

Vintage Radio

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The Radiogram Bloke

Mainly because of their size, radiograms and radiogram/TV combination units are usually ignored by vintage radio enthusiasts. However, a lot of equipment was produced and at least one collector, Peter Henstridge of Adelaide, SA, has restored some items to as new condition.



A fully-restored Precedent radiogram, tape recorder and TV combination unit. Such units were very expensive in their day.

ENTHUSIASTS WHO collect and restore antiques often specialise in a certain area and vintage radio buffs are no different. They may be interested almost exclusively in early crystal sets for example, or their interests might involve pre-valve equipment, early breadboard radios, coffin-style radios, consoles, radiograms, PA am-

plifiers, TV sets (both b&w and colour) or radio communications equipment.

Alternatively, they might be interested in reel-to-reel tape recorders, car radios, valve and early transistor portables, mantel receivers, console sets, radiograms or "combo" units that have a TV, radio receiver, turntable and perhaps even a tape recorder all

in one cabinet. Some enthusiasts even concentrate on just collecting valves or other specialised items and some even go to the trouble of building replicas if the original equipment is no longer available.

However, it's the mantel receivers (both pre-war and post-war) that are the most likely to be collected. The main reasons for this are that they are small (which makes them easy to display), they are relatively common and they are usually easy to restore.

By contrast, some categories of our radio/TV heritage have not proved popular with collectors for a variety of reasons. For example, B&W valve TV receivers are considered difficult to restore and are given a wide berth by most vintage radio collectors. Most collectors are simply not familiar with the technology and picture tube availability is very limited, as is the availability of some other specialised parts.

Another area that is receiving little attention is radiograms and other combination units with TV sets and reel-to-reel tape recorders built into a single cabinet. The bulk of the equipment is the main issue here but the increased complexity of such equipment compared to mantel receivers also turns many collectors away.

The Radiogram Bloke

Fortunately, not everyone is put off by radiograms and combination units. In fact, these are the very types of sets that vintage radio enthusiast Peter Henstridge from Adelaide has chosen to collect and restore.

Peter's interest in vintage radio started around 2002 when he purchased a Kriesler model 11-103 radiogram at a local opportunity shop for the princely sum of \$20. He and a mate sat it on a table to have a good look at it and then tried it out (note: I personally do not recommend that old radios be turned on before they have been thoroughly checked, as some faults can damage critical components when it



This photo shows Peter's Healing 501E console following restoration. Despite its age, the cabinet was in good order.

is switched on)). Its performance was woeful, with many obvious faults that Peter would have to fix at some time in the future.

It stayed in a room gathering dust for many months. Then, one day while downloading music off the internet, he realised that if he played vinyl records from the period he was interested in on the old Kriesler radiogram, it would save mucking around with time-consuming downloads. As a result, he immediately got stuck into the restoration which was a complete success. And having been bitten by the restoration bug, Peter has subsequently restored many other radiograms.

That first radiogram, the Kriesler 11-103, took Peter nearly six months to restore. The cabinet and the internals, including the record changer, all needed attention, so it was a steep learning curve as electronics isn't his occupation. However, once Peter had this radiogram up and running, he was really keen to restore more, either for himself or for friends.

Peter's interest in radiograms eventually led him to register "The Radiogram Bloke" as a business name and to advertise his services on a local community radio station. He also obtained publicity in *Collectormania* (a magazine for collectors) and other publications.

Peter's aim was to make sure that



A view inside the Healing 501E before work commenced. It required little work to get it going again.

radiograms received more attention than they had in the past. He even took a selection of his radiograms, consoles and TV/radiograms to a local boot sale. And to make his demonstration even more effective, he took along a small alternator/generator so he could power the exhibits and show people what these old (but hardly inferior) pieces of equipment could do.

His demonstration produced a reaction he hadn't really expected. One visitor even offered to buy one of his restored sets and so a deal was done. He realised then that his hobby could be self-sustaining. He says that over 100 radiograms and similar pieces of equipment have now been through his workshop, so there are now many fine pieces of furniture in the form



This general view shows just some of the sets in Peter's collection. All have been restored to full working order.



Above: this interesting radiogram was made by Classic in Sydney during the 1950s and featured curved doors which opened up to reveal a record changer and record storage area at left and a cocktail bar at the right. The same unit is shown at left with the doors closed.



of restored radiograms making their appearance again in many lounge rooms. Part of the reason for this is the renewed interest in vinyl records amongst some music fans.

Although Peter's interest is predominately radiograms, he also has many other older radios. These include coffin-style sets, a 1920s peep show machine that shows "naughty" pictures, various console radios, advertising and promotional literature, and many other bits and pieces of our radio and early audio history. His collection fills a number of rooms in his

home as well as a shed and a shipping container. However, from personal experience, it's not a good idea to leave equipment in a container for too long. I once did this and due to the conditions inside the container, quite a few items of equipment and some accompanying literature were ruined.

Peter's restoration techniques

After looking at some of the before and after restoration photographs, it's obvious that Peter wants the restored equipment to look like new. Just how close it gets to being original though

depends on a number of factors, including parts availability and the condition of the set after many years of storage (often in a damp, rodent-infested backyard shed).

One interesting restoration is to a Bakelite receiver cabinet. One end has been restored and looks just as it would have when it was first manufactured, while the other end has been left as it came to him. This is a particularly good example of how a piece of "junk", in the minds of many, can be made to look like the radio our parents lovingly placed on a table or mantelpiece.

Peter doesn't claim to be a technical wizard and sometimes seeks assistance from a friend if he runs into technical problems. However, he's able to do most of the work himself.

When restoring the chassis of a receiver, he first cleans the metal work and then paints it if necessary. If there are any polished metal fittings, these are removed, cleaned and then coated with a clear lacquer to preserve their finish. The controls and other moving surfaces are then cleaned and lubricated.

If there is a record changer, this is also carefully cleaned and lubricated



Left & above: this unknown brand early radiogram has also been restored to full working order. Note the ancient turntable.

as necessary. Most of the problems with these items relate to dried out grease and oil which stops the mechanism from working. In addition, turntable motors usually have oil-soaked felt pads that feed a sintered bronze bearing and these are given a dose of oil to ensure that the bearing stays well-lubricated.

Turntable idler wheels also need to be inspected to ensure they are in good condition and replaced if they are not. It's not unusual for an idler wheel to have a flat spot where it has been resting against the drive shaft of the motor for the last 30 or so years. Fortunately, Peter has a good stock of spares to replace any worn turntable parts.

Restoring the electronics

Peter usually begins the electronic side of the restoration by replacing all the paper and electrolytic capacitors. The power transformer and the mains cord are then carefully checked and the latter replaced if necessary.

Once that's done, the set is thoroughly tested and one or more valves also replaced if substitution proves that they are down in performance. If

the receiver doesn't work as expected after this work is done, Peter then enlists his electronics friend who can diagnose faults and carry out an alignment if necessary.

Peter specialises in restoring his radiograms and similar items to look like they did at the time of manufacture. If a cabinet is in good condition, it will be left as is. However, most require work on them.

Peter uses Accent Paint Stripper from Mitre 10, as it doesn't stain the timber like some strippers do. Once he is satisfied with that, he fills any imperfections with a grain filler and perhaps some stain if need be. He then sands it down with fine grades of abrasive paper, finishing off with 0000 grade steel wool. Coarser grades than that will usually leave sanding marks.

The next stage is to stain the cabinet to its original colour using a spray gun. Then, when the layers are all on, including a clear lacquer, the surface is lightly sanded with 0000 steel wool. The end results of this work can be seen in the photographs.

Finally, the cabinet is polished with an automotive-type polish of Peter's own mix. Once he is satisfied with the

sheen, the excess polish is removed using Orange Oil. The end result is an extremely fine-looking piece of furniture.

One particular item that Peter has restored, an STC A8551 Capehart radiogram, will be featured in "Vintage Radio" next month. It shows how Peter does the job and the quality of the equipment after restoration.

A range of restorations

Radiograms are not the only items that Peter has restored. Towards the end of the radiogram era, a number of interesting innovations appeared on the home entertainment scene. Television by then had become well and truly entrenched and so too were reel-to-reel tape recorders (although to a lesser extent than TV sets).

As a result, some manufacturers produced combination radiogram/television sets and radiogram/tape recorder ensembles. Some even produced complete radiogram/TV set/tape recorder set-ups, complete with a microphone. Karaoke, of sorts, had arrived.

Of course, many of these combination consoles also had stereo sound, although the TVs were still mono as stereo TV didn't come into use until after the introduction of colour TV.

These combination sets were invariably big and heavy, as I found out when I was in the service trade. Two examples shown in the photos are a Precedent combination console and an Astor combination console. These represented the low end of the market and the top end of the market, respectively.

The Precedent is shown with a picture on the TV screen, demonstrating that TV sets of the era will still work quite well. Unfortunately, many peo-



Before and after: these four photographs show the first STC console radio that Peter restored. The two photos at the top of the page show the set before restoration, while the bottom two photos show the finished item.

ple looked down on the Precedent as being a cut-price, poor-quality design. However, my experience is that they are simple designs that work quite well. They are also easy to restore, although their cabinets were inferior in quality to those used in the more up-market sets.

The Astor combination is a quality machine and it works extremely well.

I remember various models of both Astor and Precedent combinations from my days in the service trade and both were good. However, you did need to be strongly built to shift them about and they were pricey items, particularly the Astor and others of similar quality. As a guide, they usually cost 3-6 months' pay.

A somewhat different radiogram is

the Classic from the 1950s. It was made in Sydney and featured curved doors which opened up to reveal a Collaro record changer plus record storage at the lefthand end and a cocktail bar at the righthand end. The latter was no doubt intended for storing glasses and bottles to facilitate a quiet drink while listening to the music.

Above the dial scale and controls

is a magic eye, tuning device. Maybe that helped with the tuning after a few pleasant drinks!

Another radiogram Peter has is of unknown manufacture. It is a very early radiogram and has a wind up turntable and only plays 78 RPM records. Once again, it has been beautifully restored.

Turntables

The turntables used in these units progressed from the single players of the late 1920s to the multi-disc record changers, such as the Collaro and BSR changers, of the 1950s and 1960s. The original turntables were single speed and initially they were started and stopped manually.

By contrast, the last units to be manufactured could play up to 10 records in a stack and all three record diameters (7-inch, 10-inch and 12-inch) were selected automatically (except for playing speed). Once all the records had been played, the record changer would then shut down.

In fact, in some cases, the whole radiogram was shut down when the changer switched off.

Such units could also operate at any of the four speeds that were available near the end of the vinyl record era (ie, 16 $\frac{2}{3}$, 33, 45 and 78 RPM), although speed selection had to be done manually.

The first STC console cabinet that Peter restored was in very poor condition when obtained (see accompanying photographs) but the photographs of the finished item are impressive. The inside of the cabinet and the works are equally well restored.

Finally, Peter's interests also include horn-type speakers and the sets that they were used with. He is also interested in the history of radio station 5CL and the part Harry Kauper played in the early development of radio in South Australia. Harry also features in my book "Outback Radio: From Flynn to Satellites".

Summary

Peter has only been restoring vintage equipment for about seven years and it is interesting to see the results of his efforts in restoring radiograms. Very few collectors and restorers have shown much interest in this important part of our domestic radio heritage.

As stated previously, there are some very obvious reasons for this, the main

Photo Gallery: Sony TR-717B Transistor Mantel Radio



The Sony TR-717B transistor mantel was battery operated and so could be used as a portable too. The two bands covered MW broadcast and 3.9 - 12MHz shortwave. Its retro design has barely a straight edge and the radio was available in the 60s in 2-tone English ivory with beaver brown or English ivory and teal blue. The radio was sold world-wide, though the American market was the biggest for Sony. Boasting 7 transistors, this was a superhet design with a transformerless 280mW output stage. The transistors are: converter 2SA-123, IF1 2SC-76, IF2 2SC-76, AF1 2SD-66, AF2 2SD-65 and AF out 2SB-51 (x2).

Photo by Kevin Poulter for the Historical Radio Society of Australia (HRSA). Phone 03 9539 1117. www.hrsa.net.au



This Astor "3-in-1" radiogram & TV combination unit from 1969 is fully functional again.

one being "where do I put it?" Record changers can also be difficult to service if parts are worn or idler pulleys are defective, but pick-up heads and styli are still available for most.

The old adage of "it pays to advertise" has worked well for Peter with displays and demonstrations of his equipment, advertisements on a local

community radio station and a registered business name that promotes his interest. If you wish to contact him, his phone number is (08) 8376 9382 or via email at radiogrambloke@bigpond.com

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