

Radio Caroline – The Boat that Continues to Rock

Cast your mind back to the early 1960's. Radio broadcasting in the UK was the sole prerogative of The BBC. Non classical music was provided by the Light programme and played what I used to call "dad" music with my earliest memories of listening to Junior Choice, Music While You Work, Housewives Choice, the Billy Cotton Band Show, Sing Something Simple and my dad's favourite, Semprini Serenade.

Although British teenage music and culture were exploding, driven by the new sounds that had come over from America in the 1950s, there were very few radio programmes which catered for this. On the radio there was only a 2 hour Saturday morning programme, 'Saturday Club, presented by Brian Matthew and Alan Freeman's "Pick of the Pops" on Sundays. TV programming was similar.

It seems the programmers at Auntie BBC regarded this new teenage music as raucous and uncouth, and tried to protect the listening public from being led astray by anything that might be blasphemous or have dubious morals. This led to some strange rules on what they would play. You wouldn't have been able to hear this, for example.

100 lbs of Clay Craig Douglas 2.34

Banned because the subject matter was about God. Not the right material for a pop song,

As well as these odd rules, the BBC had an agreement with the Musicians' Union which guaranteed a certain amount of work to live orchestras employed by the BBC and restricted the amount of recorded music played on air. Session singers like Vince Hill performed live cover versions of the current hits and only established artists got "needle time". So new artists, who'd recorded with smaller record labels didn't get a chance.

The only way to hear pop music on the radio every day was via Radio Luxembourg which broadcast to the UK after 6pm in the evening when the atmospheric conditions were supposed to be right. Even so the signal faded in and out.

Here too new artists couldn't get a look in. Airtime was block booked by the major record companies and in order to showcase as many records as possible the DJs only played about a minute of a song and then faded it out.

So how could new artists get their music heard? 23 year old Ronan O'Rahilly, a wealthy Irishman was about to be their saviour. He had come to London and opened a R & B club where he became promoter/manager to some of the up and coming new artists like The Rolling Stones, Georgie Fame, and The Animals. When his artists found it difficult to get recording contracts, he started his own record label. When he couldn't get the records played, well then, he'd start his own radio station.

Now, the only "legal" way to do this was by broadcasting from a ship anchored outside UK territorial waters, and registered to a country where international marine broadcasting was legal. Two ship-based stations Radio Mercur and Radio Nord had already blazed the trail, and were broadcasting to Scandinavia. Further afield Voice of America was broadcasting to Communist countries from a US registered ship anchored in the Mediterranean.

O'Rahilly quickly gained financial support from his wealthy young club clientele and fortunately his father owned an isolated and seldom used shipyard at Greenore in Ireland. What better place to convert a ship into a floating radio station.

O'Rahilly purchased an ex passenger ferry, the *Fredericia*, and recruited an ex Radio Nord engineer to convert it into a radio ship.. Local newspapers were told that the new ship was a marine research vessel which needed a tall mast to help it search for deep sea sponges.

This happened in early 1962 and this was in the charts:

Rock a Hula Baby – Elvis Presley 2.05

Now O'Rahilly had a rival. Alan Crawford, an Australian businessman, also had his own record label and he too was looking to promote his artists in the UK. When Radio Nord was outlawed in June 1962 he and his US consortium purchased the ship, renaming it the *Mi Amigo*.

Fast forward to the beginning of 1964 and Crawford's new station "Radio Atlanta" was almost ready to start broadcasting. All that remained was the fitting of a new aerial mast and O'Rahilly offered him the use of his father's isolated shipyard. In return Crawford trained O'Rahilly's newly recruited DJ announcers, and gave him the use of his recording studios to pre-record his programmes which would then be sent out to the ship.

While supposedly helping their rivals, O'Rahilly's team took every opportunity to hamper Crawford's final preparations. Mysteriously wires got cut, equipment disappeared and several times the ship was ordered out of harbour by the harbour master, for no apparent reason.

It's no surprise, then, that O'Rahilly's ship was ready first - despite a bit of sabotage by Crawford, who supplied some engineers to work on the *Fredericia*'s transmitters. Their work ensured test broadcasts interfered with just about everything electrical in the surrounding area - television, radio and telephone – all were affected. Even the harbour lights were blinking to the music.

Now, as part of the negotiations it had been agreed that O'Reilly's ship, the *Fredericia*, would anchor in the Irish sea and broadcast to the north of the country. Instead he sent her south to an anchorage just off the Essex coast, the area originally intended for Crawford's ship, the *Mi Amigo*.

At midday on Easter Sunday, March 28th 1964, a radio signal appeared on 199 medium wave and Simon Dee came on air announcing a new all day music station, Radio Caroline. Then this was played. Maybe they were having a dig at Radio Luxembourg's dodgy signal but with Caroline still broadcasting today, I think it was prophetic.

Rolling Stones 'Not Fade Away' 1.50

There are a number of stories of how the new station came to be called "Caroline". The most popular is that O'Rahilly saw a photograph in a magazine showing president Kennedy's daughter Caroline dancing in the Oval Office of the White House. The image of a playful disruption of government was exactly the image he wanted.

Within days Radio Caroline had attracted a big audience and, crucially, advertisers. Broadcasting 12 hours a day - from 6am to 6pm it had gained more listeners by Autumn than the 3 BBC networks combined. Although they had no jingles or news bulletins in those early days, every hour a recording of the ship's bell rang for the station identification spot.

Three months later Crawford's ship, the *Mi Amigo*, dropped anchor in its original spot off the Essex coast, and Radio Atlanta came on air right next to Caroline's wavelength after

Caroline had closed down for the night. But not before a last-minute hitch. One of Atlanta's ex-employees, who now worked for Caroline, used to work as an engineer on the Mi Amigo when it was operating as Radio Nord,. come on board for a nostalgic look round his old Radio Nord ship and cleverly cut one or two things so the transmitting equipment would blow up.

It soon became clear that the two stations were competing for the same audience and the same advertisers. Although both stations remained separately owned, Radio Atlanta was renamed Caroline South and stayed off the Essex coast broadcasting from the Mi Amigo. O'Rahilly's ship, the Fredericia, became Caroline North and sailed to her original destination near the Isle of Man, broadcasting as she went. With such a big mast (nearly 200ft) the ship was easy to spot. As she sailed along the English Channel people lined the coastline flashing mirrors at the ship. At night they flashed their car headlights. Arriving at their new anchorage 2 men canoed out to ship with an envelope containing a piece of heather and a note saying "Welcome to the Isle of Man" and so began a partnership which lasts to this day.

In the charts at that time: **A Hard Day's Night – The Beatles 2.33**

So what was life like on board Radio Caroline?

At first programmes were pre-recorded onshore and broadcast by the transmitter engineer but with rough weather often preventing the tender getting alongside, it wasn't long before Caroline switched to live broadcasting. Even then the DJs mostly acted as announcer while the engineer played the records, which made the broadcasts sound as formal as the BBC. Later on, though, the DJs began playing the records themselves and the programmes became more informal. There were updates with what was happening on and around the ship as well as banter between the DJs at handover time. They were allowed one week ashore every 2 weeks where they em-ceed discos and concerts, and recorded celebrity interviews for broadcast.

Although professional riggers visited the ships regularly to maintain the aerial mast if something went wrong in the meantime one of the DJs had to climb up to fix it, usually without a safety harness. This was especially challenging for those onboard Caroline South as the Mi Amigo was quite a small ship. Even on a calm day the waters off Felixstowe were very choppy and the ship's movement swayed the mast from side to side by 15 to 30ft, so this was not for the faint hearted. It's hard to believe now but a 24year old Tony Blackburn was one such brave soul. Here is the first record Tony played when he joined the ship in July 1964.

Rag Doll – The Four Seasons 3.01

When the seas became very rough the Mi Amigo used to bob up and down like a cork and many a time broadcasters had to crawl to the studio. Many of them used to get seasick, too, and they kept a bucket alongside them while they were on air. On such days it was difficult keeping the needle on the record, so they had to put a coin on the stylus to hold it down and follow the microphone back and forth as it dangled from the ceiling.

The supply tender brought out free copies of new releases from the record companies and anything the DJs didn't like got skimmed across the waves like giant pebbles. Another pastime was walking round the deck at night holding florescent tubes which lit up like Star Wars light sabres because of the strong radio frequency coming from the transmitter.

Despite what was portrayed in the film "The Boat that Rocked" there was a strictly no girls policy. Other than the music librarian, Maureen Blackburn (no relation to Tony) the only woman to stay on board overnight was this one, who had come out to the ship to promote

her record and was so determined to stay that she locked herself in the toilet until the tender had left.

Terry – Twinkle

3.10

Within a couple of months more pirate stations started to appear, most of them were in the south of England, broadcasting from abandoned WW2 anti-aircraft forts in the Thames Estuary. Many were low powered/low budget operations, often running off a series of car batteries which meant they only had limited range and could only stay on air a few hours before the power ran out.

The first to arrive was Radio Sutch which began broadcasting in May 1964 from one of the towers located at Shivering sands near Herne Bay. Promoted as Britain's First Teenage Radio Station it was started by Screaming Lord Sutch as a publicity stunt for his singing and political career. After only a few months Sutch got bored and sold the station to his manager, Reg Calvert (who was also manager for The Fortunes). He took over some of the other towers at Shivering Sands and renamed his new station Radio City.

The only pirate station to rival Radio Caroline was the American backed Radio London (or Big L, as it was known) which began broadcasting on 23rd December 1964 from a former US minesweeper called the MV Galaxy.

This was the first record played:

I Could Easily Fall In Love with You by Cliff Richard.

2.53

Radio London was staffed by experienced DJs who used the American Top 40 format and had expensive custom made jingles as well as regular news bulletins obtained from the BBC and Voice of America, re-written and broadcast just 30 minutes later. It soon developed 2 cult shows, the anarchic Kenny and Cash show and John Peel's midnight to 2am slot "The Perfumed Garden", which played the more avant-garde artists like Jefferson Airplane and Captain Beefheart. Caroline sounded distinctly old fashioned in comparison.

In September 1965 Caroline South's owner, Alan Crawford, attempted a merger with Radio City and he installed a transmitter on the nearby Knock John fort. But the deal fell through, the fort and its transmitter lay deserted. Ronan O'Rahilly then took over Caroline South introducing a Top 40 chart show, customised jingles and a news service.

Meanwhile Roy Bates, an ex-fisherman, had set his sights on the abandoned Knock John fort and its transmitter. He and a group of men hijacked it, setting up their own station, Radio Essex. A feud developed between Bates and Radio City's Reg Calvert and possession of the fort alternated between them, with each side launching attacks on the other, even kidnapping each other's men. The squabbling went on for a month but eventually a settlement was reached. Radio City took back its equipment and Roy Bates kept the fort.

As long as the pirate stations were outside UK territorial waters, the Government could do nothing to stop them and with an election looming, alienating 20million voters would not have been a great move. The only threat to their existence was either running out of money or running aground. On the night of 19 January 1966 the Mi Amigo lost her anchor in a force 9 gale and ended up on Frinton beach. Fortunately the ship managed to pull herself free but not before the crew and DJs, including Tony Blackburn and Dave Lee Travis, had been removed by breeches buoy. The final song played that night had been this one :

Eve of Destruction - Barry McGuire

3.36

Caroline transferred to another ship while repairs were carried out, only to go off air a couple of months later when a crewman inadvertently opened a sea valve and couldn't shut it again.

But in June 1966 something happened that changed everything. As Radio London DJ Dave Cash recalled many years later, 'they, as in the Government, couldn't act against us ... They needed something heavy like drugs or murder – we gave them murder'.

It started as a dispute between Radio City's Reg Calvert and one of Alan Crawford's business partners, Major Oliver Smedley. Smedley sent a group of Thames dockers to hijack Shivering Sands fort and remove the transmitting equipment left there after their failed merger. As the fort was outside the UK territorial limit, the police wouldn't intervene so Calvert took matters into his own hands. He burst into Smedley's home and, during the skuffle that followed, Calvert was killed with a shot gun.

Paint it Black – The Rolling Stones

3.47

The new Labour Government moved quickly. Within six months The Marine Broadcasting Offences bill was announced. By August 14th 1967 supplying the ships, working on or advertising on them would become illegal. Contravening the law would incur a maximum penalty of an unspecified fine plus 2 years in prison. Additionally, the UK's territorial limit would be enlarged to outlaw the fort-based stations.

O'Rahilly immediately seized control of another wartime fort, Roughs Tower, which remained outside the territorial limit, and began to convert it into a heliport to service Caroline South after the ban.

But Roy Bates (owner of the soon-to-be outlawed Radio Essex) had set his sights on the Tower too. When Caroline's men left it temporarily unattended he and some men hijacked the Tower. After a number of violent disputes with possession of the fort alternating between them, O'Rahilly and Bates agreed to share the fort and work on the helipad resumed. However, in the Spring of 1967 Bates took advantage of O'Rahilly's men going ashore and wouldn't let them back on. Attempts to recapture the fort ended in petrol bombs and shots being fired. Outside the territorial limit, and outside the law, there was nothing they could do. Yet again Roy Bates had won.

Bates then declared Roughs Tower the Independent State of Sealand and bestowed royal titles on all his family. Despite several attempts by the Royal Navy to take it back it remains in the hands of the Bates family and you can buy yourself a noble title or even spend the night there!

Both Radio Caroline and Radio London fought huge campaigns to win the right to continue broadcasting and pirate radio fans formed the Free Radio Association to try to save their beloved stations.

We love the pirate stations – The Roaring Sixties

3.17

The Isle of Man, which was independently governed, fought Westminster in an attempt to retain Caroline North but they were eventually overruled.

When August 14th 1967 arrived station after station made their emotional farewells. Radio London, who had decided to close after all, was the first to go. When their DJ's arrived at London's Liverpool Street station, over a thousand supporters were there to welcome them back. Chaos reigned for several hours as they surged through police lines waving banners and shouting their support for the offshore stations. The following month Tony Blackburn

opened the BBC's replacement for the pirate stations, Radio One, much of it staffed by DJs from Radio London. Here is the first record he played.

Flowers in the Rain – The Move

2.36

Meanwhile, back on Radio Caroline South, Johnnie Walker made a defiant speech and took the station into a new era as outlaws on the waves.

All Radio Caroline's British board of directors were obliged to resign or face prosecution except two, Ronan O'Rahilly and Philip Solomon, who were both Irish citizens, and the station's management operations were transferred to Holland.

But as the number of advertisers dwindled so Radio Caroline's revenue dwindled. Supplying the ships from Holland (or Ireland in the case of Caroline North) was expensive. Sometimes the weather forced the tenders to turn back and there were often shortages of records and supplies.

The DJs devised ways of keeping in touch by using coded messages. Despite all contact with Caroline being illegal, listeners to Johnnie Walker communicated through what became known as Frinton Flashing. Motorists parked along the seafront, spelling out replies to questions with their car headlights.

Then, suddenly, in March 1968, both ships went quiet. The Dutch company which supplied them hadn't been paid for some time. As dawn broke, and without warning, they cut their anchor chains, towed them to Holland and impounded them for non payment of debts.

This was the last record played on Caroline South

Cinderella Rockefella - Esther and Abi Ofarim

2.33

It seemed that Caroline was finished. The DJs returned to Britain, no-one was arrested, and Johnnie Walker joined the BBC. For the next 4 years the ships lay rusting and looted by souvenir hunters.

The Caroline North ship Fredericia was scrapped in early 1972. The Mi Amigo was bought by the Dutch Free Radio organisation and broadcast a succession of Dutch and English language music stations, with Radio Caroline returning in April 1979. She broke anchor a number of times and finally sank in a Force 10 gale on Long Sands in the Thames Estuary on March 19th 1980.

Shortly afterwards, O'Rahilly purchased a former Icelandic trawler, the Ross Revenge, and Radio Caroline re-started broadcasting from an anchorage 12 miles off the Essex coast at Knock Deep. You have to question where did he get the money from? Well, apparently Ronan used to refer to his friend "George". Could it have been George Harrison? I guess we'll never know.

During the course of her many exciting and sometimes violent adventures, including riding out the 1987 hurricane and being boarded and trashed by "heavies" working for the Dutch government Radio Caroline struggled on. In 1990 the UK Government introduced another Broadcasting Act which would make it impossible for Caroline to continue broadcasting from the high seas. Lack of funds meant the ship became more and more unseaworthy and in 1990 November 1991 she ended up on the notorious Goodwin Sands. By now almost derelict she was refloated, towed back to the UK and remained at anchor while the lawyers worked out what to do. It seemed that Radio Caroline was finished. A few years later she was brought back to life by a band of dedicated volunteers. She's now anchored in the River

Blackwater in Essex where she's broadcasting recorded shows via the internet and has been awarded a licence to broadcast locally on AM. Volunteers run boat trips out to tour the ship and once a month DJs go onboard to broadcast live as Radio Caroline North, carried on the Manx Radio frequency.

The ship is now facing major repairs and Radio Caroline is running competitions and a crowd-funder to raise the money. Once again Radio Caroline is facing an uncertain future.

Caroline - the Fortunes

2.00