cabinet



This handsome set is a dual-wave Radiola from 1937. The cabinet restoration was difficult because someone had previously "restored" the cabinet by applying many coats of thick lumpy lacquer.



Affectionately known as "Old Henry", this monster was made in the early 1930s. It is typical of many unbranded receivers of that era and carries an Eclipse Radio chassis, a 7-valve superhet unit with two 59s in the output stage.

is not only attractive but gives excellent baffling for the speaker. A well restored console radio has a very distinctive sound indeed.

Push-pull outputs

Old consoles offer other advantages as well. Some have push-pull output stages, whereby the loudspeaker is driven by two valves instead of the usual one. Such receivers are capable of high power outputs that are remarkably free of distortion.

I recently acquired a 1937-model 8-valve Stromberg-Carlson that has a lot to offer. It has several shortwave bands, magic eye tuning, a stage of radio frequency (RF) amplification, a push-pull output stage and a 10-inch loudspeaker built into a vented enclosure. The set has always been kept indoors and the cabinet is in very good condition. Hopefully, the receiver will restore OK but at this stage I have done nothing with it.

Receivers like this Stromberg-Carlson are well worth the effort of restoring because they work so well when the job is finished. Although a

5-valve set may perform quite adequately, an 8-valver free-wheels, so to speak, with plenty in reserve.

Some time ago, this column carried a photograph of an old Precedent console cabinet with turned legs. Unfortunately, that's all it was – an empty cabinet. Well, a suitable chassis and speaker have since been found and, eventually, a fairly early 1930s superhet will emerge from what could well be described as an uninteresting assortment of junk. It should end up as a very attractive old console radio.

Incidentally, the metal escutcheon on the Precedent bears the motto "Realism Realized". It doesn't sound very convincing today does it?

Originality

Although the missing parts problem has been solved with the Precedent, a similar situation has arisen with another console cabinet; in this instance, a Univox.

Once again, the empty cabinet is a stately affair on turned legs so the search is on again for suitable innards. It will matter little whether they be

original or bits and pieces that can be adapted to suit.

That last statement may upset a few readers because there is a difference of opinion among vintage radio restorers regarding the subject of originality. Naturally, I have my own views.

I believe that, generally speaking, originality is not very important, especially with a set that is to be used as distinct from one that is for display. If the overall effect looks OK, well and good – what goes out of sight under the chassis doesn't really matter.

If an old valve radio is to be installed in the lounge room and is intended for regular use, then an all-original set may not be the best way to go.

I have a mid-1930s console in my lounge room (a no-brand model) and if I had retained the original loudspeaker, I would not bother to listen to it. The old 12-inch Eclipse electrodynamic loudspeaker not only had a warped cone but had also developed a loose or misaligned voice coil, resulting in a buzz somewhere in the normal speech range. Some voices

NOTICE.

This Receiver is manufactured by Radio Corporation Pty. Ltd. to meet the popular demand for a low-priced Console Superhet.

It is covered by a factory guarantee, and only good materials and workmanship have been used in its construction. It should be clearly understood, however, that it is not possible to embody in a Receiver selling at this price the refinements of design, materials and workmanship which are incorporated in the well-known range of Astor Receivers manufactured by the same Company.

This notice is typical of those attached to many mid-1930s "el cheapo" models. It left no doubt as to what the buyer was purchasing.

came through perfectly, while others buzzed and rattled on every second or third word. It depended on the pitch of the voice.

Buzzes and rattles are very common with old electrodynamic loudspeakers and are quite irritating if you want to listen to that particular radio on a regular basis.

It is for this very reason that my lounge room console has a permanent magnet speaker in it of about 1950 vintage. It may not be original but it is far more listenable than the old Eclipse speaker.

The 2.5k Ω field coil of the original speaker was replaced by two 20 watt resistors in series. These resistors have been installed in a corner underneath the chassis where their dissipated heat will not affect other components.

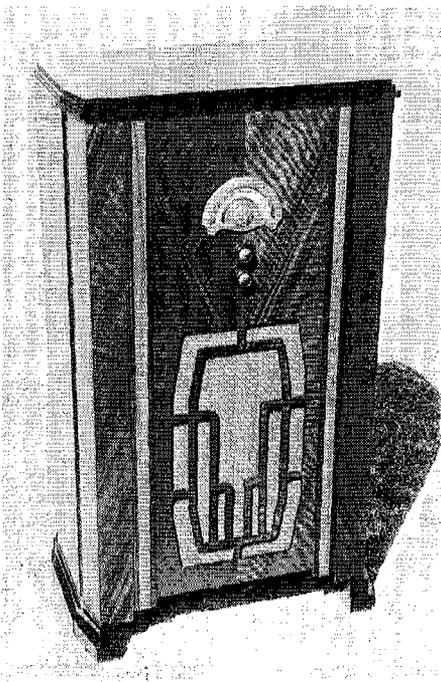
Valve transplant

This particular receiver had also undergone other modifications long before I became the proud owner. At some time in the past, it had been given a power transformer transplant and I suspect that, at the same time, it had been converted from 2.5V valves to 6.3V valves.

Now I'm not that concerned about originality that I feel compelled to convert the set back to 2.5V operation. That, I believe, would be taking this originality aspect of restoration to extremes. However, if I was restoring something that was rare and valuable, then I would not be so hasty to

alter the set's originality. Some of the receivers in my collection are very original, others are not.

In conclusion, console receivers from the 1930s are very collectable and are worthwhile items to restore. They range from budget-priced models to the ultimate in domestic valve radio receiver design and can be a pleasure to own and use. **SC**



The author's mid-1930s lounge room console is a 6-valve receiver with a non-original 12-inch permag speaker. It gives a very good performance.