

Antique Radios Restored

Engineer combines his technical skills with his passion for audio

SHANNON BECKER: Where do you live now?

MIKE URBAN: Windsor, CT

SHANNON: How did you become interested in electronics?

MIKE: At a young age (early 1960s), I received the Rocket Radio crystal set as a gift.

I clipped it onto an old house radiator pipe and listened to AM radio for free—no batteries needed. It was amazing trying to figure out how that worked! Later in life (mid-1970s), I found a large table radio for \$25 at a garage sale. It was a beautiful Grundig international radio with AM, shortwave, and FM. It was housed in a gorgeous blond wood cabinet with a very large, lighted glass dial, vacuum tubes, and awesome sound coming from two large speakers. Here, I discovered the superior quality of tube sound amplification. The radio sounded as real as live music which had a warm, rich, full-bodied tone.

SHANNON: What first attracted you to radios?

MIKE: I have always had a particular interest in radio, which provided hours of entertainment listening to local sports broadcasts—this was before cable TV became popular (early 1970s)—as well as, tuning to programs coming in via shortwave from all over the world. After graduating from high school, I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. I ventured into a few electronics classes at a local community college. I liked it enough to go further, earning a 4-year engineering degree and obtaining a FCC HAM radio license.

SHANNON: You now own your own vintage radio business, Urban Radio and Vintage Hi-Fi. What made you venture out on your own?

MIKE: After graduating college, I embarked on a 20-year corporate career developing computer and audio/video products for General Electric, Olivetti, Apple Computer, Quantel, Avid, and Barco. Overtime, with too many corporate downsizings and mergers, I needed to get control of life and with a very supportive spouse, decided the time was right to do something that I truly enjoy, combining my passion for audio with my technical skills. Vintage electronics appeared very collectible with the invention of eBay (1990s), so I went in search of finding many garage and attic treasures. Later, I found working at radio/TV repair shops while getting through college provided a second benefit in life. Special skills were needed to get many of these electronic items working, now very desirable to own and listen to, they needed to be repaired or restored to their former glory. The time was right to start advertising, therefore, www.urban-antiqueradio.com came to be.

SHANNON: What kind of work do you do and is there an actual storefront or is most of your business done via the Internet?

MIKE: Starting in a one bedroom apartment, the business started to grow and the landlord finally had enough (as I took over his basement). So it was necessary to find another location. We then settled into a commercial storefront (for about eight years) and while the economy had its ups and downs decided to transition from retail & repair to mostly repair/restoration work. There were many customers in search of a repair shop, either for sentimental reasons (their heirloom item) or for the sheer pleasure of listening to quality audio. Again, the business grew to the point of needing more space as all (or almost all) of the repair shops went out



Photo 1: Mike Urban, owner of Urban Antique Radio and Vintage Hi-Fi

of business due to a “dying art” or to many new items becoming disposable (see **Photo 2**). So, my wife and I went in search of an antique home, as we have become preservationists! Settling in Windsor, CT (the Hartford area) seemed obvious as many customers travel between New York and Boston, plus there is a great radio museum here (more on that later). As for more distant customers, we get those items shipped to us for repair.

SHANNON: Where do you find vintage radios these days?

MIKE: There are many radio swap meets, HAM swap meets, specialized auctions, to find almost anything in the vintage electronic category. Best resource is the Internet. For example, to find upcoming events, try the Antique Radio Classified (www.antiqueradio.com) or google “ham radio shows hamfests”. There seems to be one or more event on every weekend (somewhere in the country) usually during the better weather months (some are outdoor tailgating events). Then, there are the car shows, too. We repair a lot of vintage car radios. We find collectors of one category often branch out into another category!



Photo 2: Mike Urban's workbench



Photo 3: The AK84

SHANNON: How many radios do you have in your personal collection?

MIKE: Too many. I am always finding something interesting. Each one is like a work of art (see Photo 3). Then, it's time to thin out as we can only listen to a few at a time and I don't want to move again!

SHANNON: What has been your most exciting vintage radio find to date?

MIKE: The thing about collecting (it is addictive, too -- I should start ARCA, Antique Radio Collecting Anonymous -- just kidding but there should be one!) is finding yet another item you haven't seen before or finding an item in pristine condition. This keeps us excited for the next time, as to what may be found. As for my greatest find, actually it was a very rare pre-war TV (a full length story can be found on my web site: www.urban-antiqueradio.com). Currently, my passion for vintage hi-fi has grown above and beyond radio. Finding the ultimate listening experience is never ending!

SHANNON: I understand there is a vintage radio museum in Windsor. Is it open to the public? And how did it come to be?

MIKE: There is a Vintage Radio & Communications museum here in Windsor, CT (www.vrcmct.org/). It is open to

the public on weekends (in search of more volunteers, too), has regular swap meets, and has a long history going back to 1990. Best to visit the website to get all the details.

SHANNON: What do you find to be

the most challenging when it comes to refurbishing antique radios? What is the most rewarding?

MIKE: Parts! On the inside, you will find electronic, electro-mechanical, or all mechanical parts and on the out-

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side, you will find cabinet details, wood, metal, plastic, different knobs, bezels, speaker grille cloth, and so on. There are many parts available but then there are many custom parts for any given repair item (transformers, coils, controls, knobs, etc.). Just like a car, manufacturers would change the design (inside & out) every year to entice customers to purchase the next new thing.

Multiply that with decades of brands and models makes far too many to count. So we have to go in search of old stock (new & used), find parts sets, find reproduction parts, or rebuild / recreate the part. Most rewarding is the finished product. Bringing it back to life is a grand accomplishment. Especially wood cabinet radios made with special veneer designs of birds eye maple or walnut burl, many were fine pieces of furniture, too.

SHANNON: Do you have any advice for *audioXpress* readers who are considering audio technology improvements to their own antique radios?

MIKE: Beware of trying to repair yourself, seek out a professional. Inside there are high voltages that can be dangerous to an untrained technician, some lethal. Plugging into 120 VAC (turning on after being in storage for many years or decades) can damage some parts causing smoke and broken power cords can be a shock!

SHANNON: There has been a long-running debate between tube and solid-state amplifier aficionados? Do you have a personal preference, and if so, why?

MIKE: Tubes rule!.. they're HOT! Seriously though, I have performed many A/B listening tests between tube and solid state components and always prefer the sound of tubes (see **Photo 4**).

Some solid state components do come very, very, close but I always go back to vacuum tubes. They sound warm and they look glowingly warm, too. Ask any guitar player -- they want a tube amp. Also, look at some of the prices paid on eBay for vintage electronic tube gear. Beyond the technical debate, the best analogy I have is the comparison be-



Photo 4: A vintage Hi-Fi unit on display at Urban Antique Radio and Vintage Hi-Fi

tween video and film, sharp & contrasty to warm & smooth.

SHANNON: What projects are you currently working on?

MIKE: I just finished a Sparton 15-tube radio console (see **Photo 5**). Just when you've think you've seen and heard it all. Another amazing radio from 1938. Borders on early hi-fi with its 15- tubes, separate power chassis (2A3 pair) and big 15" speaker. Beautiful mirrored dial and wood cabinet, too! I use to think Zenith was the best in this timeframe but there are others out there, Capehart, EH Scott, to name a few. Even after 14 years (full time), I still haven't seen everything!



Photo 5: Sparton

SHANNON: A lot has changed in audio technology during the past few decades. What changes do you consider positive? Any negative?

MIKE: I used to think digital was the way to go... then, I listened to more and more analog to change my perception. There is no comparison, especially compressed digital audio. It does have its place in portability (iPods, CDs, etc.) but when listening at home to a loudspeaker stereo system, you hear the difference. Vinyl has made a comeback for that very

reason. I even get some customers that swear by reel-to-reel tape. The ear is analog! And to go further, I don't need surround sound with umpteen speakers either (I will have many home theater buffs mad at me -- I do like it for action movies though) but for classic mono jazz recordings or early Beatles or many superb stereo recordings (on vinyl) -- two ears, two speakers, two channels, works for me. Another negative is that ultra loud, subsonic distortion, thumping out of car audio systems, today. I feel like I am being tortured. Anybody else? Finally, what I especially dislike is the disposable nature of today's electronics towards the mass market. Analog was replaced with digital, custom integrated circuits replaced component repair and the build quality has all but disappeared.

Now on a positive note... vinyl pressings are coming out for both new recordings and some of the old classics have been re-issued, new production vacuum tubes for the audio market are manufactured today (Russia & China) and good old US made, quality vintage hi-fi, radios, HAM gear, etc. can be found at some very affordable prices. Add in some restoration and voila, you have something special that will last another lifetime, especially at a fraction it would the cost to manufacture that same item today. Vintage lives on! **aX**