

Transistor Radios, East and West

by Robert Davidson

I'd been collecting vintage 1930s valve radios for several years before I came across something odd at a yard sale down the street from my home in Concord, Massachusetts: an ivory Zenith Royal 500D, lying on top its grey flannel carrying pouch. Inside the pouch, I found a small and well-preserved "Owner's Guide". It was a really nice looking pocket radio and in great condition, and it played well too. But it was a transistor radio, and at that time (1988) transistor radios, and radios from the 1950s in general, weren't commonly considered by most radio collectors to be "real" radios. And the price put me off: \$3.50. So I left it there. The yard sale's owners were packing up their tables when I came back around 5pm, I saw that the Zenith was still there, and I bought it.

A month or so later I bought another transistor radio at a yard sale, and then another at a flea market -- and then another, and another. It didn't take me much longer than that to figure out that not only were vintage transistor radios dirt-cheap at the time but they were also going to become *very* collectible, very soon.

But as my collection grew over the following years, the Zenith 500D remained my own personal radio, not really part of my collection but the one I actually listened to, mostly for listening to Boston Red Sox games: as any American baseball fan who's over fifty years old will tell you, there really is nothing like listening to a baseball game on a transistor radio. And in 2004, after I had moved to Slovakia in eastern Europe, I remember several evenings of turning on the 500D and tuning across the MW band, my expat ears thrilled by hearing stations coming in loud-and-clear from all over Europe! This 500D was still doing an outstanding job forty-five years after manufacture.



1959 ZENITH ROYAL 500D: a MW-only radio, like almost all US radios. The Zenith Royal 500 series was one of the most popular US transistor radios ever made, first produced in 1956 and continuing in production changes in cabinet design and circuit design over a long series of model numbers, culminating in the 1961 Zenith Royal 500H with a radical cabinet design change and more importantly its significantly enhanced AF and RF circuit designs and a large 3x5-inch speaker that would make it the best performing pocket transistor radio of its time.

I've made use of a number of my transistor radios for actual listening, especially the "short wave shirt pockets" -- but listening to these radios has been only a secondary attraction in my collecting old transistor radios. I've always focused more on cabinet design, radio history and social and commercial history in choosing which radios I bought or traded. Like most collectors, I consider the radios I seek out not so much as devices to be used but more as objects of history to be preserved.



1960 TOSHIBA 7TP-352S, a 2-band, MW/SW pocket radio, its SW band covering 6 – 18 MHz; and its companion TOSHIBA 7TP-352M, covering MW and 1.6 – 5 MHz SW. Both radios have a seven-section 62mm telescopic antenna built into their cabinets. Other shirt pocket short wave transistor radios of the time included the Hitachi WH-761SB, the Jefferson-Travis JT-G200, the National T-21, and the Mitsubishi 7X-505.



1963 PHILIPS L0X25T/22G: a 2-band, MW/SW pocket radio with a SW band covering 10 – 18 MHz

Early on, I justified my purchases large and small as being “investments”, safer than the stock market, more like buying small bits of property, something I could always sell off at a later date for a good profit – and I actually fell for that logic myself for quite a while, until it became clear that prices weren’t exactly increasing exponentially over time – and in fact, as *eBay* later brought so many examples of formerly-considered “rare” items to market over the following two decades, most transistor radios actually declined somewhat in value. So I’ve saved that “investment” argument for my wife and my mother, even though it’s become a bit awkward these days when they ask me just when will I be selling off my “investments”. (Actually, I’ve sold several hundred radios from my collection at radio flea markets and on *eBay* over the past twenty-five years or so, and as it stands now, I regret selling every last one of those radios. I wish I had all of them back – *all* of them!)

But for the most part I’ve held on to the best radios I’ve come across, radios that are unique for their placement in the earliest years of transistor radio history, whether for circuit ingenuity, industrial design, radio history, or just plain history itself: They’re displayed on my web site, “*Transistor radios Around the World*”, <http://www.abetterpage.com/wt/index.html>, a site I hope is viewed more as a hypertext Web-based “book” about transistor radio history and design than just as a site displaying a collection.



1958 ZENITH ROYAL 1000-D “Trans-Oceanic” – This and the companion Royal 1000 really must have been the best multiband transistor portables of their time, following a long series of valve Trans-Oceanics going back to the early 1940s – besides giving good reception on all bands, this was a really “solid” radio incorporating a nickel-plated cabinet, a heavy aluminum mesh grille, “genuine leather” on several surfaces, and a huge and beautiful 5mm x 29mm reverse-stamped curved plastic tuning window overlaying a turreted nine-band tuning dial. Nine 1.5-volt “D” cells were required to power the set. This transistor Trans-Oceanic also included several features found on its valve predecessors: a time zone chart, a pull-out reception guide and log, and the famous “Wave Magnet” detachable antenna. The overall effect was that of a serious portable multiband radio -- and it was pricy too, \$275 at the time, about \$1400 in today’s dollars. The nine tuning bands covered 150 kHz to 22.5 MHz.

For the first two decades in which I was collecting transistor radios, I focused mostly on radios made in Japan and the US, as had almost all other collectors during that time and as most American collectors still do today.

Collectors in western Europe were of course collecting European transistor radios as well as Japanese and US sets; and actually I was collecting as many European sets as I could

find at the time in the late 1980s and the 1990s while I was still living in the US -- my first transistor radio web site, published in 1998, “*The M31 Galaxy of Transistor Radios*” (<http://www.abetterpage.com/transistors/trans/1trans.html>) has a section devoted to the dozen or so European transistor radios I had been able to find at the time.

After moving to Europe in 2004, my collecting focus took a sharp turn eastward: Besides now being able to buy western European radios on all the European *eBay* sites, since most of the radios listed on them were not available for purchase in the US at the time, I realized that living in a former East Bloc country might give me access to transistor radios that previously hadn't been available before to me or other western collectors: transistor radios from formerly occupied East European countries and the former USSR.



1962 Perdio PR33 “mini 66”: One of a very few shirt pocket transistor radio models made in Great Britain in the early 1960s – a two-band LW/MW radio, though its LW “band” was actually just a single pre-set frequency: 200 kHz (1500 meters), what was then BBC’s “Light Programme” station.



1962 TED "St Germain": a two-band LW/MW radio very popular among French citizens in its day



circa 1960 Voxson 750 "Magic": MW-only, an early Italian shirt pocket radio

So I started searching out the usual places: flea markets, yard sales, junk shops. But there is just one flea market in Slovakia's capitol city Bratislava, where I live, and in two years of searching I never found a single "vintage" transistor radio there. And there is exactly one junk shop in all of Slovakia, famous for its uniqueness as an unknown concept in the country – there I found one nondescript Russian pocket transistor radio made in 1972.

And yards sales? There are no yard sales in Slovakia. When my wife and I showed our Slovak friends photos of the yard sale we had held in Concord before moving to Europe, they were horrified. "Even the Gypsies don't do that here," they said. (Yes, Slovaks in general have *very* politically incorrect attitudes towards Roma!)

At some point I figured out I needed to go on the auction sites. My command of the Slovak language is "survival level" – just enough to get by when my Slovak-speaking wife isn't with me. But luckily, the Slovak language shares enough in common with the other Slavic languages that I can get by in those languages too, especially when using Google Translator for navigating the sites and corresponding with the sellers.

In this way, I was able to buy a number of early and historical transistor radios on (non-*eBay*) auction sites in Poland and the Czech Republic (*aukro.cz*, *allegro.pl*). The German eBay site, *eBay.de*, was much more straightforward for buying radios from the former DDR -- and the only Hungarian transistor radio I've ever managed to buy on a Hungarian auction site (*vatera.hu*) (the Hungarian language shares *nothing* in common either with Slavic languages or Romance languages) I have to attribute solely to the miracle of Google Translator – it doesn't work well, but it works well enough if you keep at it long enough!



1959/60 EMV Tunde 2: a second version of Hungary's first transistor radio



1960 Tesla T60: Czechoslovakia's first "pocket" transistor radio

But the biggest challenge was finding and getting *early* transistor radios that had been made in the former Soviet Union: radios made in Russia, Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine. *eBay* has "Soviet" and "Russian" and "USSR" transistor radio listings all day long – these are mostly Russian-made sets from the 1980s and 1990s -- and *eBay.co.uk* and *eBay.de* have many listings of Soviet-era export radios that were sold throughout Western Europe. But what I was looking for were the Soviet transistor radios that were made in the late 1950s and early 1960s that were never made for export, not even to the "satellite state" Eastern European countries. Getting these required several years of scouring *molotok.ru* (Russia's main auction site which closed in August 2015), heavy usage of Google Translator for reading the listings and for correspondence, and a whole lot of trust in the Russian sellers from whom I bought the radios.



1959 Russia “Atmosphere” (Атмосфера): the second “mass-production” transistor radio made in the USSR with likely no more than 10,000 units produced – many further “Atmosphere” models followed over the years with radically different and more sophisticated cabinet designs and better circuit designs, but this remains the original “Atmosphere”, a LW/MW radio using a total of seven transistors in its circuit, though only two different transistor types were used in its circuit (four П-13As and three П-402s). Its original price, including batteries, was 40 rubles, 25 kopecks (about USD \$1.35 in today's currency).

While a few of the early USSR transistor radios I’ve acquired came from auction sites outside of Russia, all but one of those were export models that had been sold in western Europe at the time. But over a brief period of three or four years, I was able to bid on, win, and purchase about a half-dozen early USSR transistor radios on the now-defunct Russian auction site, ***molotok.ru***, radios that generally are only very rarely available in the West. There was no PayPal or credit card payment available, only a pay site useable only within Russia – in fact many of the listings were stated as being open only to buyers in the seller’s own city, required cash, and payment instructions went along the lines of, “To meet at noon Saturday in Saint Isaac’s Square”. My only option (for those few sellers who even allowed for it) was sending the seller money through Western Union – so I had to trust that a seller in Saint Petersburg or Moscow would actually send me the radio I purchased after he had picked up my money – and every last one of them did.



1960 Russia “Neva” (HeBa): the first Soviet shirt pocket transistor radio, a six-transistor MW/LW radio manufactured at Radiopribor Factory, Leningrad (Saint Petersburg).

One of my favorite vintage Soviet transistor radios is the **1960/61 VEF Spidola** – unlike most other vintage Soviet sets, it’s not very rare or hard to find these days, but it holds several important “firsts” to its name: The Spidola was the first Soviet multi-band transistor radio, the first Soviet transistor radio made for export outside the USSR, and the first REALLY mass-produced Soviet transistor radio, literally made by the millions — you can still find them fairly often today on [eBay.co.uk](https://www.eBay.co.uk) and [eBay.de](https://www.eBay.de).

This was the first of many VEF radio models over the years named "Spidola", yet this original model remained in production until 1964 or later. No matter what the year of manufacture, the original Spidola is a great radio and certainly an important piece of Cold War history.

To those of us in the West who grew up during the Cold War era, it seems almost inconceivable now to realize that the most popular and best-selling Soviet radio ever made was a multi-band shortwave radio capable of receiving broadcasts from all over the world, including the US and western Europe. And in fact this radio was front-and-center in a number of Soviet political investigations regarding "illicit" receptions of broadcasts from the West. It's been said that by the late 1960s the name "Spidola" in Russia had become nearly synonymous with the word "radio".



1960/61 VEF Spidola: the first Soviet multi-band transistor radio, a 7-band LW/MW/SW set employing ten transistors and two diodes – but that ten-transistor circuit made use of only TWO transistor types! And at first glance, this looks like just a big and frumpy lunchbox job — but a closer look reveals its carefully considered design that outmatched almost anything made in Western Europe at the time. The cabinet was designed by the well-known Latvian industrial designer, Adolfs Irbite.

The Spidola's original sale price within the Soviet states was 73 Rubles — about \$2.50 in today's currency, considered a bit pricy at the time in Russia. I don't know what price was placed on the Spidola export models, though obviously it was far higher than any equivalent of 73 Rubels — but compare those 73 Rubels to the sale price of the US 1958 Zenith 1000 series, selling for the equivalent of \$1400 in today's dollars, or more than 500 times as much as the Spidola!

Today, it's quite easy to find fully working Soviet-era multiband radios from the 1980s, 1970s, and even the 1960s on *eBay.co.uk* and other eBay sites – these sets can give a glimpse into the technology and commerce of another culture and another era as you tune across their broadcast bands.

When I first started collecting transistor radios, I really had no idea what I was doing — my choices were limited both by my own “tastes” and experience and by what I could learn from other collectors at the time – very little information was available in print and the World Wide Web didn't exist yet. I looked mostly for US and Japanese radios that “looked cool”, were early, rare, and maybe would be worth some money someday (you know, as “investments”). As time passed, I refined my search down to: historical importance, rarity, and cabinet design – but I still kept mostly to US and Japanese radios and saw western European sets only as a sort of sidebar to my real collection.

At some point this search shifted to include European transistor radios, East and West, as well as sets from the former USSR. That forced me to rethink what is historical, and what is “rare”, and most challengingly, what is “good” design.

What's historical is fairly straightforward if you allow that a transistor radio didn't have to be made in Japan or the US to be of historical importance, whether in the history of radio or in social or commercial history. What's “rare” is mostly decided among collectors, a value that seems to change almost seasonally with only a few constants having held up over the years.

And cabinet design? This was a big re-think for me, as I value cabinet design at least as much as rarity and historical importance. Japanese transistor radio makers without question produced by far the best cabinet designs in the 1950s and then by far the best cabinet designs and stylings in the 1960s. US makers made many great cabinet designs and stylings in the '50s and '60s. And transistor radio makers in western Europe? There were some great designs but overall not nearly what were found among US makers and especially Japanese makers -- in fact, many western European cabinet designs were often less inspired than those of transistor sets being produced in East European countries at the time. And late-'50s/early-'60s Soviet design was pretty spotty but with a few good hits, something one now has to take in context to fully appreciate these very rare vintage transistor radios.

Japanese transistor radio cabinet design was certainly the best that any country had to offer at the time, and US radio makers really did have a lock on great “stylings”, but there were many other design cultures going on in the world at the same time, and it helps a whole lot to see these designs according to their own cultures. I think doing that allows one to get past the “cool” factor and recognize that there are many more historical and collectible transistor radios out there.

links and references:

<http://www.abetterpage.com/transistors/trans/1trans.html> -- my first transistor radio web site, "*The M31 Galaxy of Transistor Radios*", published in 1998

<http://www.abetterpage.com/wt/index.html> -- my second transistor radio web site, "*Transistor Radios Around the World*", published in 2015

<http://tabiwallah.com/radiowallah/index.html> -- Alan Kastner's "*Radio Wallah*", the longstanding definitive web site on early Japanese transistor radios

http://www.rw6ase.narod.ru/00/rp_p.html -- the "transistor radios" links page on the massive Russian vintage radio web site, <http://www.rw6ase.narod.ru/>

The Portable Radio in American Life; Michael Brian Schiffer, University of Arizona Press, 1991 – the most informative and influential book covering US and Japan transistor radios, still an endless inspiration!

MADE IN RUSSIA: Unsung Icons of Soviet Design; Michael Idov, et al., Rizzoli International Publications, 2011