

# VINTAGE RADIO

By JOHN HILL



## The vexed question of originality

**How far should one go to ensure originality when restoring a vintage radio receiver? Often, for all sorts of reasons, non-original parts & materials must be substituted if the set is to be restored to working order.**

Way back in the January 1993 issue of SILICON CHIP, the "Mailbag" page carried a letter which severely criticised me for converting a battery-powered receiver to 240V AC operation. Apparently, battery radios must remain battery radios for ever.

I did not bother answering my critic at the time, mainly because of the time lag involved. SILICON CHIP operates on a two-month lead time and any reply would have taken months before it finally reached the news-

stands. By that stage, the issue would have long been forgotten.

Since then, however, I have had second thoughts on the matter. Unlike my critic, many other enthusiasts share my viewpoint and they do not insist that originality be maintained at all cost. This month's Vintage Radio will present some of my thoughts on maintaining originality when restoring old radio receivers.

The Historical Radio Society of Australia (HRSA), of which I am a

member, puts out a quarterly newsletter. From time to time, there have been comments in the newsletter regarding the alteration of receivers (AC conversions and the like) and the Society generally does not condone such modifications.

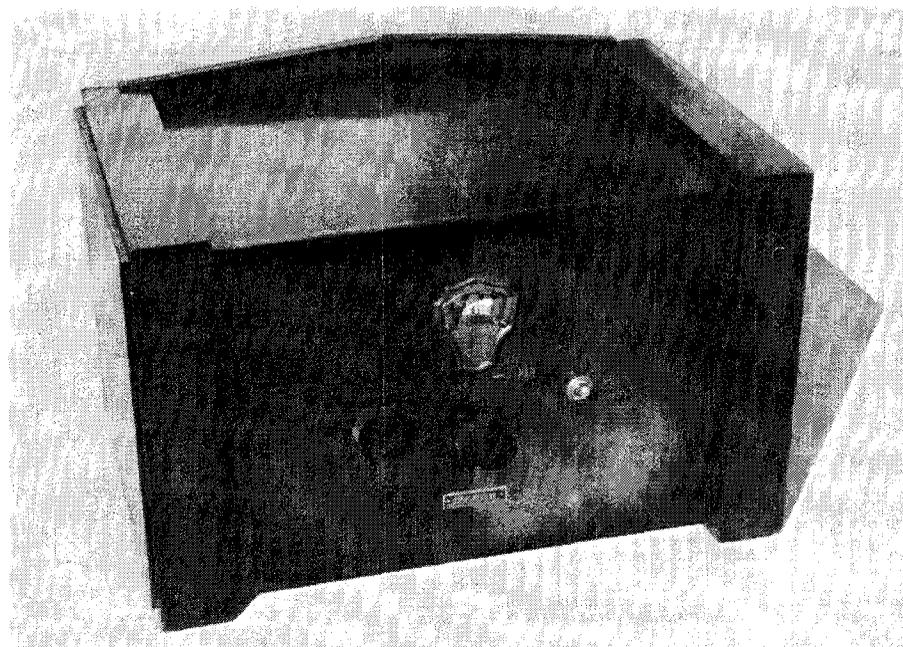
That said, the fact remains that collectors are individuals with minds and opinions of their own. If someone wants to convert a battery receiver to 240V, then it really has nothing to do with anyone else.

I know from my own experience that an AC conversion is an interesting challenge and mine eventually proved quite successful once the bugs had been ironed out. I also believe that the receiver would be much easier to sell in its present 240V form than if it had been left as a straight battery set, requiring a mountain of batteries or a special power supply to run it. Surely using a specially made modern power supply is departing from the originality aspect just as much as an AC conversion?

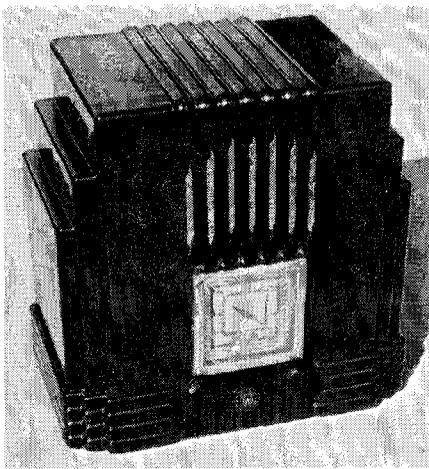
With the set I converted, the chassis was already punched for the rectifier valve and power transformer, so why get uptight about adding these components?

Even though the receiver ended up being quite unoriginal, only someone fairly familiar with that make and model of receiver would notice the difference. The modifications are not very apparent until one looks underneath the chassis, where the wiring and some components are far from authentic. But how many people are going to insist that the chassis be removed from the cabinet for an originality inspection?

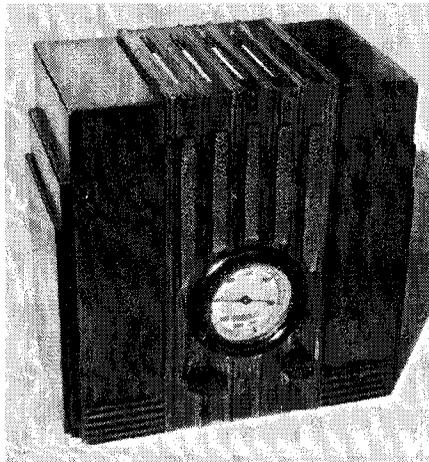
The most critical of the "it must be original" brigade seems to be the older collectors who have been collecting most of their lives. These people have



**This 1930 3-valve Seyon was the first reasonably original old receiver the author found. Even then, it had the wrong output valve & its accompanying loudspeaker had long been lost.**



Early AWA Radiolettes with bakelite or timber cabinets are very collectable items. This particular series is often referred to as the "Empire State" model, due to the shape of its cabinet. The set shown is very original & includes the correct knobs, badge & speaker cloth. Although the power cord has been replaced, it looks as though it could still be the original.



A 1934 timber cabinet Radiolette in very original condition. The major differences between this model and the bakelite "Empire State" version were the round dial &, on later models, the valve shielding.

had the advantage of picking up early radios and spare parts when they were still plentiful and in good condition. That makes keeping them original a much easier task.

Today's collector is faced with an entirely different situation because most of the receivers he finds are – more often than not – total wrecks. If the "keep it original" brigade could see some of the things I have found in various stages of disrepair, they most certainly would not want them as

original items in their vintage radio collections.

### Amplion horn speaker

A good example of some of these wrecks was described in Vintage Radio for February 1993. In this instance, an Amplion horn speaker was rebuilt from parts that were salvaged from three damaged and incomplete speakers. To make matters worse (from an originality perspective), some of the metal work was re-nickelled and some was repainted, while the timber work was fully refurbished using satin Estapol®. I'll pause now while everyone throws their hands up in horror.

Unoriginal and all as the little Amplion may be, it looks absolutely beautiful. What's more, I have received many a request to sell it, with offers of up to \$400 being made to tempt me. Would an unrestored original with crazed lacquer and peeling nickel be more valuable?

I take pride in my restorations and do them to the best of my ability. The restoration of the old Amplion horn speaker required considerable care and a reasonable degree of skill. When such a project is completed, there is a great feeling of achievement. Surely this must be more rewarding than rubbing Marveer® over the original?

### Timber cabinets

Very few timber cabinets retain a good surface finish after 50 or more years. In the case of the previously mentioned AC conversion (which in-

involved combining two wrecks), the better of the two cabinets was 90% bare timber with loose veneer. What is one supposed to do – keep it original or refurbish it?

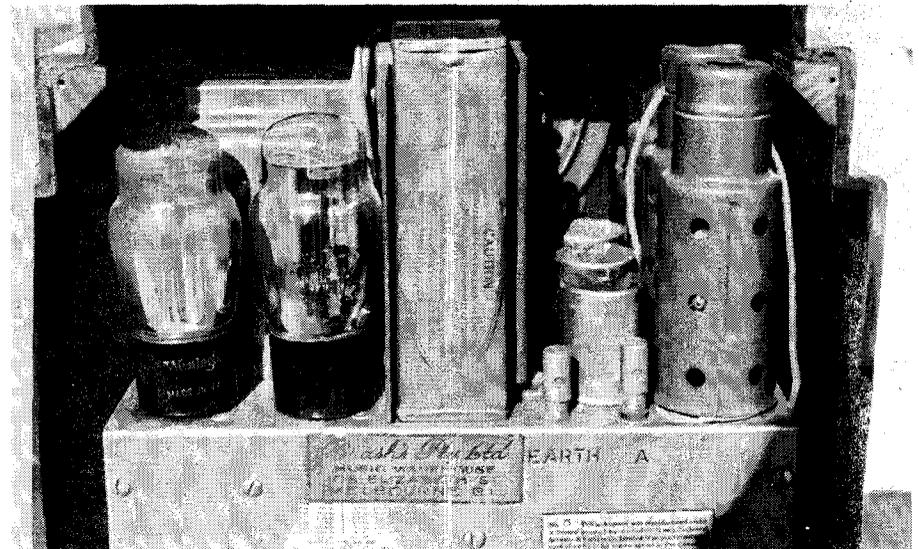
As far as I am concerned there is no choice in the matter. Most timber cabinets require the full restoration treatment if they are to look presentable again. Nothing looks worse than crazed or flaking lacquer – even if the remaining fragments are the remnants of the authentic original finish.

On several occasions in this column, mention has been made of installing modern capacitors inside the cardboard tubes of older paper capacitors. This suggestion was included for the benefit of those who may wish to retain an authentic appearance for the under-chassis components.

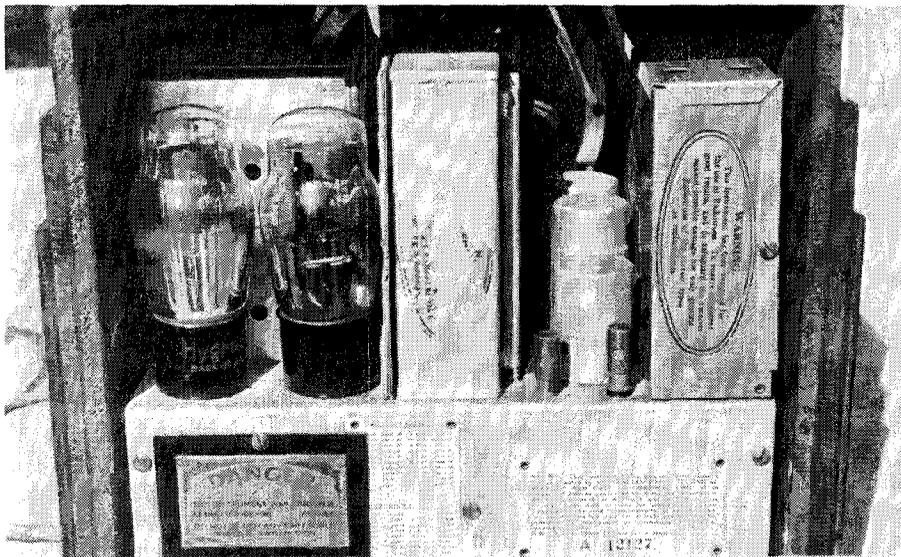
Personally, I have never done this and it is most unlikely that I ever will, simply because it seems such a ridiculous waste of time and effort, the result of which will be hidden from view anyway. If ever such a doctored receiver finds itself on my workbench, the first thing I will most likely do is cut out all the old "paper" capacitors.

### Power cords

What should be done regarding the use of original power cords? Original power cords may look authentic but, in most cases, the natural rubber used in their manufacture becomes perished and no longer provides a safe level of insulation. One only has to twist some of this old power flex to



Rear view of "Empire State" Radiolette. This 1936 model uses individual valve shields which makes valve replacement easier than the earlier model. This receiver still has its original loudspeaker.



Rear view of the timber cabinet Radiolette. Note the different valve shielding used in this model, compared to the unit in the bakelite cabinet. Apart from that, the two are virtually identical.

hear the brittle rubber insulation cracking. Plastic covered wire may not look the part but it is usually a lot safer than the cord it replaces.

Speaker grille cloth is another originality problem worth discussing. I have seen many restored receivers with tattered, moth-eaten speaker cloths which have been left in place because of originality. Some have even had the holes sewn together which is a fairly obvious repair. Surely some

reasonably appropriate replacement material is preferable to a faded, dirty, moth-eaten original?

While on the subject of originality, it is interesting to look through the 1993 Vintage Radio Calendar, keeping in mind that the featured receivers are owned by some of Australia's foremost radio collectors.

The Peter Pan on the front page of the calendar is missing all of the capital city stations that are normally marked in red on the front of the dial. That's not very original, is it?

But who is going to throw the set away because of a few missing stations and who would expect to find the red station markings on the front of the dial when polishing it?

Can you pick out the sets in the calendar that may have the wrong knobs, power cords or non-original speaker cloths? Maybe, maybe not! Regardless of this, the sets in this beautifully presented calendar look the part and that's what really counts.

Old Bill, a collector friend of mine, has quite a few interesting radios from the 1920s. I might add that not one

of them is in working order. What's more, on closer examination, some of these sets have had quite major alterations made to them in the past and so are not very authentic at all.

One such receiver is a 6-valve McMichael superhet. It is an impressive looking receiver of about 1924-5 vintage. It must be that old because it was originally made to receive the long-wave band which was in use for a short period of time before general broadcasting switched to what is now commonly called the AM or broadcast band.

The authenticity of the old McMichael has been sadly ruined due to some serviceman's modification (a hand-wound aerial coil on a cardboard former), so that the receiver could tune into the "new" broadcast band which came into existence sometime in the mid 1920s.

What should be done with such a receiver? Leave it with an "authentic modification" or convert it back to the long-wave band with further non-original circuit alterations? How extreme do you wish to be regarding originality?

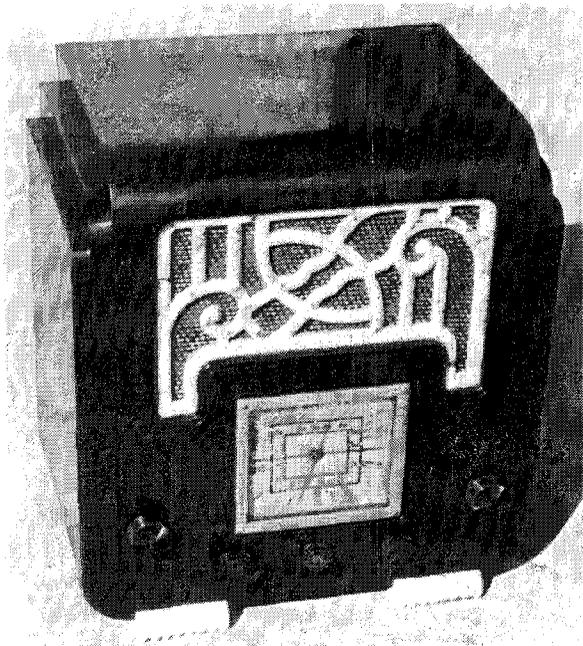
### Originality vs practicality

Now readers should not think that I am one-eyed or anti-original. I am not but I do like to think that I am reasonably practical. In fact, there are a number of receivers in my collection that are very original, although they are few and far between.

These receivers were in exceptional condition for their age when I acquired them and I have tried to maintain their original appearance. Some still retain their original speaker cloths and cabinet finish, while the chassis have only been cleaned and polished, not repainted. They also have the right shaped valves and, generally speaking, look the part.

I can appreciate the value of such sets but if I only collected these "good ones", then I would have a very small collection indeed. As for the remainder of my radios, most were found in quite poor condition and I have either restored them, combined them with other similar models, or converted them to 240V operation as I saw fit at the time.

The veteran and vintage car people probably have similar discussions about originality. I imagine that if they strove for complete originality there



Another popular Radiolette model from the author's collection. It's not quite as original as the models featured on the previous page. The speaker cloth has been replaced & its chassis is in only fair condition due to surface rust.

would be very few old cars in working order and those that were would be rusty, smoke-belching rattle traps.

I found out many years ago when driving a Skoda 1200 station wagon (one of six in Australia) that, with modifications – Austin pistons, an A40 timing chain and a Holden carburettor – it worked quite well. When the bonnet was down, no-one would have ever known the difference.

Incidentally, the Skoda was given to me – that was the only way its previous owner could get rid of it. After six years, I eventually gave it away too.

While improvisation can keep many an old car or radio receiver in working order, keeping them completely original is another matter. Originality is a nice ideal but a fairly unrealistic one in most instances.

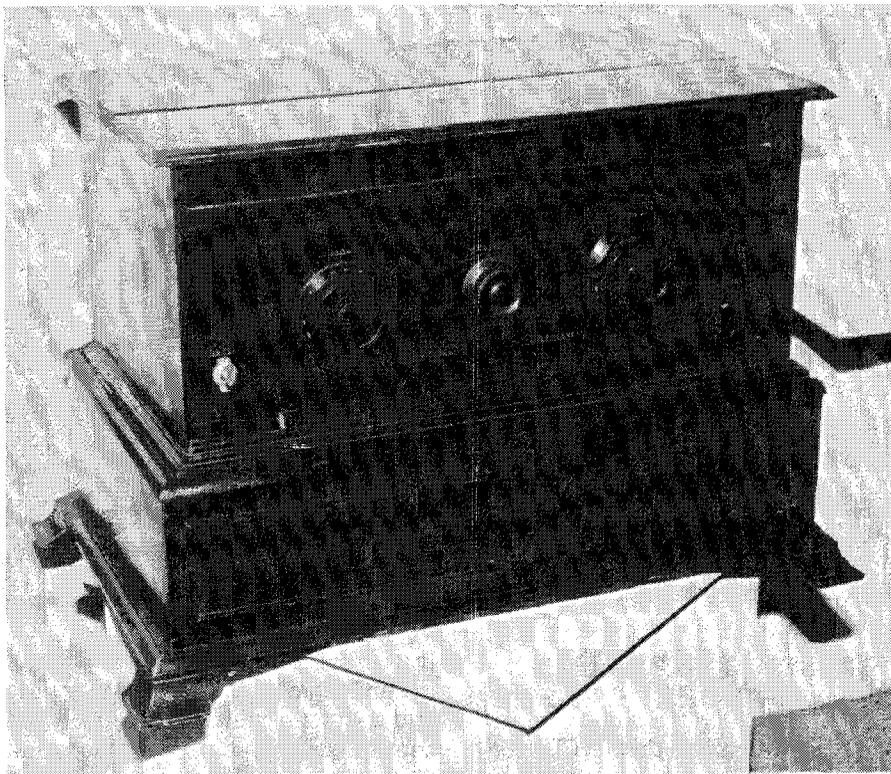
If an old valve radio is 100% original, then there is every chance that it does not work. If it is working, it has most likely had some of its parts replaced at some time or other and is, therefore, no longer original. As stated before, it depends on what extremes one wishes to go to regarding this matter.

Some would argue that there are varying degrees of originality: completely original, very original, fairly original, not very original and fairly unoriginal. No doubt you can add a few more categories to this list. It all depends on what parts are available and how much money one is prepared to spend restoring a receiver.

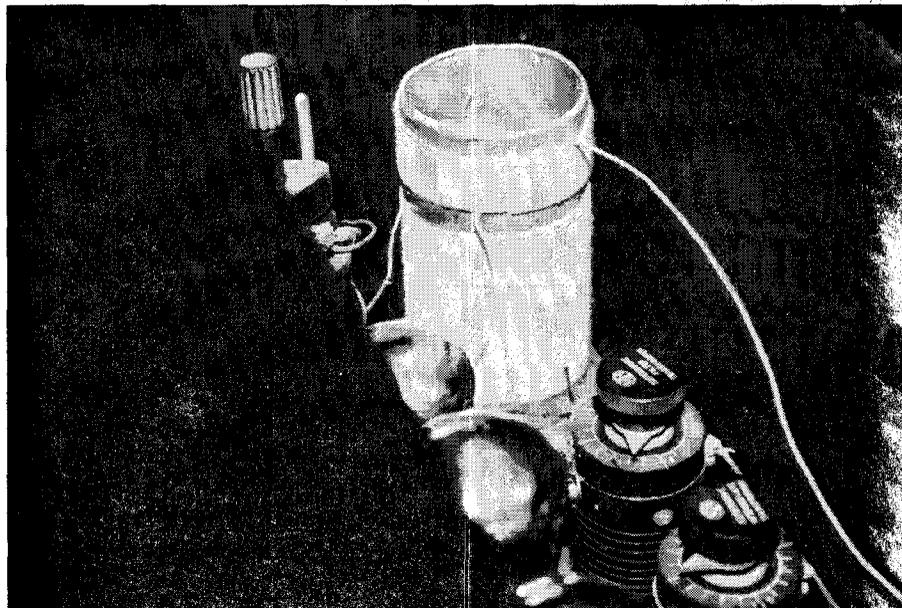
From my point of view, I enjoy my involvement with vintage radio. I like to get old receivers working again without spending more on the project than it is worth. I think that this is where some collectors lose sight of reality because when the time comes to sell some of their wares, they cannot get back what they have spent.

When all is said and done, they are only old radio receivers that, until a few years ago, were being discarded in great numbers because no-one wanted them. Now, for some reason or other (so I am told), they should be maintained in their original condition. Well, I don't think that that is being very realistic and I for one will continue to do my own thing as I see fit!

No doubt, some readers will wholeheartedly support what I have written in this story, while others will com-



**This view shows the old McMichael Super-Seven superhet receiver that was mentioned in the text. While the receiver looks fairly genuine on the outside, a major modification to the aerial circuit has spoilt the set's originality.**



**This close-up view shows the hand-wound aerial coil that was used to convert the McMichael receiver to broadcast band reception (the set was originally made to receive the long-wave band). Note the two IF transformers sitting next to the home-made coil.**

pletely disagree. Normally, I am not so outspoken about such matters, preferring to let others do as they wish without my interference. Hopefully, others will view my activities in a similar manner.

However, I was challenged about

the wilful destruction of two "authentic" battery powered radios. After considerable deliberation, this has been my reply. I hope that I have not offended too many of my readers.

On to more important matters next month.

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