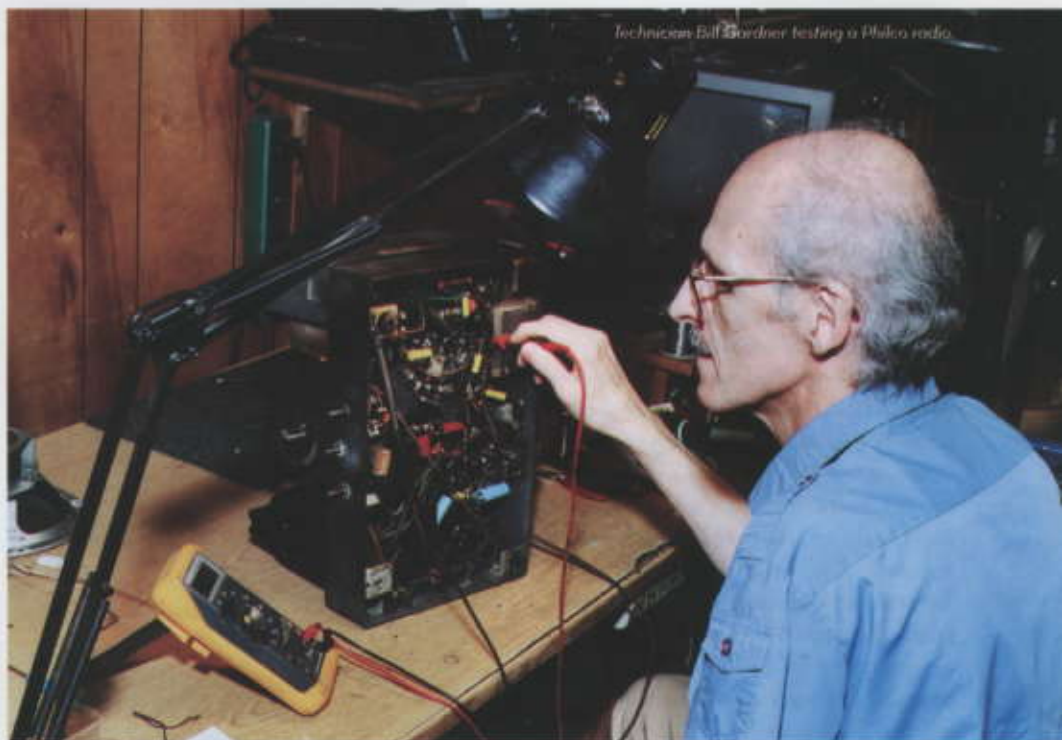


Twelve-year-olds may be discerning buyers of the latest MP-3 players, but some of their baby boomer parents are looking outside the big box stores for another generation's preferred source of music: radios. Not new radios, with digital tuning and dozens of preset buttons, but old radios, some with vacuum tubes the size of light bulbs.



Technician Bill Gordon testing a Philco radio.

Nostalgia *in a* Box

story and photographs by Farron D. Brouger



Post-war plastic vacuum tube radios at Atomic Warehouse.

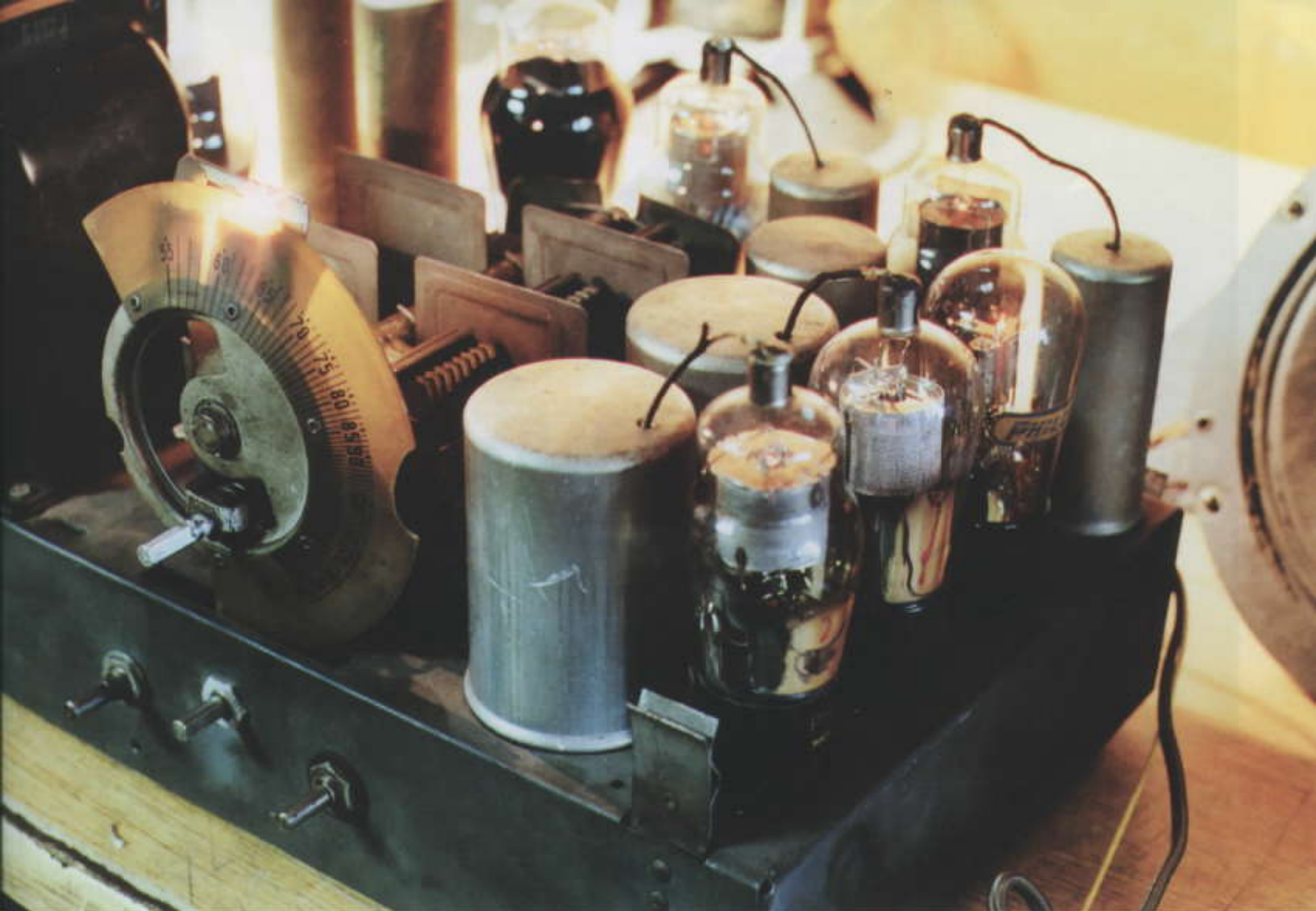
ANTIQUE RADIOS ARE BEING COLLECTED AND RESTORED BY A GENERATION THAT TOOK HIGH TECH FROM THE LAB TO THE LIVING ROOM BUT GREW UP WITH THEIR GRANDPARENTS' RADIOS FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE LATE '20S AND '30S.

According to Ed Lyons, co-editor of the Mid-Atlantic Radio Club's *Radio Age*, "Most of the 800 to 900 members of our club are what you'd term baby boomers, many of whom got started trying to restore something they remembered as kids."

There's even a slightly sinister side to old radios, Lyons notes. "In Germany, many radios exist that have the unlawful swastika on them, and these were hidden away until eBay came along, and now they are surreptitiously sold for big bucks."

Safety concerns

Whether you find Grandma's radio in



the attic or on eBay, don't plug it in. In an interview last summer at a repair shop in downtown Dillsburg technician Bill Gardner, surrounded by radios in varying stages of repair, probed the innards of a Philco radio chassis. He delves into the power supply, from the wall plug through the large, heavy transformers. Old wiring is a safety concern. Before printed circuit boards and integrated circuits, a radio's parts were mounted on a metal box—the chassis—and connected with what's now called point-to-point wiring. Though the solder joints can last forever, the rubber insulation becomes brittle and crumbles, exposing bare wire, with the potential for short circuits.

Another safety issue involves the capacitors. Gardner also explained that the radio he was investigating has been "recapped," meaning that the capacitors have been replaced with new ones. Unlike solid state components, some old radio parts deteriorate over time, and capacitors are the most vulnerable. In Gardner's experience, "You can get a radio going 99 percent of the time just by replacing the capacitors."

Powered up and running

With new wiring and capacitors, as needed, the radio is gently brought to life. "I plug the set into a variable transformer and gradually bring up the voltage," Gardner explains. Using circuit diagrams and specifications from the CD-ROM version of the out-of-print, 23-volume set of John F. Rider's Perpetual Troubleshooter's Manuals, Gardner tests voltages at key points. If all is in order and no additional parts are needed, the radio is powered up and run continuously for at least a week to make sure components in borderline condition won't fail soon

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Nostalgic Radios

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after delivery to the customer.

And what if something fails during the break-in period? Old radios bring with them the legacy of serviceability. The pre-war large table models and floor-standing consoles were designed and built to be repaired when they broke down, not to be discarded because servicing them cost more than replacing them, as is true of so many consumer electronics today.

Serviceability a plus

Vacuum tubes are no longer made in this country, but the mostly widely used types are neither scarce nor expensive, typically costing \$5 to \$10. With the dominance of transistors in the 1960s, obsolete stocks of tubes were bought cheaply in bulk and now sell as "NOS," new old stock, often in the original boxes. Rare early tubes with glass envelopes, made with the same glassblowing equipment as light bulbs, can cost more than \$500.

Tubes are not only readily replaceable but also unlikely to need replacing. "The circuitry is so overengineered, and the tubes are used so conservatively that they will probably outlast the owner," says Gardner.

Looking past the robust but frail-looking tubes, which parts are most difficult to restore to original condition? Classic tube designs used choke coils that were wound with hair-thin lacquer insulated copper wire. When exposed to moisture in

the air, the insulation breaks down, and the fragile wire itself oxidizes, turning that familiar old copper green. Unfortunately, Gardner says, "tuned radio frequency coils just aren't available from any supplier."

More work to be done

An electronic overhaul restores the unseen parts of a vintage radio, but there's more work to be done. Again, there are surprises in store for the uninitiated. Until about 1940 radios were housed in wooden cabinets, some of them quite elaborate pieces of furniture (check out the gorgeous E.H. Scott collection at <http://radiodaze.com/>). Common refinishing materials and techniques can restore the luster to these beauties. The cosmetic bits and pieces are another matter. Control knobs, switches and dials can be hard to find, and due to their scarcity, relatively pricey.

The hottest radio models

Not having a fondly remembered old radio in the attic is no obstacle to replicating it. Online photos at radio hobby sites or eBay may spark a memory. For hands-on browsing, try local swap meets, where antique radios change hands like cameras and sports memorabilia. Nostalgia merchants usually have a selection of radios and may have contacts where they can find others. The Atomic Warehouse in Harrisburg fills a converted auto parts warehouse with a wide-ranging stock of radios in its vast nostalgia and collectibles inventory, along with a vintage electronics repair shop. Owner Steve Pearlman



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Vintage tubes in original boxes are sold as NOS, new-old-stock.

admits a preference for colorful plastic radios from the '40s and '50s, and will if asked educate the curious in the mysteries of bakelite, Plaskon and urea.

If the radio in your past was plastic you need not feel humble. The hottest collectible radios are the Catalins and Plaskon midgets in colors like butter-scotch, pistachio, mint green and lavender, described by Pearlman to be "the rarest of the rare." Dozens of these little beauties arranged in a softly lit glass display case look more like candy than 50-year-old consumer electronics. Not penny candy, though. The best examples sell for \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more.

What's your line?

Whether your interest is in restoring a radio heirloom or collecting artifacts from the last century, you will find a surprising number of like-minded people to show you the way. Some lived through radio's golden decades, but many are of the post-war generation whose reactions sometimes surprised Gardner in the Dillsburg shop. "I've seen people come into the shop to pick up a radio, and it's playing, and tears come to their eyes." No, you can't quite buy memories, but you certainly can restore a few. *SL*

Farron D. Brouger, a freelance writer based in Anaheim, Calif., grew up in northern York County.

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