

## THE STORY OF ULTIMATE RADIO

Nowadays it may come as a surprise to some people to learn just how long ago it was that the first New Zealand-made radios were marketed. Although it is freely admitted that, then as now, no receiver can really be 'Made in N.Z.' in the strictest sense of the term because everything in it (apart from the cabinet) is imported either in the form of raw material or manufactured components, it remains a fact that the first receivers were assembled on a commercial basis as early as 1923. Of course it didn't need much capital outlay nor require a great deal of technical knowledge or manufacturing expertise to 'make' a radio in those days; home constructors were doing it all the time! So it was that the first set to be sold under a N.Z. brandname actually was no more than a locally assembled kit-set of American origin. But we should begin at the beginning.

The story is told of how one of the directors of an Auckland firm of importers was in Vancouver sometime late in 1922 where he saw, and heard, his first radio. He was sufficiently impressed with the commercial possibilities of the new medium of entertainment to arrange to have a quantity of crystal sets snipped back home. Only when he had returned to Auckland and the sets were on the way did he and his fellow directors realise that without a local broadcasting in existence those crystal sets were going to be unsaleable stock! A hurried cable to the U.S. requested the urgent dispatch of a suitable transmitter.

One thing led to another and the firm of Radio Ltd was formed to import all kinds of radio apparatus. For many years after this Radio Ltd's main business was that of an importer. In 1923, however, the name Ultimate first appeared when a 2-valve receiver was assembled from a Gilfillan kit-set and fitted into a locally-made cabinet.

The production of a 4-valve all-wave battery set in 1927 resulted in the name Ultimate becoming recognised throughout the country and at the same time signalled a gradual change in company policy whereby manufacturing replaced importing. By 1933 Radio Ltd had ceased to import receivers and had become purely manufacturers.

When an Ultimate receiver was used in Admiral Richard E. Byrd's first Antarctic expedition in 1929 it represented quite a feather in Radio Ltd's cap and provided useful publicity for the Ultimate name. Receiver production continued to grow steadily and in 1930 Radio Ltd could claim to have made and sold over 1000 console models, a quite respectable figure considering the fierce competition from imported receivers. Although there were no import restrictions in those days there was one factor that favoured local production and that was the existence of a not inconsiderable 'Be British, Buy British' sentiment. Radio Ltd was not slow to take advantage of the situation and for several years made

a point of advertising Ultimate receivers as being of 'British Construction'. After all New Zealand was a British country, wasn't it and even if all the components weren't of British origin well ....?

Another factor favouring local production was that because most imported receivers were of American origin they incurred a fairly high rate of duty; on the other hand New Zealand made radios could incorporate English raw material and components which could be imported duty free. In 1932 an Ultimate 5-valve superhet in a floor model cabinet was being advertised as - "This Beautiful Console at the Price of the Imported Midget".

In spite of the prevailing economic depression of the early 1930s Radio Ltd continued to flourish and by 1932 had two factories in operation; No 1 in Rocklands Ave and No 2 in Porters Ave. By this time receiver production averaged 50 sets per week, the actual figure for 1932 being 1509. By the end of 1935 the demand for Ultimate radios had risen to such an extent that the two small suburban factories were unable to cope and a new five-storey building in Quay St was acquired. This move resulted in the firm being reorganised as Radio (1936) Ltd under which name it remained for the next twenty years.

During 1936 the verified reception of 798 stations by the proud owner of an Ultimate radio was hailed as a world record and the feat provided advertising copy for the next three years. "The World's Finest Radio" was the bold claim made during 1938-39, a claim based largely on the success of the 1936 DX record.

At this time the still extant 'Buy British' sentiment led to what can only be described as a dirty trick on the part of Radio (1936) Ltd. This is what happened. Since 1933 Rola speakers had been used exclusively in the manufacture of Ultimate radios, supplies being obtained from various countries i.e. America, Australia or England. However when using American-made Rola speakers Radio (1936) Ltd stooped to the deceitful practice of painting out the words "Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A." which appeared on the back and which otherwise have been only too readily apparent to a prospective purchaser. A deliberate deception intended to conceal that the particular speakers were not of British manufacture.

In spite of this minor lapse the name Ultimate earned for itself a well-deserved reputation for quality of workmanship amongst technicians and sales people alike. In any case the need for a continued subterfuge was removed by the introduction of New Zealand-made Rola speakers early in 1940.

A little-known fact, worth recording here, is that during the late 1930s Ultimate receivers were actually exported in sizeable quantities. Although Australia provided the main market some sets even went as far afield as India.

After a notable wartime effort in the production of military radio equipment, which is a story in itself, Ultimate continued to hold the position of New Zealand's leading radio manufacturer. It was at this time that the production of a limited range of electrical appliances, first undertaken in 1937, became well established.

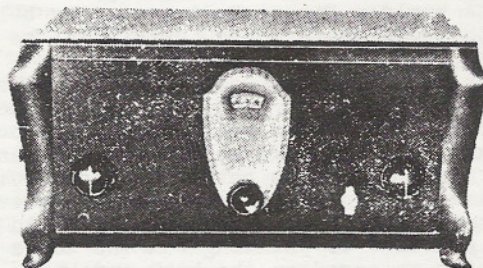


With the advent of television looming large on the horizon in the late 1950s the need for technical assistance and production know-how led Ultimate to seek overseas connections which resulted in an association being formed with the old-established British firm of E.K.Cole Ltd. In 1955 the company was reorganised as Ultimate-Ekco (NZ) Co Ltd and not long afterwards selected models of Ekco radios were produced and marketed alongside the locally designed Ultimate.

Although not among the first manufacturers of television receivers Ultimate-Ekco produced one of the highest quality sets until 1965 when E.K.Cole was taken over by Pye Ltd. It was this takeover which eventually resulted in Ultimate-Ekco coming under the control of N.Z. Pye and in 1967 the Quay St premises were finally vacated.

The closure represented the end of an era in N.Z. radio manufacturing and the start of the domination of this country's electronics industry by overseas interests. So, although the name Ultimate survives to this day it is now only a brandname used by Pye.

## Leader In Performance



If you're looking for a radio that will outperform any other set in its class—if you're eager to own a set that will give you loud-speaker reception of all short and long-wave stations—if you want the biggest thrill in radio—then hear the

### **"ULTIMATE"** *All Wave* **Screen Grid "4"**

Read what this enthusiastic "Ultimate" owner says. Note his reference to reception of London.

—an entirely new departure in receiver design. Includes the new and enormously efficient screen-grid valve, metal-screened chassis, all-wave reception, single-dial control and all-aluminium cabinet—the most outstanding receiver for 1929.