



By C.J. Huss

Chapter Eighteen – “Vintage Fix-actions”

~ ~ ~ (Where we try to ... oh dear.....) ~ ~ ~

It’s not uncommon for customers to ask about what will be involved in the repair or refurbishing of their vintage piece of audio gear, and for the most part, that’s fairly straightforward, at least in terms of the basics.

If the person calling hasn’t already volunteered the info, I start by asking them a few questions, such as - is this a component they have been the sole owner of, or did they purchase it used? Is it still working, or mostly so, perhaps just has some noisy controls or switches, some lamps burned out?

The best situation would be the last one—the amp, preamp, tuner, whatever is mostly still working. While that isn’t a guarantee that the unit may not need a fair amount of time to bring it up to its best performance and reliability, it at least tells me that the bulk of the circuitry is doing its thing, and that can usually cut down on the diagnostic time needed before the maintenance work itself.

When a component is new or fairly so, say less than five-to-ten years old, most failures only involve determining what part or parts have failed. You replace them, make any factory-approved modifications or updates, test run for long enough to hope you catch any other potential issues, then send it on its way.

Now when I was first entering the audio repair trade, and studying under experienced technicians, I was made aware of the importance of preventive maintenance in addition to correcting the component’s non-functioning state. How much of this gets done logically depends on how old the component was and of course what it was. A power amplifier, for example, would usually have different issues than a preamp or an FM tuner. A stereo receiver would have all three of the above components on a single chassis, so even greater attention to possibilities for future failure were called for.

If the unit was just a year or two old, all of the lamps were likely still fine, the controls or switches may not need cleaning, cracked or intermittent solder connections were rare.

But if you were around the 8-to-12 year range, usually you would dust the interior, replace the lamps, clean switches and controls, clean the rear panel jacks, check for questionable solder joints, unplug, clean, replug any internal connectors, and extend the test run for an additional day or two past the usual to check for possible intermittent problems.

Not surprisingly, such extra time taken means extra cost, but as long as the reasons were explained to the customer up front, with the end goal having the unit not return to the shop a few weeks or months later

(unhappy customer along with it), the costs become far less of an objection.

Fast forwarding to here in the recent decades of the 21st century, many owners of electronic gear—audio, video, whatever—have discovered that getting anything repaired when it fails is an iffy thing at best. Why that is something I talked about before in a previous column, but it sadly isn’t likely to change anytime soon if ever.

Which brings me back to repairs for one of the few electronic items out there that there is still some demand for doing, which is vintage stereo gear. Why fix equipment from this era, which I’ll loosely define here as components made over 25-to-30 years ago? Why would anyone think of fixing something that old? Well, why would folks want to repair vintage cars, or for that matter, any variety of antiques?

Because there is a strong emotional and/or aesthetic attachment to them. And while many purely “practical” people would find this a curious reaction, that’s their reasoned choice to simply replace it with new. I have customers who have attachments to things that even an old techno-soffie like myself would look askance at, but I’m not them.

So, a customer calls, and tells me he has a Pioneer integrated amplifier that he bought when he was overseas in the military back in the early-to-mid 1970’s. It was the very first piece of high-performance stereo gear he had owned. It’s always worked superbly, and besides the performance aspect, it just—looks really cool!

“It’s...the new stuff I’ve checked out over the last few years, it’s okay, it sounds fine and all, but it... it doesn’t look or feel like real stereo gear. It’s a black box with a fancy light-up display screen and tiny push buttons everywhere. It’s...bland.”

Hmmm, what’s that recent series of TV commercials about “not becoming your parents”? Yes, they’re funny, I admit, but personally I’m a happy camper about being a lot like my parents in certain ways. Anyway, I’m for sure with the guy above at least in terms of this field. There is a certain creative aspect to much of the older gear that simply doesn’t resonate with newer technology, for better or worse.

So I tell the fellow with his beloved gem that here’s the scoop, once he informs me that it was working okay up until last week, when it suddenly developed a loud hum in both channels that is there no matter what input he selects, and doesn’t change with the volume setting.

“You likely have a power supply failure of some kind. That can be expensive, depending on the parts needed and time to replace them. When was the last time you had any service done to this amplifier?”

“Mmm, maybe 15 years ago? Something went wrong in the phono section, they replaced some transistors I believe.”

“Okay. Here’s what I’d recommend, and you need to tell me if the investment is something you’re comfortable with. A unit this old will need more than just repairs, it really should be refurbished to make

perform as well as possible and be as reliable as possible. There are hundreds of parts in there and while any of them could fail at any time, some are much more likely to go than others. In particular, there are parts called electrolytic capacitors that have an average lifetime of perhaps 15 to 25 years, less if the product is used infrequently. There may be dozens of these scattered throughout the various circuits. If they are not replaced, your amp will probably nickel and dime you over its remaining years.”

“Is this what they call ‘re-capping’? I visited some online audio forums and I see that mentioned quite a few times. How expensive is that?”

“With the exception of the big main filter capacitors, the others are fairly cheap, but each one takes at least five minutes or so to remove and replace. So, say 36 caps times 5 minutes each equals 3 hours time. If you need new main filter caps too—very likely from your description of the problem—add at least \$60.00 to \$100.00 for just that.”

“Hmmm. So if you also figure cleaning the controls and stuff, whatever likely else, I’d be looking at...”

“\$400.00 to \$500.00, Could even get up to over \$700.00. Obviously you could buy a perfectly decent new amp for that. It’s your call.”

“Oh, I want to fix it. If I do all you said, it could work for years yet, right?”

A Jukebox or Monkey for Christmas?

By Bob Rudy

Imagine if the first thing you purchased foreshadowed your life and career. What was it? When I was 5 years old, there were two places a boy could fantasize about the stuff he wanted. There were ads in comic books, and there was the holy grail of cheap, cool stuff...the Johnson Smith mail order catalog. You could even buy a real-live monkey from these magazine ads, which my grandmother and I wanted, but my grandfather wouldn’t go for it.



It was in the Johnson Smith catalog that I discovered the first toy I would buy with my own savings — a jukebox bank! I gathered my change together, filled out the order blank, and off in the mail went my dream for musical independence. I no longer had to rely on the playlist of the local radio station to hear my favorite songs.

The big day finally arrived, my package was delivered, but it was much smaller than I expected. When I opened the box, my disappointment mirrored Ralphie’s reaction in the movie “A Christmas Story” when he got Aunt Clara’s gift...a pink bunny suit! “THIS WAS THE JUKEBOX I ORDERED????”

The Select-O-Matic Jukebox coin bank, manufactured by Haji in Japan, was made out of tin. You wind it up in the back, put a coin in the front slot and the flat piece of tin that vaguely looked like a record would spin and make plinking sounds. The size of the jukebox was 4” x 2 1/2” x 4 3/4”. Instead of hearing The Beatles or Phil Spector’s wall-of-sound...I heard “plink...plink...plink”.

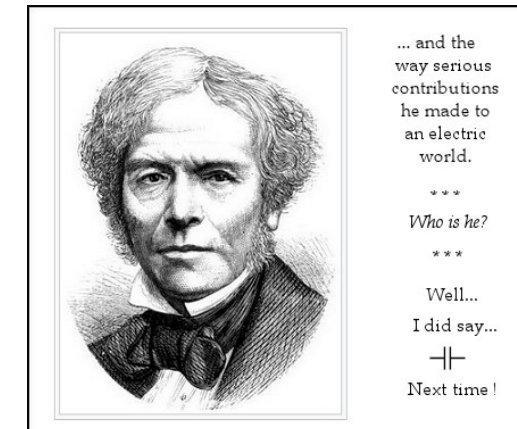


“I hope so, but I can only guarantee any new parts I install. But your odds are surely improved over just doing the bare minimum to get it running again, and it will also nearly always sound better due to the new caps and the cleaning.”

“When can I bring it in? I guess I’m foolish, but---”

“No, just devoted to an old friend. No shame in that.”

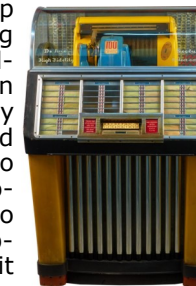
Okay there, loyal readers, all for this issue. Next time, I’ll be talking about this fellow...



Meantime/in-between time... happy tunes!

-- CJ

When I was about 20 years old, I saw my dream of owning a “real” jukebox within sight. It was an ad in the newspaper for a public sale at an old auto repair garage. There mixed in with the shop tools and grease guns was a Seeburg Select-O-Matic 100 jukebox! This model was the kind of jukebox you see in Al’s Diner on the TV show “Happy Days”. It was produced in 1952 and played 45 rpm records. I managed to buy this classic piece of music memorabilia for \$75.00. It didn’t take too much to get it working and I was happy for a while until I eventually sold it for \$300. I thought I made a pretty good profit, until years later when I discovered that jukebox was worth several thousand dollars.



About 10 years later (in the late 80s), I purchased my second jukebox, a Rock-Ola 444 that was made in 1970-71. One day while working on it, I broke the glass on the top front panel of the jukebox. Although I had the damage repaired, I was disappointed in myself for being so careless and eventually sold it a few years later.

Around 2010, I got jukebox fever again. While searching the Internet, I found a Rowe R-93 (made in 1989-90). This was a combo jukebox, which could hold 100 records and originally came with a Pioneer 6-CD changer for additional selections. The previous owner converted the machine to play everything from an mp3 player. The jukebox has a non-functional CD in the top of the cabinet that rotates just to draw your attention. Rowe made another version of the R-93 with a small crystal ball that spins. This jukebox sits in the corner of our basement rec room along with a pool table and our Gilligan’s Island pinball machine. (cont. on page 6)