



TECHNOLOGY

A growing body of enthusiasts is learning to appreciate the style and quality of workmanship found in old valve radios. Yesterday's junk can be today's pricey treasure. Roger Harrison reports.

Resurrecting the technology of yesteryear – principally wireless sets – may be a pleasant and rewarding pastime for some. But for others, restored radios are like restored cars, furniture or the bric-a-brac of daily life “back then” – collectable, and worth increasing sums of money.

The birth of broadcasting in the 1920s ushered in a remarkable and sophisticated technology that had far-reaching influences on daily family life and society as a whole. The technology broke down invisible barriers of time and distance, and brought experiences to people that they were otherwise denied. A wireless set was a major purchase for a household in the early years and many local manufacturers vied to provide attractive models with ‘unique’ features, having designs in keeping with the style and fashions of their period.

It wasn't so long ago that old valve radios were regarded as just so much junk, dross from an unromantic era. Now, restored, they can fetch prices ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars! What are the

factors that interest people so much that they spend hours painstakingly stripping down and refurbishing these vintage sets and months searching for elusive original parts; why would collectors pay such prices, far higher than the modern, functional equivalent?

Why do it?

Well, it depends on who you talk to. It's generally a combination of factors, rather than one or two alone. However, nostalgia and aesthetics seem to head the list. Some people have an interest in stylistic and functional comparisons; investment potential is another factor; while others simply appreciate vintage radios for their durability and quality of workmanship.

The “wireless era” ran from the mid-1920s through to about 1950. A decade later, valves were no longer being used in new receiver designs as transistors and transistor receiver designs had been developed to the point where they were cheaper and more easily manufactured. As the 1960s advanced, valve radios were pensioned off or discarded, replaced by the new technology.

Valve radio designs reflect the character and style of their era. Indeed, the age of a particular set can be readily placed by its design. As an item of household furniture, a radio design only had to conform to providing a few functional features – a few knobs and a dial – leaving the rest to creative imagination and experiment. And boy, did they experiment. Hundreds of styles appeared, which are now generally categorised under a few groupings, such as the late-30s “cathedral” style sets, the fascia panels of which look rather reminiscent of the main altar wall of a cathedral. The loudspeaker was concealed behind the “windows”.

Floor-standing console radios allowed plenty of scope to design the unit as a piece of furniture. Indeed, some manufacturers went so far as to make the radio a functional piece of furniture! They concealed receivers in writing desks, sideboards, occasional tables – all sorts of things. A 1930s console radio, in working order and featuring a fully restored french-polished wood veneer cabinet can readily fetch \$1000, perhaps \$3000-plus for

something very stylish and perhaps a little rare.

Common sets of the 30s and 40s, restored and in good order, may set you back \$200 to \$400; for a table or mantel set, up to \$600 or even more for a console model. Nostalgia has its price. If you have restored an old house and stylistically recreated a certain era, either throughout the house or just in a room or two, carefully obtaining furniture and fittings from the era, then a wireless set from the era is the final touch (hence the price).

Enthusiasts who rescue and restore valve radios just for the love of it, for the comparison of the older technology with the new, and/or through an appreciation of the quality and reliability exhibited by many valve radios, get their satisfaction from these factors, not because their work represents investment potential or through any specialised appreciation of knowledge of their design aesthetics.

It is not uncommon to find an elderly valve radio still in working order, untouched by servicemen, some 30 or 40 years after its original purchase.

For those touched by the nostalgia surrounding vintage radios, a disappointment is always present – you can't pick up those old programs!

Back then

Once broadcasting got under way in the 1920s, products were quickly manufactured to meet the forecast demand. There were literally dozens of manufacturers, big and small, throughout Australia and New Zealand in the 20s and 30s, although they dwindled in the depression and up to World War II. They call it industry rationalisation these days.

In Australia, AWA, STC, Stromberg Carlson, Kreisler (alright – who made that joke about “ethnic radio”) and Breville were among the “big names”. Imports appeared here, too. Brand names such as Western Electric, Ekco, Philco and Atwater Kent may be found. An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 sets went on the market in Australia between the mid-20s and about 1950, according to one source. How many are left is uncertain, but valve radios are hardly rarities.

The first low-cost receivers were crystal sets. Typically, they cost twenty five shillings

BRINGING BACK THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Rediscovering vintage radio



A venerable collection! At top rear is an RCA Model 60, circa 1927-28, featuring a polished wooden cabinet; it was fully imported and very expensive in its day. The large cabinet to the left, with the basket of flowers design, is an RCA Model 106 loudspeaker that came with the Model 60 receiver. The basket of flowers was an RCA trademark. Atop this cabinet is a "variometer" tuning coil from a receiver of the 1920s era. In front of the RCA speaker, with the black cabinet sporting a circular fretwork front, is an Ampion loudspeaker, circa 1923-24. To its right are several valves of the era. The black horn on the right is a Browne horn speaker of 1925. Just behind this is an Atwater Kent Model 56 receiver of 1928. It is ac-powered and features eight valves and a metal cabinet. Atwater Kent was a very large US manufacturer. To the rear of this receiver, hiding partly behind the RCA speaker, is an Atwater Kent Model 3E speaker of 1927-28.

(\$2.50) a big bite from the breadwinner's take-home pay of about three pounds (\$6) in the mid-1920s. AWA's Radiola set of 1924 cost fifteen guineas (fifteen pounds, fifteen shillings – about \$31.50). In other words, about six weeks' wages. Its 1925 crystal set cost six pounds, about two weeks' wages.

Top-of-the-line receivers were expensive indeed! You could pay the equivalent of five to six months' wages for a four-valve AWA-made set. The company released two models in 1925, priced at fifty six pounds ten shillings and sixty eight pounds. If average annual earnings these days are around \$30,000, that's like paying \$12,500 and \$15,000! Who said today's hi-fis were

expensive? Sales figures for the AWA sets are not revealed.

So, if you see prices over the thousand dollar mark for restored sets, consider the bargain you're getting.

Contacts

Sydney and Melbourne sport a growing band of restoration enthusiasts and vintage radio collectors, but others are in evidence all round the country. In New Zealand, Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington seem to support a goodly gang of enthusiasts, although, like Australia, enthusiasts and collectors are to be found all over.

In Sydney, auctions, particularly auctions of goods and chattels from deceased estates, provide a steady stream of raw material, and there has been a thriving informal swap market between enthusiast-collectors for many years. Some "old wares" traders sell vintage radios, usually at prices well above their worth so they're given a wide berth by knowledgeable enthusiasts and collectors.

Victorian collectors and enthusiasts are well catered for by two retail stores specialising in valve wireless sets. One is Nostalgia Wireless in Union Rd, Surrey Hills, and another Resurrection Radio at 51 Chapel St, Prahran.

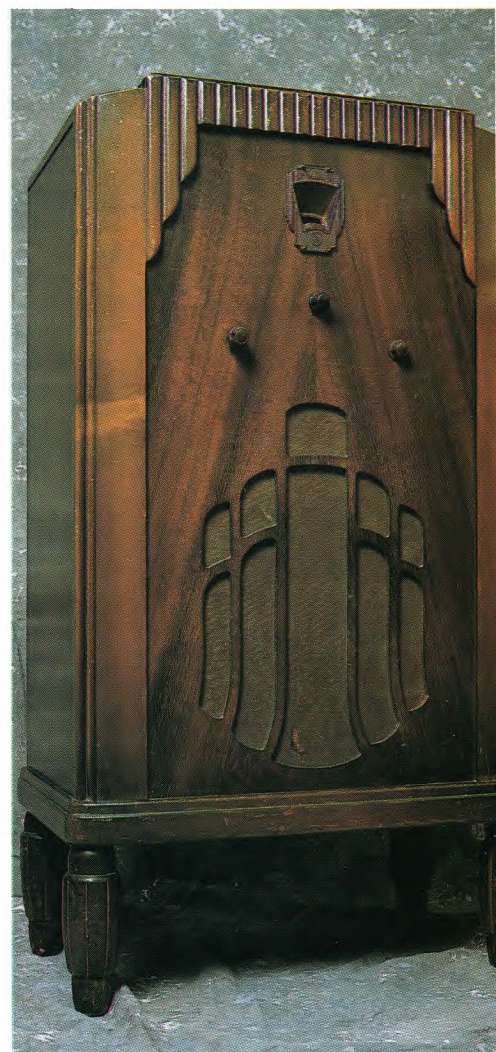
If you're keen on meeting others of like interest, the Early Wireless and Sound Society of NSW can be contacted by writing to John Murt, PO Box 623, Lane Cove, NSW 2066. In Victoria, there's the Historical Radio Society of Australia. Contact the membership convenor, Rex Wales, at 49 Sharon Rd, Springvale Vic 3171.

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This Colmovox receiver, from 1923-24, was made in Australia by the Colmovox brothers. It is a Model 5 (or Model 6). It is a tuned radio frequency design, note the three vernier dials — each stage had to be tuned separately (a three-handed job!) The valves in front are typical of the types used in such receivers.

Information to compile this feature was gleaned from chief technician, bottlewasher and salesman, Jack, at Resurrection Radio in Victoria; from Andrew Kay of The Vintage Wireless Radio Company in Sydney; and John Murt of the Early Wireless and Sound Society of NSW.



Australian made! This is a Fisk AWA Model 55 receiver, an upright console style of 1929-35, made by Amalgamated Wireless Australia (AWA) headed by Ernest Fisk, who was later knighted for his contribution to the industry.