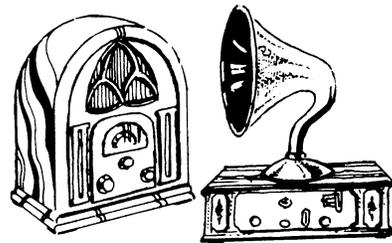


Vintage Radio

by PETER LANKSHEAR



Cabinet restoration

It may surprise the new vintage radio enthusiast to learn that one of the most controversial topics for serious collectors is the question of cabinet restoration. One faction says that a radio should be displayed as found, with dents, scratches, warts and all. Others contend that a receiver is only fit to be seen when it looks at least as pristine as it did when it left the factory.

In Britain and the United States, restoration has been the subject of some strong words from respected authorities, and the N.Z. Vintage Radio Society members conducted a prolonged debate some years ago, with no final resolution. What then is all the fuss about?

The key issue is originality. The purists insist that an artifact should not be modified in any way, or have incorporated any materials that were not available at the time of its construction. The opposite school maintains that many valuable relics are unsatisfactory in their 'as found' condition and accepts that modern components and materials may have to be used, but concedes that every attempt should be made to conform to the original concepts and intentions of the designer.

Absolute originality can be an unrealistic ideal, as there are few radios that have not been serviced or worked on at some time.

An extreme example of the restoration school is the vintage car movement. By the very nature of their purpose and treatment, old cars are rarely, if ever, found in good original condition and collecting is practically synonymous with complete rebuilding and refinishing. Some examples have so much care lavished on them that the finish of the paintwork and chrome is considerably better than the manufacturer would have intended or could have afforded. Prizes are awarded at shows for perfection of paintwork and appearance.

Many museum curators do not approve of this approach at all. They contend that perfection of finish is second-

ary to authenticity and anyway, all materials deteriorate in time and it is unrealistic to pretend otherwise.

In the art world, classic works are being painstakingly 'derestored' in an attempt to undo the mistakes of past misdirected enthusiasms. Radio collecting has found its place somewhere in between the over-restoration and the purist disciplines.

A compromise

The most practical approach for collectors to adopt is a compromise between these extremes. Elliott Sivowitch, Radio Curator of the Smithsonian Institution, told me that their approach is, if at all possible, to tidy up an exhibit using cleaning agents and polishes. Only if these fail will refinishing work be considered.

It seems to me that what the Smithsonian judges to be correct should be a good guide for amateur collectors. It is sometimes surprising what a bit of elbow grease and a domestic cleaner will achieve. Preparations are available for the rejuvenation of tired and crazed lacquer.

Significantly, at an auction, reasonably sound receivers in original condition will invariably realise more than even well restored models. In other words, refinishing is likely to devalue a collectors item, so unless you really are an expert, leave old and rare cabinets alone until you have had a lot of experience!

Consideration should be given to employment of a professional refinisher if a valuable cabinet is in a bad way.

When to refurbish

Despite all this there are times when refinishing a cabinet is appropriate.

Radios from around 1940 and later are not rare or particularly valuable. Still capable of doing a good day's work, they are entirely suitable as everyday domestic receivers, and definitely have a place in collections. Wooden cabinets of this era were pieces of attractive furniture with classic veneers and really come to life when properly polished. Many are still in excellent condition and a good clean and an application of furniture polish is all that is necessary for rejuvenation.

Some cabinets have not been so fortunate. Many fine receivers became unfashionable and were relegated to the workshop, garage or factory, to spend their time belting out the top 40 tunes or sporting commentaries. Knobs were often lost, or were adjusted with greasy or paint covered fingers. The cabinets were knocked about and became prime targets for pinups and stick-on decals and as repositories for glasses, cans and cups.

The result of all this rough treatment is a finish that is generally beyond saving. It is at this stage that these old classics can often be obtained for the asking.

Such a receiver came my way recently. Saved from the rubbish collector, it had suffered from the usual treatment handed out to workshop hacks. Knobs were missing and one was replaced with an obviously incorrect type. Labels and dirt hid the inlaid veneer. After the treatment I am about to describe, it now looks like new and graces the Lankshear conservatory.

The set in question is a New Zealand made Columbus 90, typical of literally scores of models of the 1940's from both sides of the Tasman.

I am not, in this article, dealing with servicing of the chassis. This is a very extensive subject which I hope to cover in later articles. For now, assuming that



The author's Columbus 90 mantel model, before cabinet restoration. It dates from the 1940's. Note the scratched lacquer and stickers plastered over the cabinet.

the radio is working, I suggest that all paper and electrolytic capacitors as well as resistors should be checked with a meter. Replacements are inexpensive and any suspicious characters should be renewed.

A big job

Refinishing an old receiver cabinet is not a project that can be completed in one evening. If you are going to restore the finish on a wooden cabinet, there are no half measures.

Be prepared to strip the cabinet down completely to the wood. Under no circumstances should the original polish be covered over with new lacquer. This is referred to by a fellow collector as the 'toffee apple treatment', and looks terrible.

First remove the knobs and chassis bolts, to take out the chassis. In larger radios the speaker will be separate and fastened to the cabinet by wood screws. At this stage a thorough dusting with a paint brush and vacuum cleaner is a good idea. Put the chassis and speaker to one side, along with the hardware and make a thorough inspection of the cabinet to dismantle it as much as possible.

At the least remove the speaker mounting board, grill and dial escutcheon. The grill cloth will be either glued to the cabinet or the speaker board. Either way it is likely to be the worse for wear, dirty and faded and unless laundering is successful, it is best discarded.

Removing the finish

The success of the whole project depends on the thoroughness of the removal of the old finish and subsequent preparation of the wood for refinishing.

Sanding, scraping and stripping are the recognised methods and each has its merits and traps.

Hand sanding is safest, but slowest. Always use a cork sanding block and medium grade sandpaper. Do not be tempted to use a coarse paper to speed up the work. The result will be deep scratches in the wood, which will be very hard to remove. An orbital power sander is much more efficient, but unless great care is taken, thin veneer will be cut through with disastrous consequences. A steel scraper can be very effective, but requires skill to sharpen properly and use without damaging the cabinet.

The easiest method, but the most expensive, is to use a proprietary paint stripper. These are pungent smelling pastes that are applied thickly and left to soften the finish. After the stripper has been left to work, for half an hour or so, the resulting goo is removed with a scraper, hopefully leaving bare wood underneath. Incomplete removal can be corrected by a second coat.

A mixture of remover and old lacquer is inflammable, so dispose of it carefully. The active ingredient of stripper is actually a gas, the paste being only the vehicle to carry it. It is, therefore, a good idea to conserve the gas by covering the cabinet with a plastic sheet or better still, putting it in a large plastic bag. Always use rubber gloves or there will be more than paint removed!

When stripping is complete, the whole cabinet should be scrubbed with a stiff brush and water. This may seem a bit drastic, but it does no harm, makes final sanding much easier and gets rid of the last vestiges of paste.

Repairing damage

Regardless of the method used, we have now reached the stage of attending to the woodwork. Lifting veneer can be held in position with masking tape and reglued with PVA glue.

Dents can often be removed by wetting the depressed area, then covering it with a wet rag and heating with a household iron. The resulting steam swells the pores of the wood and forces the fibres back into shape.

Chips, borer holes and small cracks in the veneer can often be disguised with plastic wood. Be careful to match the colours, as bare wood can be considerably paler than when finished. An extreme case is walnut. Unfinished, it is a light brown, but when wetted, even with water, the colour can be almost black.

If there is any suspicion of borer infestation, obtain one of the liquid poisons sold for the purpose. A typical compound is diluted with mineral turpentine and painted liberally on the interior of the cabinet.

When the blemishes are removed, sand the cabinet down using a sanding block, and fine aluminium oxide or garnet paper, rubbing only with (i.e., along) the grain. Be particularly careful to get the last vestiges of old lacquer out of the mouldings and grooves.

It is likely that some solid parts of the cabinet will be made from inexpensive wood, stained with dyes to resemble fine timber. Lacquer removal, washing and sanding between them will have removed most of this colouring. Oil stains are rubbed into the wood, but tend to hide the grain and are best used on open pored timbers. Water based stains are the most stable but raise the grain, which has to be resanded.

Non grain raising (NGR) stains are the easiest to apply. They are available in many shades at paint and handyman stores. Being spirit based, they dry instantly and should be applied with a small paint brush.

Stains are concentrated dyes and their effect can be very easily overdone. Be careful because unwanted splashes are very hard to remove. Generally, figured woods and veneers are best left unstained. The insides of many cabinets were stained and should be redone if at all patchy.

It will be obvious from all this, that restoration can be fairly time consuming. There is plenty to go on with and next month I will describe the relacquering and reassembly work. EA