

GEAR & GADGETS



DAVE URBAN (2)

The Temple of Tunes

Vintage-audio collectors are on the hunt for coveted, ancient components to make their classic stereo systems sing. Here, how to start exploring and avoid the pitfalls

By JOHN CLARKE

VINTAGE-AUDIO collectors are a peculiar breed of relic hunters—never still, rarely pleased, steadfastly in pursuit of another sonic fix.

Many of them may begin collecting affordable vintage gear as a hobby, only to quickly scale up their compulsion, “always looking for the next upgrade, or the perfect component,” said Adam Wexler, owner of StereoBuyers in Brooklyn, N.Y., which specializes in buying and selling high-end vintage-audio equipment (stereobuyers.com). “People obsess over this stuff, but that’s part of the enjoyment.”

While modern tech geeks covet the latest novelties—brighter! faster! newer!—these dogged audiophiles are quixotically focused on tracking down the *right* thing. And many of the holy-grail products haven’t been manufactured for generations. Gear in working condition from the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s, specifically by brands like Garrard, JBL and McIntosh, has become gleaming prizes for zealous collectors.

“The hunt is definitely part of it,” Mr. Wexler said. “They just don’t make them like they used to.”

That’s because old-school amplifier tubes were built with more rigorous standards and tolerances; many served critical functions in planes, radars and military equipment. Some now-outlawed materi-

als, like lead solder, created stronger connections that helped an amp produce better sound. Most vintage equipment is also skillfully hand-wired point-to-point—shortening the distances signals must flow, minimizing interference and noise in the circuits. Mr. Wexler claims it sounds better than most modern amps powered by circuit boards. “This was way before the modern-day vibe of planned electronics obsolescence,” he said.

Even though these components were built to last, a number of factors might scare away potential collectors, said Mr. Wexler, including: potential costs of refurbishment, the questionable reliability of aging parts and the scarcity of certain replacements.

“Many parts are no longer available for vintage gear, making it impossible or more difficult to repair,” echoed Steve Rowell of Audio Classics who deals vintage equipment in upstate New York (audioclassics.com). Competent service technicians are scarce, he added, “and when they are good, they’re gobbed up by competing industries.”

Still, devoted audio fans—collectors, obsessives, perfectionists and nostalgics—are unwaveringly drawn to the warm, sonically accurate tones emanating from a Thorens TD 124 turntable or classic aesthetics, like the ethereal blue glow from a McIntosh MC2505 amp’s meters. They scour the internet for these rare finds and pay upward of

\$75,000 for refurbished pieces, even eating into their 401ks.

Vintage audio collectors fall into two camps, Mr. Wexler said: First, those trying to precisely replicate the music source, since “high fidelity, new or old, will have a sonic signature and vintage gear often has a warmer, more tonally rich sound.” Second, those just trying to find the sound that satisfies their tastes. “Some concentrate on bass,”

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said Mr. Rowell, “some on the mids, and some on the highs,” and they seek out equipment accordingly.

Of course, lust always plays a part. “It’s gotta look cool,” Mr. Wexler said. “It’s relative, though. A Garrard 301 turntable makes me salivate, but it might look like an erector set to someone else.” Collectors like Bill McLaughlin of Blue Point, N.Y., prioritize good-condition pieces, even if it means precipitous prices. “The electronics can be replaced,” he said, but you can’t fix face plates and knobs and meters that are no longer being made.

Iconic gear like the McIntosh MC275 amp excites many collectors

because of its history and status within the music industry. “It was the original,” said Charlie Randall, CEO of McIntosh Labs. “Just as car enthusiasts would love to get their hands on a first-generation Camaro, audio enthusiasts would love to get a first-gen MC275. It doesn’t mean subsequent generations weren’t as good, it just means the original holds a special place in the heart of a true collector. The same could be said about obtaining a first printing of a classic book.”

Original amps are similarly elusive; they’re often gifted to kids like an heirloom. “You never own a Patek Philippe watch, you merely look after it for the next generation. Same applies to vintage audio gear,” said Mr. Rowell, who once turned down the offer of a 1960 Jaguar in exchange for a McIntosh amp.

Collectors dream about stumbling upon a perfectly preserved component tossed to the curb or collecting dust at a thrift shop. That occasionally does happen. But more often than not, you’ll need to pay top dollar and rely on reputable online markets like Echo Audio (echohifi.com), Hawthorne Stereo (hawthornestereo.com) or Sounds Classic (soundsclassic.com).

But first, start window-shopping from home where you can safely swipe through hundreds of shiny components on eBay. It costs nothing to marvel at the idea of bidding \$4,000 for a Marantz 9 amplifier or a pair of \$20,000 Western Electric

BUYER BEWARE / THE DANGERS OF OBSESSION

AUDIOPHILES, a predominantly male group, sometimes go to unhealthy lengths collecting primo gear. It can become an expensive obsession that leads them to ignore priorities, engage in high-risk online bidding or hide purchases from partners.

Steve Rowell, owner of Audio Classics in New York, said McIntosh amps are popular with buyers trying to conceal their addiction because the various models look so similar: You can pay \$15,000 for a more powerful amp that one’s spouse would be hard-pressed to distinguish from its less desirable predecessor.

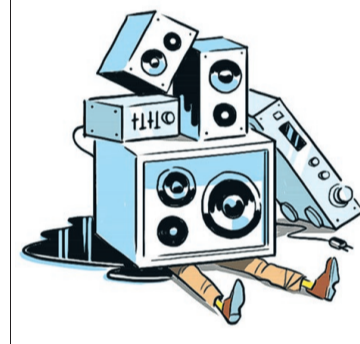
Mr. Rowell knows of collectors who have taken out mortgages on their homes to finance their habits. One client who lives in a \$50,000 trailer recently purchased \$250,000 worth of vintage audio gear. “It’s all about priorities,” Mr. Rowell said.

Another, who had a serious case of obsessive-compulsive disorder hid several storage units of gear from his wife. A third concealed purchases from his partner by having the gear sent to his office, where he built a clandestine listening room.

Then there are hoarders. Adam Wexler, owner of StereoBuyers in Brooklyn, N.Y., once visited an audiophile whose house was packed to the ceiling with speakers, amps and turntables.

Before your quest for such pieces gets out of hand, take care lest you’re crushed under the weight of your obsession.

—J.C.



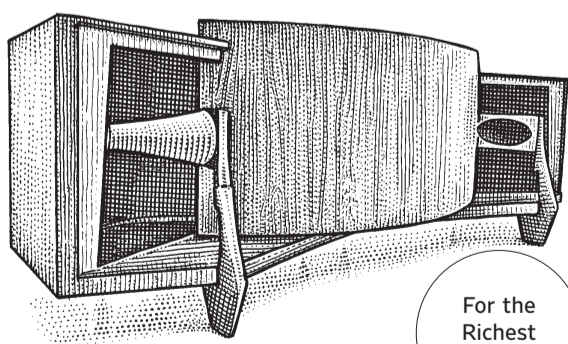
16A Horn Speakers.

If you decide to start seriously collecting, first make sure you can afford to (see “Buyer Beware,” above) and do research to confirm that the seller has a solid reputation. Some stores offer warranties and guarantees on used gear and places like Audio Classics test each unit to rate its physical and electronic condition.

“Use common sense,” said Mr. Wexler. “These things are very old, and often need to be refurbished and rebuilt. You need to be careful. You will pay a premium for them.” If possible, buy locally so you can personally inspect the components and save on added insurance fees.

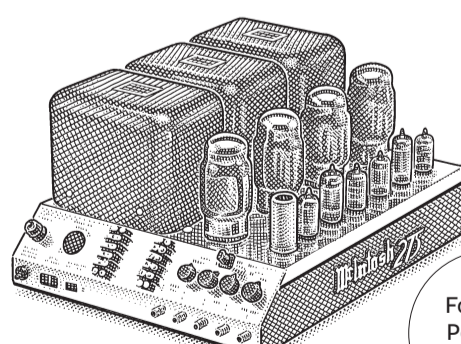
Buying anything used, especially decades-old audio gear, carries a degree of risk. You might happily find the amp of your dreams, only to discover hidden costs to fix or refurbish the piece. It won’t be as reliable as a new component, it may interface poorly with your smartphone and parts may be hard to come by. Mitigate those risks and the sonic rewards are sublime.

EAR CANDY / HOLY-GRAIL ITEMS FOR VINTAGE AUDIO COLLECTORS



For the Richest Tones

Ambitious collectors treasure the **JBL Paragon speaker** for its rich, deep tones. Others seek the iconic piece for the status it brings: costing \$1,830 upon its 1957 release, it offered the most expensive speakers available (and found eager buyers among celebrities). Created by industrial designer Arnold Wolf and stereophonic audio pioneer Richard Ranger, the Paragon offered audiophiles a horn-shaped stereo speaker system housed within a midcentury modern wood cabinet. Only 1,000 Paragon speakers, measuring nearly 9 feet long, were ever produced. While some critics mocked the aesthetics of a speaker the size of a Volkswagen, the cabinets’ master craftsmanship was undeniable. It wasn’t just design that made the Paragon. “A whole curtain of sound was opened up,” Mr. Ranger once said of his creation.



For More Powerful Sound

Designed and built by McIntosh Laboratory in Binghamton, N.Y.—the legendary audio brand favored by Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys and Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead—the **McIntosh MC275 amplifier** has been a coveted power source for stereo systems since its 1961 creation. A classic stereo tube amp, the MC275 dominated the audio landscape until the advent of transistors in the 1970s. (McIntosh revived the popular MC275 for a commemorative reissue from 1993 to 1996.) “What makes it endure...is that when the original amplifier was designed, it was way ahead of its time,” said Charlie Randall, head of McIntosh Labs. “It’s as competitive as any tube amplifier that you can find on the market today.”



For Relentless Efficiency

Praised by vinyl aficionados, the **Garrard 301 turntable** is nearly unmatched in performance. The company lineage dates back to Garrard & Co., whose detailed work was trusted by the British royal family, for which it produced crowns, tiaras and brooches. This turntable, equally illustrious, still often commands a high four-figure price tag. Described as robust and minimalist by “Home Theatre Review,” the turntable base was made of die-cast aluminum, it came in gray or creamy white enamel and it was driven by a quiet AC motor. Three versions were produced starting in 1954 and an estimated 65,000 were sold. “It has an organic, natural sound,” said Adam Wexler, who proudly owns a Garrard 301 and runs StereoBuyers in Brooklyn, N.Y. “Newer turntables sound clinical.”

—J.C.