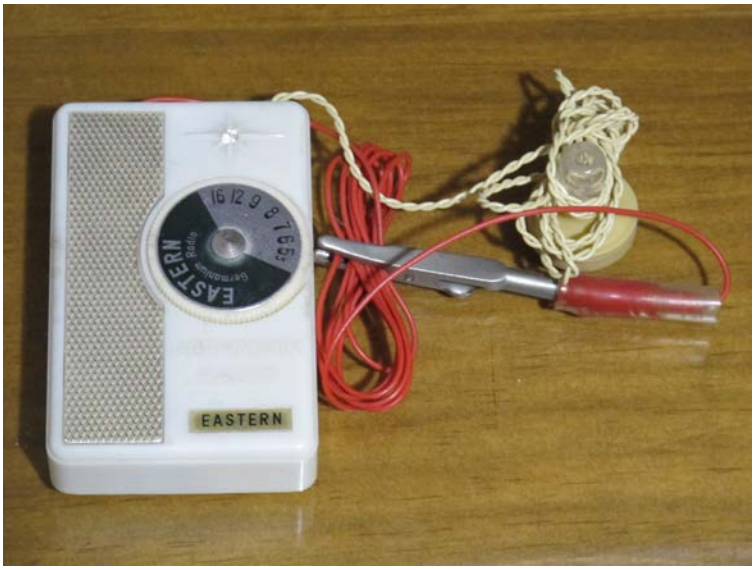
Radio Reminiscences – Damien VK3RX

I was born and raised in Adelaide, and my early beginning with radio was in the early 1960's at the age of 9 or so when I was given a crystal set for a birthday. It was branded "Eastern", and I suspect many thousand were sold here. My older brother Ian was forever resoldering the wires to the earpiece, because I'd go to sleep listening, roll over and tear the two apart.



My brother built a 4 valve broadcast band radio in this period based on an article in Electronics Australia ("All Wave 4" or similar?) which we used to listen to at night and pick up South Australian country and interstate stations. Also in the early 1960's the family bought an AWA branded "radiogram". This replaced a console medium and shortwave set which my brother and I then inherited. We had a small bookcase between our beds and no space for the console in the room, so we removed the chassis and speaker and mounted those in the bookcase. That was our introduction to shortwave, with international broadcast stations and other mysterious signals. For some reason we didn't stumble across the amateur radio (AR) bands where the mode may still have predominantly AM, but I guess we just didn't know about AR or where to look on the dial.

In 1966 at the age of 13 a schoolmate gave me his Phillips Electronic Engineer EE20 kit, as he'd been given something bigger or better.

The EE20 was well used, all there but it didn't take long for the wires to break off some the transistors. I didn't know of any electronics parts shops in Adelaide or anyone who did, so one day in

school holidays I went into the city to a Phillips service centre, having concluded that might be the place to replace my stock. Mum had given me $2 to cover the cost (a lot in 1966).

I walked in, and there was a large counter with a few tradies being served. The guy behind the counter looked at me and in a gruff voice said *"Wadda you want?"*. Fishing one of the broken transistors out of my pocket I politely said *"I'd like three of these, please – it's an AC126 transistor"*.

The guy looked away disinterested and said *"We don't serve the public here, only trade"*. I guess I stood there looking shattered, wondering what that meant and not knowing where else to go.

The tradie beside me then exploded, using language I was aware of but not been in a position to hear adults use. He said *"Oh, for {expletive] sake, give the kid what he wants – put in on my bill if you are worried; [expletive]!!!"*.

The counter guy looked pale and took my transistor, someone in a glass office (who I now assume was a manager), looked up at the fuss, and the counter guy turned and disappeared into the store. He came back after a few minutes with something in his hand, and the office manager said something to him. He went back into the store, and came back carrying a small paper envelope and handed it to me. It clearly had a bunch of transistors inside. He said in a more civil tone *"Here you go – no charge"*.

I thanked him and turned to the tradie and said *"Thank you"* and extended my hand. He looked surprised, shook my hand and said *"No problem, kid"* and smiled. Outside I had a look in the envelope and found 10 x AC126 transistors. I think I still have a couple here now, including the LDR from the EE kit. Oh, and I refunded my mother the balance of the $2 less bus fares …..

I learnt quite a lot from the EE20, even playing around modifying some of the projects (not usually successfully). At the same time my parents took out a subscription to Electronics Australia for me, which was great and I would read each issue from cover to cover. I also had a subscription to the U.K. "Eagle" comic – remember those?

When I was 14 I was given an AWA B67 transistor portable for my birthday, quite a step up from the receiver in the EE20 kit.

It did not have a telescopic antenna, so to improve reception I fitted one with a wire loop around the internal ferrite rod. Reception was improved further when I fitted a socket to the radio and

connected an external long wire antenna outside. I then spent many hours each night tuning in broadcast stations around the country.

Then one night I decided to tune the dial to the highest frequency, and log stations while tuning down. The dial had about 5° of overshoot past the horizontal maximum mark, and I had already established that hard against the stop was around 2300kHz because I'd heard boats in the local Adelaide sea rescue squadron VH5TA at Glenelg beach testing on weekends.

I started tuning down and almost immediately came across someone talking about radio gear, and he did not sound like a broadcast station announcer. He finished talking and someone else came up and the conversation went back and forth.

I'd discovered 160 metres AM, and I never bothered with broadcast band AM stations again.

By this time my brother was married and an engineer with the Electricity Trust of South Australia, which had a number of staff with amateur radio licences. I told my brother what I had been listening to and he passed it onto some of his colleagues, who filled him in about amateur radio and gave him to pass on to me a callbook and some QSL cards.

Listening to the guys on 160 metres AM became a regular pastime, and callsigns like John VK5JQ, Colin VK5EB, Carl VK5SS, Colin VK5XY, Fred VK5MA, Phil VK5NN and interstaters John VK3ACA CedrIc VK3ACH come to mind.

The odd station running SSB came up, which bugged me because I could not resolve it. I tried tuning our medium/shortwave receiver to inject a signal to the AWA B67 which sort of worked, but clearly something better was needed. Then I noticed in EA a circuit for a BFO using a Murata SFD455D (?) filter, and decided that our medium/shortwave receiver rather than the AWA B67 was best for it so I could resolve SSB on shortwave. I put the BFO together and with the help of my brother we figured out where in the receiver to inject its output, and with an on/off switch added to the front panel we were pleased how well it worked.

I branched out into shortwave broadcast reception, chasing QSLs from them and AR operators.

When I finished school I started work as a technician in the engineering office of a manufacturing company. No electronics or radio, they manufactured wiring and cable assemblies for the appliance and motor vehicle industries.

On shortwave I discovered aeronautical communications, local and international including "SKYKING" broadcasts and B-52 flights from Guam to Vietnam. In time I bought a used Realistic DX150A receiver, and a "Fantavox" brand VHF converter that when placed alongside a broadcast band receiver tuned to 1000kHz enabled tunable VHF airband reception. To improve reception I connected a vertical antenna attached to the roof gutter outside my bedroom, and discovered that the Fantavox knocked out TV reception in our and adjacent houses, so I had to settle for its inbuilt telescopic antenna. Listening to these communications I developed an interest in aviation which led to a career in air traffic control spanning 36 years, from which I retired a few years ago.

When tertiary and work study was out of the way I got my novice licence in 1980 then a full licence in 1982.

With amateur radio I've since played around with HF VHF & UHF, SSTV and data modes, satellite communications and have spoken to various space shuttles and Andy Thomas on the Mir space station. With an interest also in the reception of commercial and military satellites, and even VHF lowband "skip" reception, there are always multiple receivers running here.

Oh, and the pix included here are of things I have picked up for a bit of nostalgia ☺

August 2020