

Archive: Sound History

New Zealand's history of audio

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New Zealand hi-fi... old and new

And now the mystery section of the *Antiques Roadshow* television programme.

Bill? Well, a bit of a puzzle this one. Quite a nice woodgrain box, but why someone's put all those chrome knobs on it... weird.

Elizabeth? Yes, I'm as stumped as Bill, on one hand we have the Uncial typeface showing great antiquity on the other a row of plugs on the back implying something electronic. Then there's the other box that seems to be connected.

Augustus? I'm pleased to say that what we've got here is a real classic. It's a New Zealand made Rait pre/power amplifier circa 1973.

Okay, so if there ever to be an *Antiques Roadshow* looking a classic New Zealand audio gear, what would they choose?

What makes something classic/collectable? To me there are a number of potential factors. The first is that it was accepted as good in its day. The second is that it should be preferably "x" years ahead of its time so that it's not bad even by current standards.

The third is that it should be visually distinctive and/or original. It may even be ugly (like the Rait) if it's representative of a period. Curiously a product may become classic by being either rare or common, in the latter context an AWA Series 9 deserves a mention.

The panel of one has been busy compiling these awards:

Early 70's Product

No surprises here, in fact, only one nomination. So put on your tartan and glitter and get that authentic [Bay City Rollers](#) sound via your **Rait 30-30**. As mentioned above this pre/power combo was produced in Christchurch from about 1973.

Power went up in 1975 to 60W/channel [basically the same amplifier with a beefed-up power supply--Editor] and tree-felling continued till 1980. (A "boring black" version was also produced for the less committed fans in the late 70's).

Late 70's Product

When I first started thinking about classic New Zealand audio gear, the very first product that came to mind was the green McLaren products. Classically elegant with their white serif typeface on the distinctive dark green panels. The 401/501 hit the still import restricted stores in 1979.

Unfortunately the 501 power amp had a few reliability problems and was replaced by the 701 power amp in 1981.

But the Pink Floyd-era award must go to the **Roberts STA50**. This amplifier was already legendary

in its own lifetime for being one of the few amplifiers of the time that could drive the dreaded Linn Sara.

The Mk I and II versions were more sought after than the Mk III which appeared to trade current drive for absolute power. One of the outstanding features of all Roberts products was the sheer build-quality, especially given the comparatively small numbers produced.

Early 80's Product

Trivial pursuit question: name nine **New** Zealand manufacturers all producing amplifiers in the early 80s? Cut throat competition? More like chainsaws at ten paces.

The eternal triangular debate of Perreaux vs McLaren vs Plinius occupied many column inches of Mike's Mag and "the other one" that was published at the time. ["The other one" was called **Sound & Vision**, published by Rick Barr in 1985 and 1986. The final published issue of **Sound & Vision** was the January/February 1986 issue. The first of "Mike's Mag" was called *Zounds* - changed after three issues to *AudioVideo* and changed again in May 1996 to **AudioEnz** - came out in November 1986 - Editor]

The first **Plinius** II preamp and III power amp (the Plinius III pictured) looked like an electric fence controller. Agricultural maybe, but I liked its smallish proportions (I'm sure they comprised 50% of the amplifiers available at the original **Soundline** shop because they were all Frank had room for).

Perreaux scored a "world first" with the mosfet PMF2150 power amp which, in the 2150b version, was exported in serious numbers. I rather coveted the tiny (and rare) SP10 preamp which was startling at the time for its lack of tone controls. But to me Rickie Lee Jones was at her most natural, lisping "ethy monny" through a Craft CA1/CA2, the quiet hero of the time.

The contents of the envelope containing the prize will surprise by not revealing an amplifier but a loudspeaker. And it's not a Lambert!

Okay, it was a close run thing. Lambert's appearance with the SP225 and SP250 is notable and the SP120 powered coffee-table (complete with smoked glass top) must score its own "decade" award for being ten years ahead of its time.

But when the judges votes are counted they are unanimous. It goes to the **Audax T200** (no picture available). This may **sound** like something from the "F" country, but it was a Kiwi creation, as witnessed by the Kauri veneer version! These are occasionally seen advertised second hand, in exchange for important body parts (usually an arm and a leg) which shows their competitiveness with modern speakers. The Audax Reference was even better, with different, if fussier looking, cabinet, metal grill and an eight-inch TPX cone.

Late 80's Products

Possibly the most elegant range of amps built in **New** Zealand, Linx moved production to the UK after the stock market crash and an indifferent response locally. Pity, as their chamfered box and laser cut switches were *tres chic*.

Presumably it's because Plinius is named after a crater on the moon that they got their styling inspiration at this time from the featureless moon monolith from 2001. Pictured is the first pre and power amplifiers that many Kiwis owned, the Plinius IIB preamp and VII power amplifier.

Far more interesting were the graphics of the Mega 105c - great fun (even if they didn't use the graphics I designed for them!). Pity the effect was rather diluted by the cheap looking (but frighteningly expensive) plastic knobs. The amp itself was one of the most carefully thought out products produced in NZ and had more balls than a Lotto machine. [A Mega 105c still powers my office system--Editor]

Again the category award 'winner' is a speaker. It could even be the overall winner if I had one.

This time it is a Lambert: the **Lambert SP260T Timekeeper**. This series was where the mid-sized Lamberts came of age. The 225s were always a good smallish speaker but the 250/255/260 were the size/price that suited **New** Zealand homes (ie me!). The 250s "box plus wart" styling didn't inspire while the 255s were tidier, if you liked coffins. While I'm not sure if the 260T's would sharpen razor blades, the pyramid shape was original, unobtrusive and acoustically useful. [And in subsequent years this general shape has been used by a number of "high-end" US speaker manufacturers--Editor]

Collectables?

They may be classics but is anyone collecting them? I mean really collecting them, not just the flotsam and jetsam that are the skeletons in the closet of the hi-fi gear freak.

I know that museums like the Otago Settlers Museum have significant computer collections, but is anyone deliberately acquiring these bits of our **history**?

In producing this article we found it surprisingly difficult to find pictures of products. The editor is collecting photographs and brochures, either for archiving as a permanent collection or scanning and placing on a CD-ROM.

If you have any old photographs or brochures, please send them to **AudioEnz**, PO Box 100-554, Auckland. Include a note and your address if you want them back, and please don't fold or bend any photographs or brochures.

Have your say!

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