Collins 51J2

The 51J and its military counterpart, the R-390, were by far the finest receivers ever built and their revolutionary architecture inspired every new design of high-end receivers well into the semiconductor age.

In the late ‘940s Collins introduced two receivers, the ham-band 75A and soon later the general coverage 51J. Both diverted considerably from the known architectures used at the time. The 51J was a double/triple conversion superheterodyne, depending upon the band; it used fixed frequency crystal-controlled first and second oscillators, the last oscillator in the conversion chain being the variable one. The variable oscillator, the so-called PTO, Permeability Tuned Oscillator, was a masterpiece of ingenuity and craftsmanship, granting linearity and accuracy up to then hard to imagine over its frequency coverage. 51J had 1.000 division for each 1MHz band. For the first time the operator could set the dial at the known frequency of the wanted emitting station and just listen.

The **PTO** was the heart of the 51J. The 70E model oscillated from 2.0 to 3.0 MHz in exactly ten shaft revolutions. The resonating components were mounted inside a factory sealed enclosure, filled with dry atmosphere. The tuning shaft had a twin screw thread, to smoothly move the iron-powder core inside the tuning coil through an anti-backlash nut. The coil wire was wound according to a logarithmic helix and the core advance was accurately controlled by a factory-adjusted cam, to have an absolutely linear frequency variation through the full range. Nevertheless Collins had to solve a lot of problems to have a general coverage receiver. In the 51J Collins had to accept some compromises to contain the complexity and the cost of its otherwise revolutionary equipment. The receiver had 30 bands, all permeability tuned for the greatest stability, 1MHz each, from 0,5 to 30,5 MHz. Each band was covered in exactly ten turns of the PTO tuning shaft. The same shaft had to move the table with the tuning slugs of the RF and of the variable IF circuits. To save on costs, only ten crystals were used to cover 30 bands. The band switch had to select the proper quartz crystal and the associated local oscillator circuits, tuned to the fundamental or to some harmonic, depending upon the band. The megacycle shaft switched the tuning capacitors for the IF stages and, through a mechanical differential, moved the table with the IF tuning coils slugs to their proper position, according to the selected band. The megacycle shaft also selected the proper linear tuning scale with 100KHz division, which was displayed in the upper window. The lower circular tuning scale, with 1KHz division and the adjustable hairline cursor was driven by the PTO shaft. A 100 KHz crystal calibrator was used to check the dial calibration of the kilocycle scale and adjust the hairline cursor.

The conversion scheme varied with the selected band. In the first band, 0.5 to 1.5 MHz, triple conversion was used: the input signal was first mixed with the third harmonic of a 4 MHz xtal oscillator, then mixed with the second harmonic of the same oscillator to have the second variable IF between 3.5 and 2.5 MHz. A single conversion scheme was used in the second band, 1.5 to 2.5 MHz, and in the third one, 2.5 to 3.5 MHz. All other bands used a double conversion architecture. The fixed IF frequency was 500 KHz.

Overall frequency stability was granted within 2 KHz in the range from -20°C up to +60°C.

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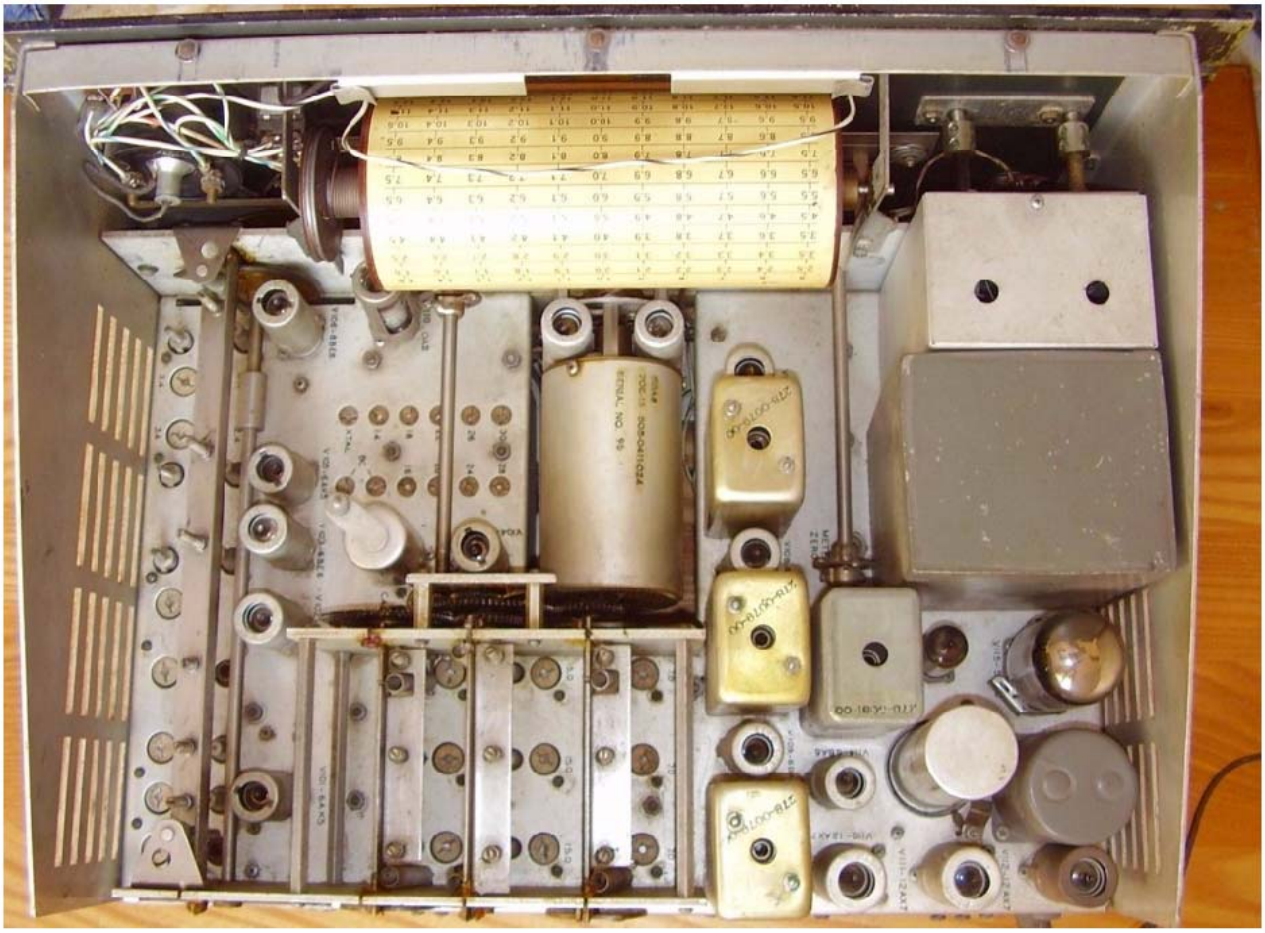
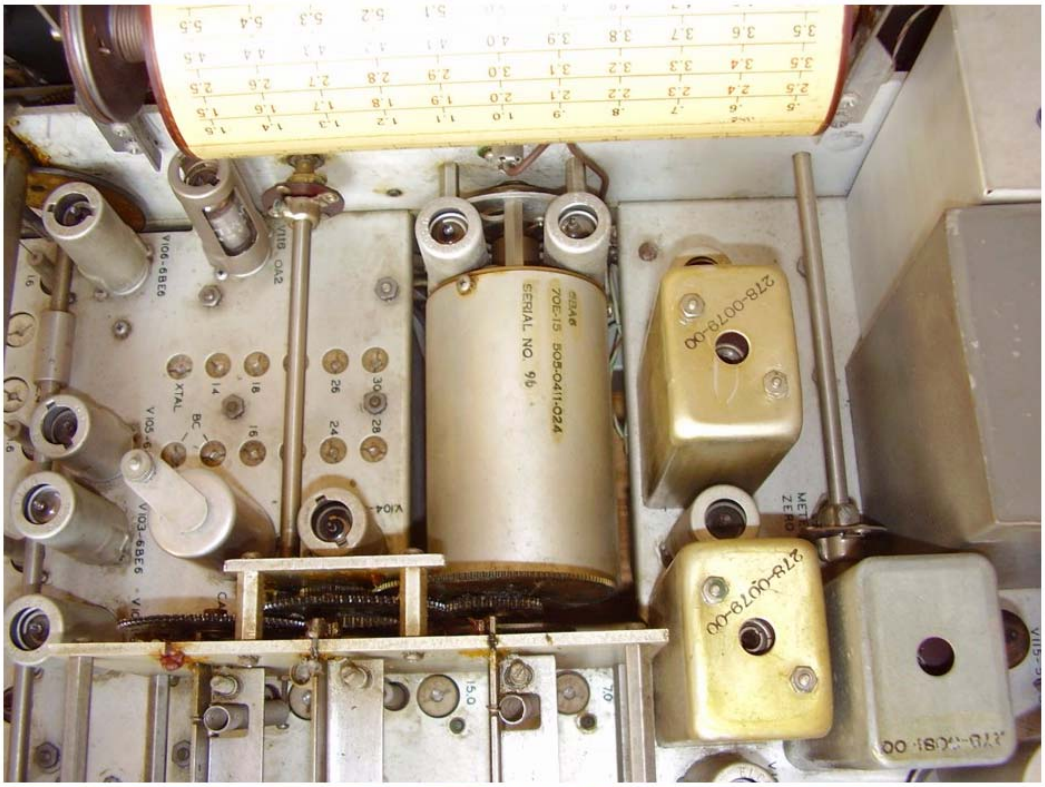
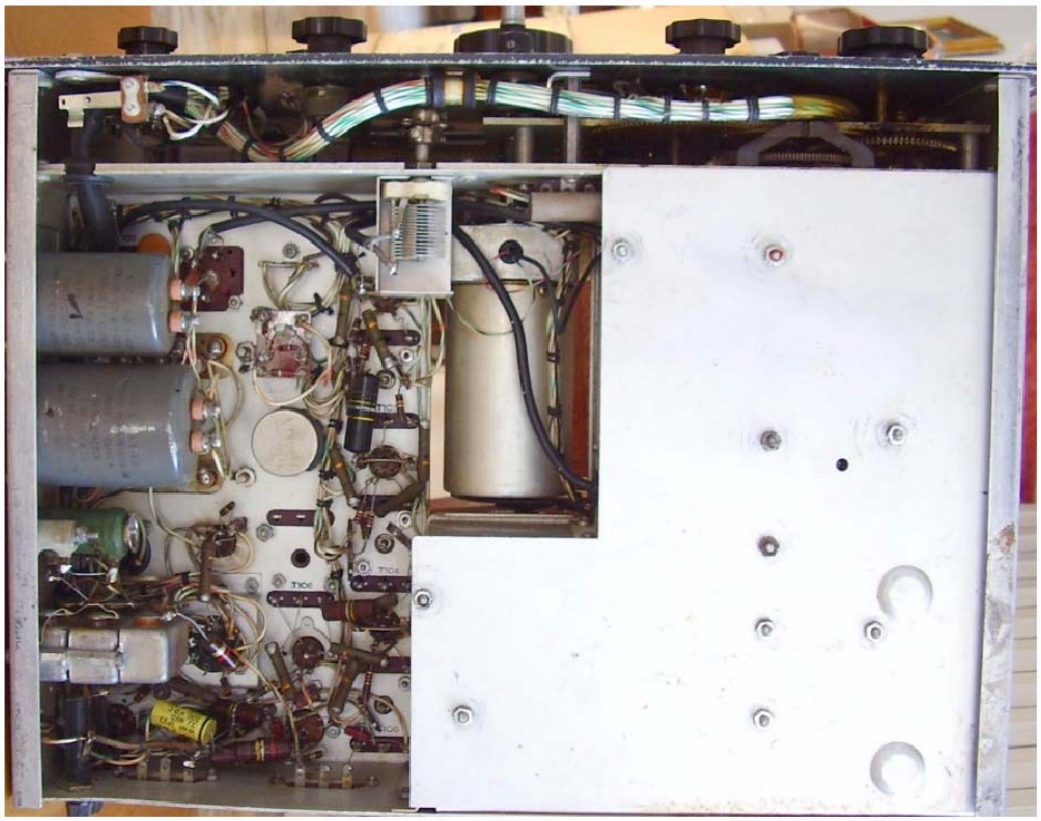


- Top, a picture of the front panel of the receiver: the band change knob selects the proper dial in the upper window. Bottom picture, an internal view of the receiver. On the left there is the variable IF tuning table. In the middle, from the top, the band scale drum; the crystal oscillator, including the crystal calibrator, and the sealed PTO; the RF tuning table. On the right the IF stages, the BFO, the AF amplifier and the power supply; the aluminum box over the power transformer contains the xtal filter and its phasing capacitor.





- A close-up view of the 70E-15 PTO and a bottom view of the chassis: a large shielding plate covers the RF and the variable IF coils.

Keep them alive!