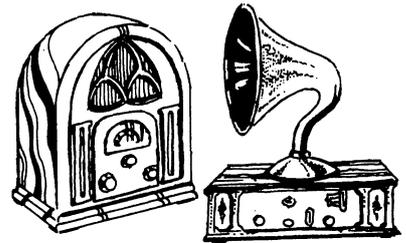


Vintage Radio

by PETER LANKSHEAR



Getting started

This is the first appearance of a new regular column in EA, designed to provide both interesting reading and useful reference information for anyone interested in the fascinating (and rapidly growing) hobby of collecting and restoring old radios. The column will be conducted by well-known and very experienced NZ collector Peter Lankshear, and here's Peter's opening introduction:

It is with great pleasure that I have accepted EA's invitation to host a monthly Vintage Radio column. My credentials are that I belong to the generation that grew up with radio, and from a very early age I found electronics an absorbing hobby. Later, I became one of those fortunate few who make a career of their hobby, and after a working lifetime, my interest is still with electronics, especially early radio.

From its earliest days, radio has had a strong hobby element, and vintage radio, in which there is a widespread and growing interest, is a natural extension.

The aim of this column is to provide information and communication for collectors, historians, restorers, in fact, anyone interested in any aspects of the pre-semiconductor era of electronics.

One of the great merits of vintage radio as a hobby is its wide range of disciplines. Among the practical subjects I hope to cover are collecting, servicing, restoring, cabinet repairs, displaying and rebuilding or making of components. Historical topics will include people, organisations, models and developments. There are very knowledgeable collectors who only collect valves, for example. One of my own favourite subjects is analysis of the design and engineering that went into valve radios.

Naturally, I will endeavour to present topics of general interest, but the wide range of experience amongst readers of EA does mean that there will be times, hopefully infrequently, when an article cannot have universal appeal. This type of column is two way. Any feedback

from readers will be valued because it will enable me to find out which topics are of the greatest interest. There is a lot about the Australian scene that I as a New Zealander would like to learn about. For example, I would like to have more information as to which American and British receivers were commonly sold in Australia.

The widespread appreciation of technological artifacts is a relatively new phenomenon. Yesterday I observed the reaction of a group of teenage girls when a restored 1925 open tourer car drove past. I heard remarks such as "neat" and "I'd love to have one like that." Their parents at the same age would not have wanted to have been seen dead in such an old "bomb".

Fortunately, early radio equipment is now widely recognised as worthy of preservation. A decade ago, when the writer first began to take a serious interest in vintage radio, the few enthusiasts involved were generally older people who had been associated with electronics in some way, and there was a concern that the technology would die with their generation. Happily, it seems now that this will not be the case. I am very encouraged by the increasing number of young people who are becoming increasingly involved in our hobby, and are mastering what to them are ancient techniques.

Inevitably, some misconceptions have arisen. I have lost count of the number of times I had been told that "you can't get valves today", or "no one can repair radios today". Both of these statements have been fostered by an industry very

involved in the "planned obsolescence" philosophy. Valves are still surprisingly plentiful, and whilst repair of valve radios is not commercially viable, increasing numbers of enthusiasts are learning the necessary skills.

An interesting concept of valve radios has developed. Invariably, the remark is made "Ah, yes, valve radios had a much better tone than these plastic transistors". Nostalgia does help, but of course the real reason for the improved sound was ample audio power feeding a large speaker.

Be that as it may, we have the unusual situation of an old technology being regarded by the layperson as being superior to its successor. It is rare to find an indifferent attitude to older receivers. Whilst there can be an ambivalence to collections of old bottles or postage stamps, radios are regarded quite differently. Radio has been for half a century or more, a central part of households. Along with television, it occupies a special place in family life. Older people, when seeing a display of early sets will say "We had one like that" and the younger generation will say something like "My grandmother had one of those". Somehow, I can't imagine a collection of washing machines or early lawnmowers creating the same enthusiasm!

An increasing number of people who have no intention of becoming collectors are having the old family radio, or one that they have acquired, refurbished. Hopefully this column will be of help to them as well as the serious enthusiast.

Collecting

Interest in vintage radio is not confined to collecting receivers. Some readers will be interested in old books, magazines and data. Valve collecting can be absorbing, whilst one local collector here in New Zealand has a large collection of headphones. Others do not have the space or the inclination to possess equipment, but many do – and be warned, the subject can be addictive.

Collections can start in many ways. Some years ago, a friend of mine, who now owns a fine and large display, found an old Crosley receiver which had been dumped and even had weeds growing through it. With some knowledge of cabinet making, and wanting something to do, he took it home and restored the tired old cabinet to its former glory. Then he located another, and another. By then he was hooked. He learned to service the electronics, and now, not only does he have a separate building housing his collection, but he supplements his retirement pension by repairing valve radios.

Other collections have started by the finding of a radio at a garage sale or in a shed. My own collection started when on impulse I purchased a 1930 Majestic TRF console from an auction room. It looked so good when it was cleaned up that I put it in my office, and it has proved an "ice breaker" for visitors.

Where to find them

I can only speak from experience of hunting for radios in New Zealand, but I imagine that the situation is much the same in Australia. Advertisements in the newspaper Wanted columns are not particularly helpful. If you do turn something up, there can be some pretty wild ideas about values.

Second hand shops in country towns are a good starting place, but don't expect superb models at giveaway prices. Keep an eye on auction rooms. If no other collector is bidding you may get a good radio at a reasonable price. Unfortunately, some antique dealers are beginning to take an interest and can drive prices up. Garage sales and farm sheds are also good places.

I have found the most rewarding approach is to let it be known to friends and relatives that you are in the collecting business. You may not get instant results, but it is surprising what turns up when you least expect it.

Finally, join one of the Vintage Radio Societies where there is often wheeling and dealing. If secretaries of societies would write to me courtesy of EA about their organisation, I would be pleased to publish details.

Here are two that I do know about:

Historical Radio Society of Australia,
C/- Rex Wales,
24 Park Lane, Mt. Waverley,
Victoria 3149, Australia.

New Zealand Vintage Radio Soc.
C/- Bryan Marsh,
20 Rimu Road, Mangere Bridge,
Auckland, New Zealand.



Part of the author's own collection of vintage receivers.

What to collect

At first the newcomer tends to grab everything that comes his way. This is not unique to radio of course; after a while experience brings discernment and his (or her) choices become more selective.

But what is collectable? I suppose that it is anything that appeals and can be accommodated is eligible. Even some of the early transistorised radios are now 30 years old.

Age is not the only criterion for collectability. Originally, rarity, novelty, innovation, appearance, market leadership, performance and advanced design are also desirable characteristics, but then so are just plain ordinariness, personal association or because you like it.

One thing is clear, monetary value has little relationship to desirability. Fortunately, vintage radio does not have a little black book of prices. Each transaction is a stand alone, and between collectors, swapping rather than trading is very common.

Be cautious

A word of caution to the new collector who might be tempted to pay out good money for a radio: be sure of what you are buying. A couple of personal examples will hopefully show that care is necessary.

On holiday, I was visiting a well known "stately home" which does have many priceless treasures and artifacts. In fact the trustees pride themselves on the authenticity of their collection. I was most impressed by a beautiful HMV radiogram of the early thirties. Externally, it was in mint condition. The custodian told me the family had purchased it new and that it had been overhauled by an expert a few years ago. As the tour party moved on, I took a quick look at the rear. The

"overhaul" comprised of an amateurish aluminium chassis fitted out with much later noval valves, utterly ruining the value of the set as a collectors item.

On the other side of the Tasman, I was visiting a friend on Queensland's Gold Coast. Knowing my interest, she insisted that I should admire a "lovely old radio" in a nearby home. Sure enough, it was an impressive 1931 RCA tallboy console. Thoughts of shipping costs crossed my mind as I turned the set around. However, I had to tactfully try and conceal my disgust when the chassis came into view. The valves, instead of being classic 24A's and 27's, had been changed to much more modern octals! Most experienced collectors have similar horror stories to tell.

If you are confronted with an apparently valuable veteran, check its authenticity very carefully, and if you have any doubts, get advice or try and do some research. Be suspicious, and take nothing at its face value. Of course, it can be a challenge to "demodify" a set, but such activities aren't recommended for the novice.

The limitations of storage space can be encountered surprisingly quickly. Even mantel radios take up a deceptive amount of room, and the average workshop, garage or den soon becomes filled. Locations around the house for discrete storage of a few sets are limited. The most tolerant of housewives is likely to object to more than one console, handsome as they may be, in the living room. Ingenuity overcomes many problems, and more than one collector has traded his car for a smaller model when his collection overflowed into the garage!

In later articles, I hope to describe some collections and display methods, but meanwhile, may I suggest that you scout about and locate some of those receivers.