

🔗 Vintage radios forge connection to past for collectors



Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor

Jim Sargent, president of the Vintage Radio and Phonograph Society with a few antique items, including a 1904 Columbia Standard phonograph. At left is a O'neil table model loudspeaker, and in rear is a 1907 Columbia Graphophone.

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Growing up, I used the intercom system to broadcast 8-track tapes through the house like it was my own radio station.

A lamp outside my door had a red light bulb, alerting passersby that I was On-The-Air. My mother humored me, making live, on-air song requests from the master intercom station in the kitchen.

“Um, hello? I’d like to hear Ike and Tina Turner’s ‘Proud Mary,’ please,” she would say, formally. Her voice was distorted; she spoke an inch from her speaker, dishwasher blaring nearby.

“Ike and Tina, comin’ right atcha,” I’d say in my best 10-year-old DJ voice, as I popped the cartridge into a Radio Shack player mounted smack up against the intercom speaker. Not exactly a professional radio broadcast, but a start.

I still collect a few old broadcasting microphones, radios and phonographs. I wondered who else was holding onto the vintage systems that brought music, life and news into our homes, long before Twitter.

The search led me to Jim Sargent, president of the Vintage Radio and Phonograph Society of Dallas, which has meetings, swap meets and auctions year-round. I went to their annual convention in Mesquite to meet with Sargent.

Mike McCarty, a society member, saw my notepad and pen and asked if I was looking for Jim.

“Yes sir, I am,” I replied.

“I’ll take you to him. I guess the law has finally caught up to Jim, huh?” McCarty said with a chuckle.

I played along. “Yeah, we’re all closing in on him now.”

He took me to a room with linen-covered tables holding America’s past — in radio and phonograph form. People positioned prized collections for special contests. David Spivey of Little Rock was unloading his collection of 1940s Emerson Model 511 Moderne radios in a rainbow of colors.

I finally shake 60-year-old Jim Sargent’s hand and we tour around. He tells me that collectors come to share stories, trade collectibles and to look for rare parts to repair radios or phonographs. He points to his own 1904 Columbia standard phonograph; he worked hard to locate a specific crank for it.

Sargent showed me the “home brews” — open board, homemade radio systems — rare cathedral-style Atwater Kent models, and a 1930s cream-colored Majestic brand radio with a Charlie McCarthy figure.

Sargent, who has worked at AT&T for 31 years, spends his off time at his Granbury home enjoying hundreds of radios and about 14 phonographs. He savors time at his workbench, surrounded by radio parts, gear, schematics and testing equipment.

“I like listening to baseball games on my 1938 Zenith console radio while I repair other radios. That was their epic year,” he said. “You can hear noise behind the game audio and speakers popping. Radio is the true theater of the mind.”

“I can hear my dad talkin’ about the whole neighborhood gathering around the porch to hear his Crosley Pup radio in Port Gibson, Miss.,” Sargent recalled. “It built memories and I think everyone here remembers these types of stories. This is a way to stay connected to the past.”

I’m starting to get it.

“Everyone loves to relive their childhood. And when a radio is on, you can react. You can stomp your feet, yell as loud as you like because that radio is talking to you in your own home,” Sargent said.

I brought my own old radio for an impromptu *Antiques Roadshow*-ish look-see. Sargent began describing it before it was even out of its cowhide holster.

“You’ve got a Philco, six-transistor radio and what’s neat about this is it’s been hand-wired,” he said. “It has a human element to it, unlike the machine, mass-produced radios of today.” He said the 1950s model is worth about \$25 at auction. Oh, but it’s priceless to me.

Camaraderie, history, a desire to restore and a connection to a very distant past, as well as childhood memories, keep fans of old radios and phonographs tuned in forever.

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