

VINTAGE RADIO

By JOHN HILL



Timber cabinets, antique dealers & vintage radio prices

How much should you pay for an old radio, particularly one that no longer works? We take a look at this question this month & offer some advice on restoring old timber cabinets.

“Purists” (those collectors who insist that their collections remain original at all costs) would shudder at the thought of scraping down a timber radio cabinet and “doing it up” – particularly if modern materials such as “Estopol” and “Aquadhere” are used in the process.

While keeping things completely original sounds OK in theory, very few timber cabinets are good enough

to leave as they are. In 10 years of radio collecting, I have found only three timber cabinets that were good enough to leave in their original state. Even then, they all required quite a bit of work before they looked reasonably presentable.

In most cases, timber cabinets deteriorate to such a dreadful state of disrepair that no-one would want them as they are and they would be most

unwelcome in any lounge room. Any 50-60 year old console or other timber cabinet radio that has spent a few years in an outside shed is usually a fairly uninteresting piece of equipment, or furniture, depending on your point of view. Some become quite loose in the joints and will have lost more of their original lacquer than they retain.

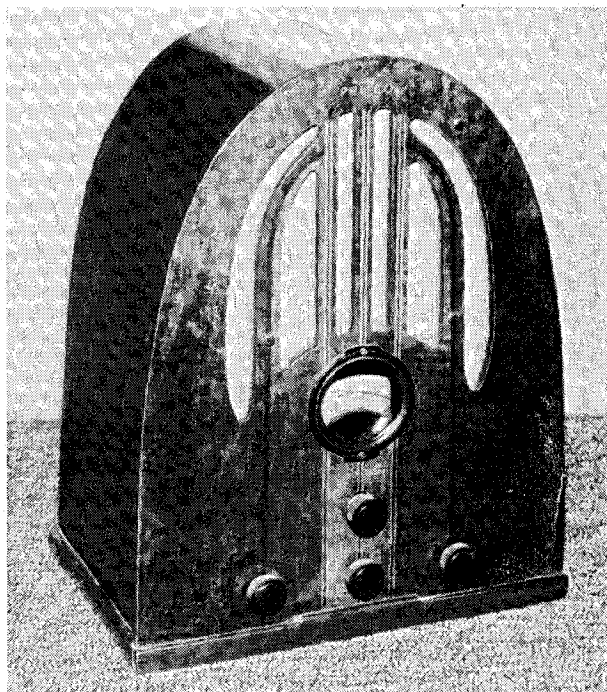
When this is the case, who wants them in original condition? I certainly don't!

Invariably, it is standard procedure, at least as far as I'm concerned, to refurbish timber cabinets. The process is long and time-consuming and involves completely stripping the old finish, sanding the cabinet smooth and re-gluing rickety joints and loose ve-



Above: this magnificent looking “wood grain” finish is only a painted on veneer which produces a remarkably good effect. This technique produced “wood grains” that no real tree could possibly match.

Right: this Philco receiver is another with a false veneer front. In this example, the effect is produced with a brush and stencil. The fine white vertical lines in the speaker fretwork are not inlaid timber as they appear to be but the plywood of the cabinet.



neer. And that's only the preparatory work!

At this stage one has the choice of using wood stains but in most instances I refrain from this treatment and allow the natural colour of the timber to show through. Wiping down with a damp cloth will show up the true tonings of the wood veneer. Staining will often dull it and smother the timber's warm appeal.

Plywood cabinets

Now a word of warning. Not all timber cabinets can be successfully refurbished! Stripping some cabinets will result in nothing to work with other than plain, unfigured plywood.

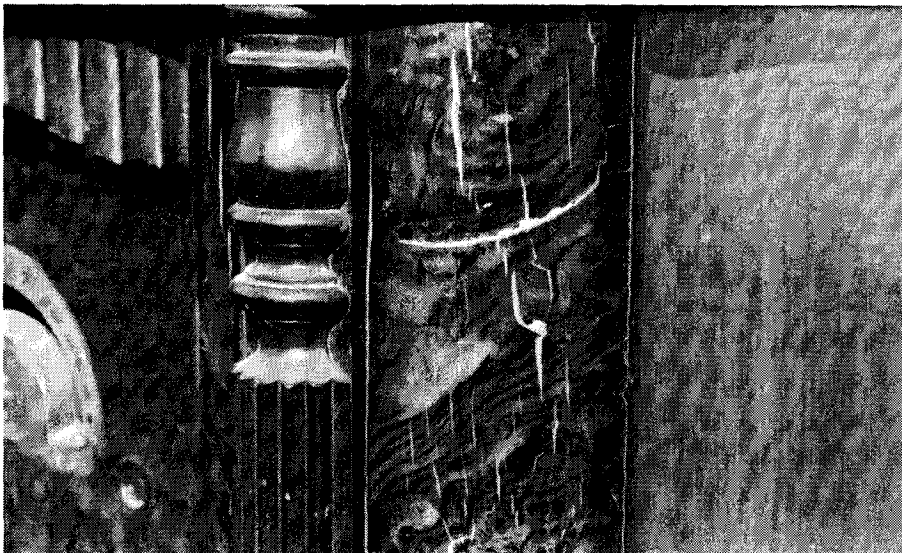
Back in the early 1930s (the great depression years), radio manufacture was very competitive and many manufacturers went out of business during that period. Any process that could trim costs would give an advantage over a competitor and so cabinet costs were trimmed considerably. They were made of much lighter materials and, in some cases, the expensive walnut veneers that were in common use at that time to enhance the cabinet's appearance were not used. Instead, the "veneer" was painted onto plain plywood and often gave a surprisingly good effect. All sorts of knotty timber patterns were developed – the sort of patterns that no real tree could possibly produce naturally.

The Univox cabinet shown in some of the accompanying photographs is one of these paint-on jobs and, after about 60 years, it has reached a stage where the painted-on wood grain has started to shrink, with splits appearing in the paint work. Each split reveals the whitish coloured plywood underneath and to strip such a cabinet would result in a bland pine coloured surface with no wood grain finish whatsoever.

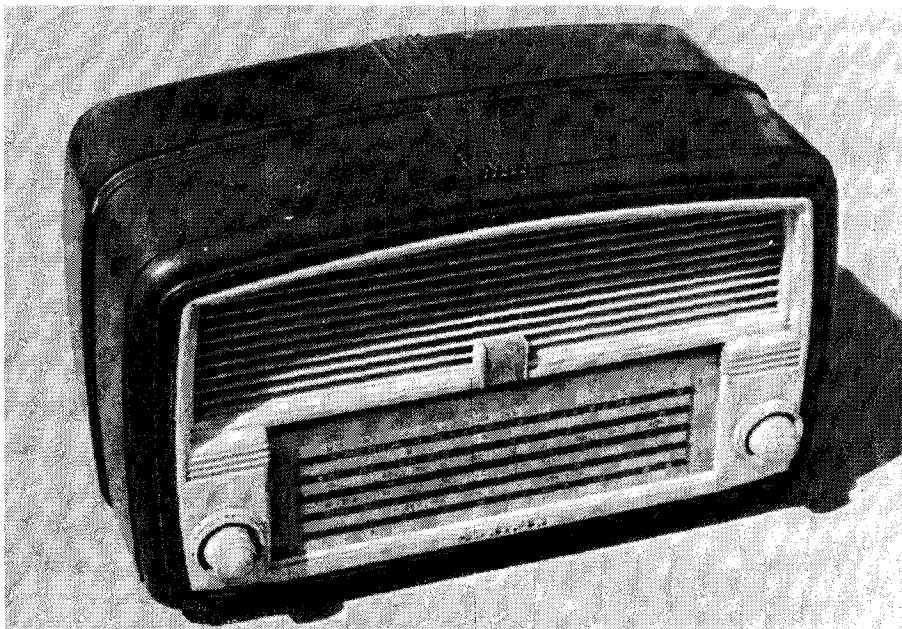
Making repairs

If a cabinet of this type is to be refurbished, the original "wood grain" must be left intact. That means that splits in the shrunken finish have to be filled in with a matching stain or colour and the whole lot covered with a clear, satin finish lacquer – not an easy task by any means!

Just how permanent a restoration of this nature would be is another matter. The old paint work may continue to crack and deteriorate and the lac-



After 60 years, the painted "veneer" starts to shrink and crack, thus making restoration a difficult task. The panel to the right of the cracked section shows how featureless the plywood underneath really is. That is what the cabinet would look like if the original finish is removed.



This old Radiola was bought for \$40 from a secondhand dealer. Although this receiver "worked", it was later discovered that mice had chewed away three quarters of the loudspeaker cone. No wonder the sound was soft & distorted!

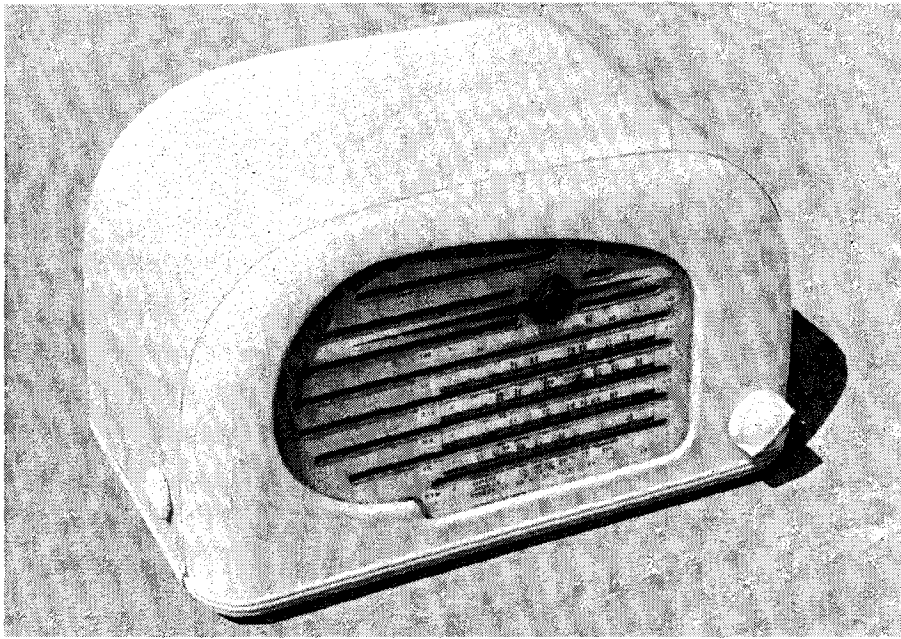
quer would be the only thing holding it in place. Such a repair would probably be, at best, a temporary measure.

The Philco receiver (see photograph) also has a similar "el cheapo" front panel. In this instance, a stencil has been used to produce thin vertical lines to create an impression of inlaid timber. It is all a fake! The "inlaid" strips are the original plywood and the darker "wood grain" has been applied with a brush.

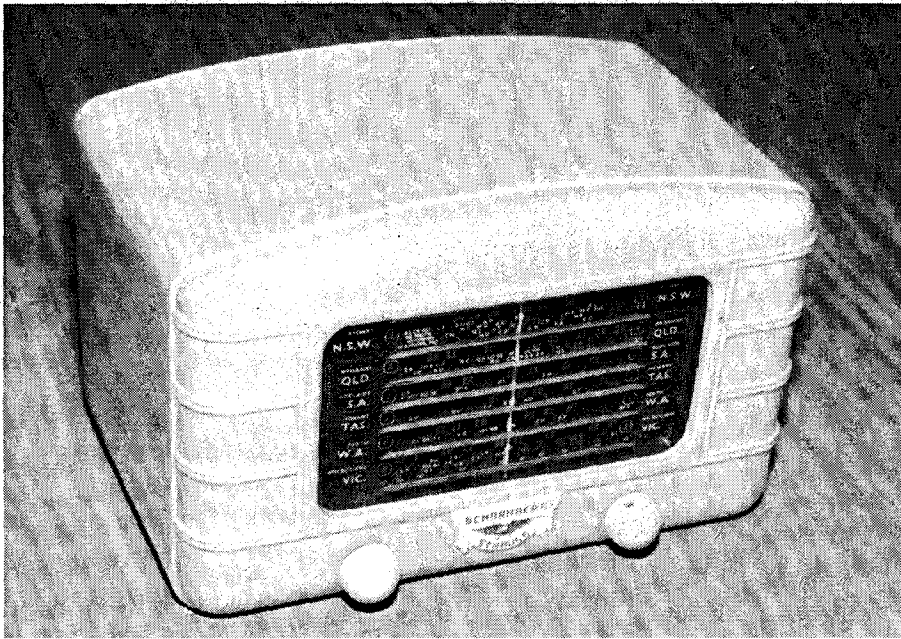
Once again, any attempt to strip the

front panel would result in nothing other than a plain piece of uninspiring plywood. However, while some collectors may be critical of such cheap and nasty production methods, who would have thought way back in the 1930s that someone would want to restore the cabinet (and the radio) some 50 or 60 years later?

Anyway, you have been warned! Always inspect a radio cabinet very closely before deciding to strip it down to bare wood. In some instances, the



The price of this little Peter Pan radio came tumbling down when the on/off switch decided not to work. If a dealer has trouble demonstrating a radio, it is in the best interests of the buyer not to interfere. No matter what, the dealer will still make a reasonable profit.



The octal valves in this Scharnberg Strauss 4-valve receiver date it at around the late 1940s. It's a fairly uncommon receiver & was obtained for \$70 but that included a set of headphones.

bare wood may be a good deal barer than you think!

So much for timber radio cabinets. Let's now move onto something else.

Vintage radio prices

Have you noticed lately that, despite the recent economic down turn, vintage radio prices did not come down very much. My observation is

that prices are still fairly inflated and, as a result, collectors are not buying. I have also heard of cases where collectors have sold their radios without getting their money back. Surely that is an indication that they may have paid more for their radios than they were really worth.

The inflated prices of valve radios (so I have been told) have been largely

due to myself and fellow vintage radio writer, Peter Lankshear. Collectively, we have encouraged many people to collect and restore old radios, thus creating a demand and a corresponding increase in prices.

However, while I know that I have been instrumental in getting some collectors started in this interesting hobby, it was bound to happen anyway. As soon as something becomes rare or is no longer made, that's when people start collecting it. Valve radios had already reached that stage when I first became interested in them about 10 years ago and the movement has gathered considerable momentum since then.

Secondhand and antique dealers are more likely to be the ones who initiated the price increases in old radios. Their prices are always based on what the market will pay, not the price they pay for their merchandise. While they do spend a lot of time chasing auctions and the like, they seem to operate on much higher margins than most retailers.

Recent acquisitions

Although secondhand dealers have to eat just as you and I, some of their prices are unrealistic to say the least. But these high prices appear to be coming down. While on a recent holiday, I managed to pick up a few receivers at fairly reasonable prices considering they were bought from dealers. I just happened to be in the right shops at the right times.

The first one was a mid 1950s 5-valve AWA Radiola, a fairly large mantel model which I was able to purchase for \$40. It was in going order but only just. The cabinet was maroon and cream and although these colours are difficult to identify through the coating of grime, I am sure that it will clean up OK. As there were no cracks in the cabinet or dial and it still had its original knobs (very important for that particular model), it was a good buy for the price.

Next was a cream Peter Pan, an identical model to the one pictured on the front of the 1993 Vintage Radio Calendar. The price on the Peter Pan was \$95. Obviously the dealer didn't know about the Vintage Radio calendar, otherwise it would have been \$195. It looked clean and tidy and was supposed to be in good working order. Once again, the set still had its

original knobs which is important because, like the previously mentioned Radiola, they are special knobs.

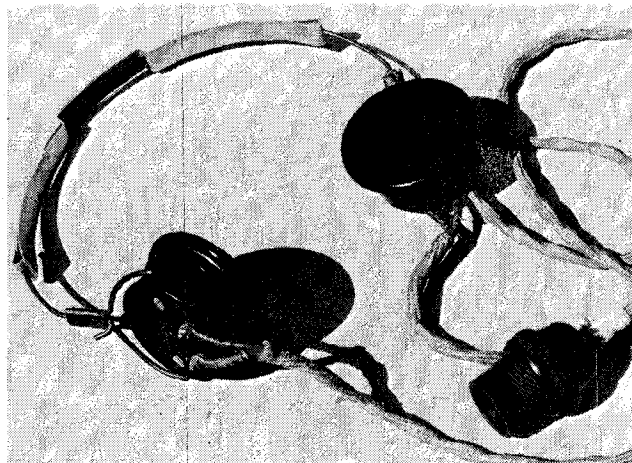
In the same shop was an empty cutlery box that my wife wanted, so I bartered for a better price on the radio if we bought both. The radio came down to \$75.

I then asked for a demonstration on the radio and it would appear as though the on/off switch decided at that very moment to play up a bit. The little Peter Pan would not switch on – it was completely dead! Another power point was tried with the same result.

After a short discussion about burnt-out power transformers and other equally frightening topics, I offered \$40 and the Peter Pan was mine. Later, when I plugged it in and switched on, it lit up first go. However, as the dealer was about 130km away at that stage, it was just too far to go back and offer him the extra money. He most likely made a reasonable profit anyway!

Many years ago, I learned never to interfere with dealers when they are demonstrating a radio. If they turn it off instead of on, or if the selector

These Browns Type "X" high impedance headphones came with the Scharnberg Strauss radio. They are in near-new condition but definitely need a new plug. The attached 240V electric light fitting is an indication of the strange (& often dangerous) things one encounters when collecting old radios & associated equipment.



switch is on a shortwave band or the gramophone setting, then that's their problem! They should be more familiar with the articles they are selling. It pays to act dumb (and can I act dumb) and let them twiddle with the knobs. If the set comes to life and starts working, then it's going to cost heaps more than if it remains mute.

I have a pet phrase that I use when a radio fails to work and that is, "you can't ask much for it when it doesn't go!"

seemed fairly reasonable to me.

Readers in capital cities such as Melbourne and Sydney may be amazed that valve radios can be bought from dealers for these prices. My advice is to get out into the countryside where such items are more reasonably priced. However, buying privately is always a better proposition than buying from dealers, although it can involve a lot of chasing around. That's one thing you pay for when buying from a dealer. SC

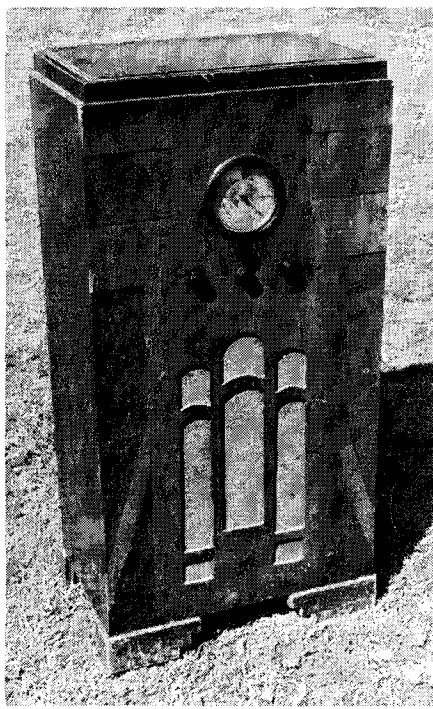
Scharnberg Strauss

The third receiver was of a brand name that one doesn't see very often and that is "Scharnberg Strauss". Apart from the name, there was nothing really exciting about it as it was just a straightforward 4-valve mantel in a rather plain looking green plastic cabinet. It was in fair working order and I bought it for \$70. The asking price was \$95.

Normally, \$70 would be more than I believe such a set is worth. However, in this case, a pair of headphones went with the deal – not just any old set of headphones but a high-impedance set of Browns Type X in almost new condition.

In the same shop, there was a 1936 5-valve, dual-wave console bearing the name "Musician" on the dial. It was, in fact, one of those numerous Eclipse Radio products that were so common during the 1930s.

Any dual-wave 1930s console that is complete with its original knobs and 12-inch (30cm) electrodynamic speaker, and has a cabinet in reasonable condition, has to be good buying from a dealer at \$120. I didn't haggle over the price with this one as it



The "Musician" is a dual-wave 5-valve superhet built by Eclipse Radio & is typical of budget-priced console receivers from the mid-1930s. It uses a 12-inch Saxon loudspeaker & should perform quite well when restored, although the cabinet certainly lacks style.