

The 1960s pirates: a comparative analysis of Radio London and Radio Caroline

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Anyone who can remember anything at all about pirate radio in the 1960s can usually remember two names: Radio Caroline and Radio London are synonymous with the offshore era. Between them they accounted for the majority of the audience who listened to the pirates, and the majority of the sponsors who advertised on them. But although they basically shared the same market rationale Caroline and London approached their task completely differently. London sought respect, prestige and accommodation. Its every move was geared towards being incorporated into the existing system of broadcasting, and its main purpose for existing seemed to be to bring about a legal commercial radio system in Great Britain. Radio Caroline had a very different rulebook and a very different guiding ethos. By a series of acts which culminated in a highly symbolic stand against what it saw as repressive legislation Caroline made explicit an underlying set of contradictions which anticipated in microcosm the wider philosophical and political contradictions of the 1960s counter-culture. For Radio London respect would eventually be won and the station's influence and programming legacy would endure in the shape of its replacement – BBC Radio One. For Radio Caroline there would be nothing like the same degree of influence. This contrast of approaches and outcomes between the two major pirate stations is at the very epicentre of the story of offshore radio.

Radio Caroline

Prior to Radio Caroline going on air in March 1964 its founder Ronan O'Rahilly had dabbled in several ventures, one of which involved running the Scene Club in London's Soho. Here O'Rahilly, was responsible for giving central London exposure to, among others, The Rolling Stones, Them, and Georgie Fame & the Blue Flames. The kind of groups O'Rahilly booked had their roots in rhythm and blues and jazz and their influences ranged from Muddy Waters to Ray Charles, Jimmy Reed to Jimmy Smith. This was Ronan O'Rahilly's musical heritage. It was also the music of Caroline's first team of djs, few of whom were purely into pop music. But while O'Rahilly's club was in Soho his social clique centres upon Chelsea, and a consideration of the role that the Chelsea set played in the emergence of both Radio Caroline and 'swinging London' is crucial to any analysis of the 1960s and does much to contradict many of the myths which have grown up around the era, and which often dismissively relegate the offshore radio phenomenon to the periphery of cultural activity. Chelsea's favoured cultural iconography was a mixture of rich

gallery owners, faded actresses with highly exclusive drug habits maintained by private incomes and inheritances, and an assortment of enigmatic socialites, who appeared to do little other than socialise. It was a self-contained, self-generating and yet transient community, relying on its own internal nervous energies for its output and creative momentum. Schemes could be indulged on a whim, without a care for their viability or their future. It is precisely within such affluent hedonism that the origins of Radio Caroline can be located. And because the packaging and selling of the Swinging Sixties really begins here then Caroline has to be viewed as an integral part of that process in all its splendour and all its failings.

One of Caroline's original backers was Jocelyn Stevens, then Editor-in-Chief of *Queen* magazine. Previous to Stevens' involvement, which began in 1958, *Queen* was the standard Court and High Society circular, a who's who of débutantes and the *nouveau* and not so *nouveau riche*. With its new editor at the helm *Queen* became the in-house publication for the Kings Road socialites. Stevens transformed *Queen* as Chelsea itself was being transformed. In its pages as in the streets and mews of SW4 the old guard rubbed shoulders with a new generation of writers and photographers who were a pivotal part of the concept of the Swinging Sixties. They included Antonia Fraser, David Bailey and Norman Parkinson and a whole range of post-existentialist post-bohemian bit-part players who were now busy re-inventing themselves as the first of the individualists who turned into modernists, and who by the time the media caught on were just plain mods. *Queen* offered a myriad of pre-radical chic styles on its pages. The magazine carried self-aggrandising features on the upper class social élite, their jet set holidays on what were then exclusive, even slightly bohemian, resorts like Ibiza and Majorca, and still found time to develop what was probably the very first designer social conscience.

Queen was the first magazine to do an in-depth feature on casual drug use. Written by John 'Hoppy' Hopkins, later an important figure in the English Underground, and who was best known for running the seminal UFO club, the piece broke new ground by emphasising leisure-time hedonism over social problem. *Queen* was also one of the first magazines to deal with feminist issues (or as *Queen* referred to them, using the appropriate apolitical vernacular of the time 'feminine issues') like abortion and birth control. With Chelsea itself being 'discovered' novelists were starting to write about the Chelsea set. The Chelsea novel, that curious hybrid of the semi-precious and the downright cultural slumming, had as its ambassadors Virginia Ironside and Nell Dunn who documented this world in transition while *Queen* readers peered narcissus-like at themselves on the pages. Its gossip and publicity grapevine and its 'Deb's Diaries' were virtually unrivalled in the early 1960s, but they also gave valuable publicity to aspiring talents from the world of fashion, photography and music, and by 1964 that whole microcosmic Chelsea world was starting to become public knowledge.

This then was Ronan O'Rahilly's cultural milieu. A twenty-two-year-old citizen of the Irish Republic, whose grandfather had been killed in the Easter Uprising, and subsequently eulogised in verse by W. B. Yeats, and who himself had been thrown out of more English public schools than he cared to remember, had entered into this exclusive clique of modernism and individualism in the late 1950s. O'Rahilly also brought with him a cultural identification with the Kennedy clan, an identification which was in the first instance responsible for the actual naming of Radio Caroline, after Kennedy's daughter was depicted in a typical *Time Life* magazine photo opportunity apparently holding up important White House business with her mere

presence and a smile. The quasi-innocence that O'Rahilly was attracted to was fuelled in the conspiratorial aftermath of the President's assassination with a rebellious instinct, an untainted naive optimism, and a shrewdly pragmatic desire for a little entrepreneurial action. O'Rahilly also allegedly held a grudge against Radio Luxembourg, supposedly because they would not accommodate his Georgie Fame acetate into their fully booked schedules – although many believe O'Rahilly's dream of a radio station had reached fruition long before this much documented, but possibly apocryphal, incident. This then was the gestural ancestry of Radio Caroline. O'Rahilly regarded freedom of expression as a political birthright, and his radio station as the symbolic embodiment of this birthright.

Apart from Jocelyn Stevens, O'Rahilly's business associates at the start of the Caroline venture possessed an uncertain pedigree for the job. During the current research the less prominent advisors would be variously described to the author, depending on the diplomacy or discretion of the source, as either City financiers or 'hangers on'. Simon Dee and Chris Moore, two of Caroline's earliest dj recruits described themselves frankly as 'Kings Road layabouts'. Moore was at the time working none too enthusiastically in advertising. Dee had previously been a student at an acting school called 'Studio 57', where Ronan O'Rahilly was one of the teachers. This school was typical of Chelsea set activities, and is crucial to an understanding of what came later. Ostensibly set up to teach the Method school of acting, as preached by Stanislavski through the works of the post-Russian revolution Moscow Arts Theatre, and imported and adapted to both American film and theatre by Lee Strasberg at his legendary Actors Studio in New York, the Method approach of introspective self-absorption, of studiously becoming the part, had an obvious appeal to the Kings Road crowd's sense of fad and fashion.

In the late 1950s there was money to be made out of the Method. Schools opened up all over London, the majority run by American ex-patriots of dubious credentials and often equally dubious ability, in order to satisfy the scepticism of formerly stodgy thespians who had reluctantly come round to thinking that there must be theatrical life beyond farce, high comedy, and the well-made play. This radical and fervently resisted break with the formal tradition and techniques of theatre became a crucial metaphor. O'Rahilly and some of his broadcasting team showed that the Method was as applicable to radio as it was to theatre. There were direct cultural parallels which Radio Caroline alone among the pirates was to make explicit in its spontaneous approach. When Studio 57 closed the infatuation of the Kings Road crowd moved on to fresh kicks, new desires, O'Rahilly moved on to club management and more direct contact with the music scene, but never lost contact with the philosophy or indeed many of the participants of the Method venture. Many of Caroline's early recruits like Carl Conway, John Junkin (who had been with Joan Littlewood's experimental East End theatre company), and Doug Kerr came not from the music industry but from acting.

The overall sound of Radio Caroline in those first few months of broadcasting could not help but reflect the likes and lifestyles of its staff and its backers. *Queen* magazine at the time used to carry a Top Twenty of the most requested numbers at Annabelles, the fashionably élitist London nightclub. This Top Twenty with its heavy emphasis on jazz and quality singers (Barney Kessel to Ella Fitzgerald) bore an uncanny resemblance to the output listeners heard on those very first broadcasts from Radio Caroline. The Caroline theme was 'Round Midnight' by jazz organist Jimmy McGriff. Simon Dee's theme tune on the station was 'On The Street Where

You Live' by Tommy Dorsey and his band. Bryan Vaughan and Jon Sydney both used Henry Mancini tunes. Gary Kemp used Ray Charles 'Let's Go'. Apart from the heavy preponderance of jazz, rhythm and blues and ballads, pop had to take its place alongside a smattering of bluebeat, trad, folk and Latin American music. Neither Radio Caroline, nor any of its early rivals, was predominantly concerned with pop music. Instead Caroline, during its first three to four months of existence (up to the period of merger with Radio Atlanta in July 1964) leaned very strongly towards what would now be called hip easy-listening or quality middle-of-the-road music, and Ronan O'Rahilly's radio station, initially at least, bore all the hallmarks of an attempt to corner the sophisticated end of the adult market.

Some typical programming from Caroline during those early months is illustrated in Table 1. Without getting too embroiled in purist definitions in musical forms there are, by any stretch of the imagination, only a few records among them which can be strictly classified as pop. Although one or two programmes from the time would have been noticeably more pop-orientated than others none of the above examples are untypical. And they are not significantly different to the output of one or two of the more adventurous shows on the Light programme at the time.

Radio London

Radio London went on air in December 1964, almost nine months after Caroline had made its first broadcast. Philip Birch, London's Managing Director, had a proven track record in advertising, having worked for fourteen years as Media Director and Accounts Executive for the J. Walter Thompson organisation, most prominently on the Ford Motors account in the early 1950s. It was a mark of the sheer professional efficiency of the Radio London organisation that without any track record they were able to acquire the services of somebody who was in a well-paid job with the largest advertising agency in the world. Such efficient organisation was to become a hallmark of the Radio London project. Alan Keen left IPC magazines to become Head of Radio London's Sales Division. Dennis Maitland, another advertisement man with a proven track record, later joined from *Housewife Magazine*. Unlike many of those on the Radio Caroline team the Radio London project was staffed by people who were first and foremost steeped in commercial media and marketing experience.

Financially the Radio London project was made economically watertight right from the start. This entailed setting up a trust fund in the Bahamas for the station's investors, which accounted for the actual purchasing of a ship and broadcasting equipment. The ship itself was actually owned by Panavess Incorporated operating out of Panama. This side of the venture maintained a corporate structure and issued shares to the principle financial overseers of the station. Sales on the other hand were managed by a British company (Radlon). Such a structure allowed a great deal of financial autonomy within the project. It also meant that as well as conveniently shielding the identities of the station's major backers, one of whom was 'Ladybird' Johnson, the US President's wife, there were also other benefits to be had. Panavess Incorporated was not liable to pay income tax in the USA. The Bahamas trust fund was similarly free of US tax obligations, and because of an arrangement whereby all British advertising fees were channelled through a Swiss account, sterling being converted to US dollars in the process, it also meant that the trustees remained free of exchange controls in the Bahamas.

Table 1

Simon Dee/Carl Conway, April 1964, 10.45 to 11.15 a.m.

'Blueberry Hill' – Ray Connif (light orchestral)
 'Nuttty Squirrel' – Billy's Bag (jazz)
 'I Call Your Name' – Billy J. Kramer & the Dakotas (pop)
 'Side by Side' – Ray Charles and Betty Carter (jazz)
 'I Love You Because' – Jim Reeves (country ballad)
 'Pushover' – Etta James (r & b)
 end of Simon Dee programme (theme: 'On the Street Where You Live – Tommy Dorsey') start
 of Carl Conway programme (theme: Ray Connif)
 'Needles and Pins' – Searchers (pop)
 'With a Little Bit of Luck' – Stanley Holloway (musical soundtrack from *My Fair Lady*)
 'Young and Foolish' – Paul Anka (ballad)

Chris Moore, April 1964, 12.00 midday to 12.30 p.m.

Opening theme: 'I've Got a Woman' – Jimmy McGriff (jazz organ instrumental)
 'I'm So in Love' – Frank Sinatra (ballad)
 'Wheel of Fortune' – Ray Connif (light orchestral)
 'Peanuts' – Gene Pitney (pop)
 'Take the A Train' – Mantovani (light orchestral arrangement)
 'Ain't Misbehavin'' – Nat King Cole (ballad arrangement)
 'As Usual' – Brenda Lee (pop ballad)
 'I'm the Lonely One' – Cliff Richard (pop)
 'Pushover' Etta James (r & b)
 'Hey Look Me Over' – Cy Coleman (jazz)
 'Stars Fell on Stockton' – Shadows (pop instrumental)

John Junkin show, 9 April 1964, recorded programme, 4.30 to 5.00 p.m.

'The Preacher' – Billy May (big band jazz)
 'You and I' – Billy Davies (pop)
 'Limehouse Blues' – Tony Bennett (ballad)
 'The Reverend Mr Black' – New Christy Minstrels (commercial folk)
 'Living It Up' – Murray Ross (jazz vocal)
 'Hello Little Girl' – The Fourmost (pop)
 'Lover' – Johnny Dolittle (ballad – jazz arrangement)
 'Falling in love' – Big Jolly trio (jazz)
 'If I were You' – Peter and Gordon (pop)
 'Confessin'' – Louie Prima and Keely Smith (jazz style ballad)
 'I Could Write a Book' – Ella Fitzgerald (jazz vocal)

Carl Conway show, 24 May 1964, 12.10 to 12.40 p.m.

'Anytime is the Right Time' – Ray Charles (gospel tinged r & b)
 'Something Special' – Dusty Springfield (pop)
 'Baby Don't Cry' – The Puppets (pop)
 'Summer Place' – Andy Williams (ballad)
 'America' – Trini Lopez (musical soundtrack: *West Side Story*)
 'I Just Wanna Stay Here and Love You' – Mike Sammes Singers (light orchestral)
 'Yesterday and You' – Ellenka Balluska (continental ballad)
 'Sunday' – The Stringalongs (Hawaiian-style instrumental)
 'My Favourite Things' – Mark Murphy (musical soundtrack: *Sound of Music*)
 'Little Egypt' – The Marauders (pop)

Radio London was a highly organised and potentially lucrative venture, and with the kind of company the Big L project was keeping it turned out to be a remarkably low risk venture too. In addition to being funded to the tune of an estimated £1.5 million (an awesome amount of money for a venture which was

supposedly taking shape against a background of potential government legislation to outlaw the stations) various prestigious reciprocal deals had been struck which kept wasteful overheads to a minimum. RCA, glad to venture into a new market, as they had been with Radio Luxembourg in the 1930s, installed Radio London's transmitting equipment for a fraction of what it would have cost for a major market US station, or indeed a similar marine military project. Like many others involved in the Radio London project they seemed confident of a return on their investment.

It was in the area of sales that Radio London was most able to maximise efficiency. Radio Caroline had tentatively opened the advertisers' eyes to a new and potentially lucrative market, but it was the London project that was able to capitalise on this potential growth area most effectively. As soon as it became fully operational from its London offices Radlon Sales drew up advertising rates cheaper than those of its rivals. Utilising the considerable expertise of its own employees in the area of marketing it was decided that Radio London would generate advertising ahead of launch and would go on air with a full account book. The first clients were familiar names in the world of commercial radio, many of whom, like Recketts, Palmolive and Gibbs, had previously advertised on Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandie in the 1930s. By negotiating through its British agencies for predominantly American multi-national clients Radio London was attempting to create a situation in which offshore multi-national capital could flourish. In generating revenue in such a way it introduced Pan European advertising to the British market. The other benefit of such a strategy was that Radio London could go on air already sounding like an established radio station.

Immediately prior to Radio London's intended on air launch date of Christmas Eve 1964 Philip Birch hired the services of the public relations firm Patrick Baker Limited to organise the station's advance publicity. An elaborate public relations campaign was devised consisting of plans for initial press liaison and an associated follow-up campaign of station-related promotions, involving the tried and tested populist formula of talent competitions, radio bingo and possible promotional tie-ups with magazines, record companies and related media. Among other proposals was a suggestion that prominent members of the 'Big L' management team, and Philip Birch in particular, should be groomed for more sophisticated areas of public relations. This would include lecturing and after-dinner speaking to responsible bodies and organisations and generally building up rapport with those who might be sympathetic to the cause of commercial radio. Particular emphasis was placed on Birch's exemplary war record for instance. His biography in the first Radio London press release mentions that 'he was reputed to be the youngest commissioned officer in the Second World War'.

Like everything else on the publicity side the campaign was well organised and guaranteed to promote the station in a favourable light. And underlying theme of the campaign was the emphasis on promoting Radio London as a respectable business concern. The station's management were keen to distance themselves from the buccaneering image which had largely been foisted upon Radio Caroline by the media, eager to find a selling angle on this new style of pop radio. A central emphasis was placed upon courting the Establishment, and not doing anything which might jeopardise the station's position.

This then was Radio London's organisational milieu. It honoured, in the main, well-established administrative practises. It was unquestionably efficient, it had recruited from a position of strength, it had shown great foresight and a shrewd

understanding of the political temperature in most of its decision-making, and it had marketed itself in a favourable light. The overriding institutional goals were not only to maximise profit but also to bring legal commercial radio, built upon the American model, to Great Britain. In theory Radio London was a pirate radio station. In all other respects it was a major market business concern which just happened as a matter of legislative convenience (or inconvenience) to be operating from a ship.

While sales revenue for Radio London could largely be achieved by picking up a phone and talking to any one of a number of well-established multi-national contacts, economic paternalism in the Radio Caroline camp was largely restricted to Ronan O'Rahilly getting his ship fitted out in the relative secrecy of his father's Dublin harbour. The Caroline team had few prestigious contacts of which to speak. Radio London was therefore always going to achieve more from an organisational point of view. London's investors and directors included the incumbent Mayor of Eastland, Texas (Don Peirson) and ex-employees of J. Walter Thompson (Philip Birch), Volkswagen (Tom Danaher), Cadillac (Mal McIlwain) and IPC (Alan Keen). Also on the team was Gordon McLendon who had been partly responsible for inventing Top Forty radio in the first place, for starting one of the first promotional jingles companies ('PAMS') in the 1940s, and for setting up one of the first offshore stations in Europe (Radio Nord) in the 1950s. The fact that 'Ladybird' Johnson was, via her Texas Trust funds, also one of the station's major backers while Ronan O'Rahilly could only compete on an emblematic level by naming his station after the daughter of the recently assassinated John Kennedy, is one of the most potent symbols of the entire offshore era and reveals everything about the two stations' contrasting intentions and expectations. Radio London could draw upon powerful multi-national allies for its support, big money from established sources. Its credentials for such a venture were after all impeccable. Caroline by contrast chose to cherish a fated ideal. It emphasised the representational and the nebulous, taking on-board the kind of hedonistic gestural politics consistent with its embryonic Swinging London origins. Radio London was pursuing pragmatic incorporation. Caroline was nurturing an illusion.

Style and performance

After a month of test transmissions Radio London began broadcasting regular programmes on 23 December 1964, and it soon became apparent that the station's approach to pop radio was as new to some of its djs as it was to its listeners. The sales force may have been well versed in the methods of commercial broadcasting, the station's image may have been fastidiously cultivated, but there did initially prove to be one or two serious inconsistencies in the thinking behind the London format. The first problem was gauging the correct level of 'Americanisation' considered to be appropriate to a British audience. This uncharacteristic indecisiveness was initially exposed in an uneasy mish-mash of on-air styles. These varied from stilted interpretations of how British staff thought an Americanised announcer should sound to the kind of slick, sharp, wise-cracking, effortlessly authentic patter of those dj's who were obviously versed in the real thing. Somewhere in between lay the style that Radio London was eventually to settle with, a predictable mid-Atlantic watering down of the verbal pyrotechnic excesses of American pop radio, made palatable to the untrained English ear.

It was the very notion of format itself which initially gave the djs most

problems. Some seemed ill at ease when attempting to approximate the kind of seamless continuity synonymous with the American approach. There was an abundance of contrived links, characteristic of those unavoidably steeped, and in many cases actually trained, in the formality of the BBC style. All the pirates were afflicted with this in the early days and it was a long time before any really broke free of its archaic conventions and began to create an identity of their own.

After considerable interpersonal wrangling at management level Radio London had decided on one particular interpretation of the American Top Forty format, but there was no guarantee that it would automatically appeal to English ears. Any kind of format radio is by nature a highly systematised construction, involving a planned schematic approach to radio airtime, but there is a danger, when analysing such formulae, of crudely categorising all these different approaches under the one catch-all definition 'American Top Forty radio'. In 1964 American Top Forty radio meant totally different things in New York and Los Angeles – and indeed in Fort Worth, Texas. Radio London's chosen 'Fabulous Forty' package consisted of three categories of records; an 'A' list, consisting of the Top Ten records of the week, a 'B' list consisting of the remainder of the Top Forty, and a 'C' list consisting of new releases. In addition to this there were slots for LP tracks, and hits from the past – the first time 'oldies' had been played as a distinct category on British pop radio. The records were supposed to be strictly rotated, in a predictable set order, which would give particular emphasis to the week's bestsellers. Dj's were forbidden from choosing their own discs, and had a 'Top Forty climber' selected for them each week by station management.

At times during those first few weeks Big L presenters conveyed a lack of hard sell at variance with the station's stated intentions. The whole venture may have been meticulously planned at boardroom level but for the Radio London djs responsible for conveying a new programming style to British listeners there were major flaws. Simply through unfamiliarity some of Radio London's djs approached the idea of format as if it were a minefield, each fresh category containing a potential pitfall. American Top Forty radio at its most refined presented the listener with a cultural montage of advertisements, music, news and patter. Radio London djs, unfamiliar with the formula, were literally reading the menu. For a station that was supposed to be modelled on the slick hard sell of American commercial radio its presenters constantly stumbled over their superlatives. Radio London was supposed to be 'Wonderful'. The Top Forty was supposed to be 'Fabulous'. It took a while for some dj's to get even this simple requirement the right way round. Even when they got the categories right there was often a curious hesitancy in the salesmanship.

In addition to its quota of staff who already had experience of overseas commercial radio, chiefly in North America and Australasia, there was another much overlooked category of broadcasters which had a crucial bearing upon Radio London's style of presentation, and its subsequent niche in British sound broadcasting, for it included those who had already gained experience of 'establishment' media. This usually meant British television, or the Forces and Colonial broadcasting network overseas Keith Skues, who worked with both Caroline and London, remembers that 'at this time (1959–60) there was no other recognised way into radio, unless you had a university degree and joined the BBC as a studio manager'¹. Skues, like many others, learned his craft with BFN in Cologne, where, he recalls, he encountered 'Self-Op' broadcasting for the first time. This kind

of experience undoubtedly allowed those who came the BFN route to become conversant with the pirate's characteristic familiarity and relaxed style.

Forces Broadcasting in the late 1950s offered a glimpse of a paradox more widely apparent within National Service as a whole. On the one hand programming was heavily scripted and strictly controlled. Broadcasts were scrupulously monitored for everything from a potential security risk to a 'dropped aitch'. On the other hand Forces Broadcasting could not help but be suffused with the wider implications of National Service ennui. There were many recruits at this time who saw broadcasting as an escape route from the drudgery with which conscription had become synonymous by the late 1950s. In a previous generation the Goons had been spawned by ENSA. Now a whole new generation of mavericks was again rising through the ranks, with the same disregard for red tape and petty authority.

During the entire thirty-two months of its existence Radio London only employed thirty djs, half of whom worked for the station for over a year. This indicates both a very settled working unit, and, for the turbulent and transitory world of media professionals in general it represents an extremely low staff turnover. During its forty-eight-month lifespan Caroline South employed at least sixty-seven djs, only thirteen of whom stayed with the station for over a year. Caroline North, during the forty-four months of its existence, employed at least thirty-eight djs, twenty-two of whom also worked at some time on Caroline South, making a known total of eighty-three for the entire Caroline network. It has to be stressed that the figure given for Radio Caroline can only be an estimate. With such a high turnover of staff, it is clear that some extremely short-term employees would not have been registered by any existing documentation. The very nature of offshore radio, inhabiting as it did the ill-defined grey areas of legality, means that memos, balance sheets and tax returns have not exactly survived in abundance. For some parties this has been extremely convenient. The task of reconstruction is made doubly difficult by the fact that unlike Radio London, who on the whole preferred 'tried and tested' announcers with a proven track record in broadcasting, Caroline was often prepared to send djs out to sea on a week's trial, some of these lasted considerably less than the full seven days. In this respect Caroline's hiring and firing policy more closely resembled that of the smaller pirates like City and Invicta, than it did the *modus operandi* of a supposedly international major-market radio station.

Caroline's early attempts to compete on programming terms with Radio London betrayed a colossal loss of nerve. In April 1965 Caroline's ex-BFN and Equity-card-carrying djs were suddenly transformed by a blundering initiative of uncertain origins into New York style 'Good Guys'. The clan image of hit stations like WMCA and WABC – with legendary djs like Big Dan Ingram, B. Mitchell Read and Jack Spector – was a winning formula in the intense ratings battle of major USA cities and around the spring of 1965 Caroline began syndicating daily programmes sponsored by Routlette Records and hosted by Jack Spector on both of its networks. The radical change of Caroline's image was an attempt to bring the station in line with Spector's own cheerleader approach, with its true-to-your-school style 'pledge of allegiance', so beloved of many Top Forty stations in the USA. But whereas the original 'Good Guys' were convincing as image ambassadors for their respective stations the English version sounded rather less plausible.

The ill-judged institutional directive which transformed what were comparatively mild-mannered, even slightly plummy, announcers into gibbering, frenetic and singularly unconvincing 'Good Guys' sat ill at ease with existing programming

and was to have wide-reaching repercussions by the end of the year, culminating in a series of drastic staff purges. On the one hand diversity was compromised in order to fit the assumed requirements of an, as yet, unformulated market. On the other hand the sheer incongruity of the 'Good Guys' image was thrown into sharp focus by the kind of sponsored programmes the station was carrying at the time. These fifteen minute features, very much in the Luxembourg style, were broadcast daily and were sponsored by, among others, Anchor cigarettes, Andrews Liver Salts, Fynnon Liver Salts, Princes Foods, Chappell Pianos (who were, ironically, owned by EMI – consistent and vociferous opponents of the pirates throughout the offshore era) and Miners Make Up. As on Luxembourg a decade earlier Caroline had little editorial say in the music policy of these shows as individual responsibilities were delegated to the respective advertising agencies. 'The Chappell Show', for instance, featured only show music, and the emphasis in several of the others was on the kind of light music which would supposedly not scare away potential consumers. Another feature of such shows was that they were often hosted by well-known personalities from the world of showbusiness. There was a motoring show hosted by Stirling Moss. 'Down Memory Lane', the programme sponsored by Fynnon's, was compered by Anne Shelton. 'The Ognib Show', a radio bingo game, was hosted by Charlie Drake. Perhaps most incongruous of all 'The Miners Make Up show', the programme most likely to appeal to a teenage audience, was hosted by Vera Lynn!

Ted Allbeury, former head of Radio 390, maintains that Radio London was a success because Philip Birch was a good businessman rather than a good radio man. Caroline had an altogether different structure and outlook. Ronan O'Rahilly had a habit of giving employees their head and keeping his unqualified pals on the payroll. Neither strategy made good business sense. The contrast between Caroline and London was therefore a contrast of intent: Creativity *versus* accountancy; idealism *versus* pragmatism. In matters of finance Caroline's seemingly permanent shambolic affairs could not be put down to simple inefficiency. Ronan O'Rahilly's chaotic approach certainly cut across the regulated ebb and flow of formal economics, but Caroline's whole existence went against the grain of standard boardroom practice. It therefore becomes necessary at this point to consider the much deeper reverberations of what was by the end of 1965 slowly beginning to manifest itself as an embryonic form of anarcho-capitalism with no clear hierarchy of control. Clear differences were being articulated between the two major offshore stations which transcended programme policies. They were differences of spirit and they could be traced back right to the stations' contrasting origins. Radio London was planned and financed at multi-national level. The Big L ethos came out of the boardroom. Caroline in contrast emerged from the dilettantish whims of the Kings Road and the unfolding possibilities of the Swinging Sixties. London reflected the industry back at itself. Caroline reflected attitude.

In successive weeks during the August and September of 1965 long-serving djs, Doug Kerr, Gary Kemp, Jon Sydney, Mike Allen and Roger Gale, were sacked or resigned from Radio Caroline. Nine weeks after this first 'mutiny' they were joined by Keith Skues, Bryan Vaughan and Paul Noble. In the space of just four months Radio Caroline South lost the services of an entire generation of announcers. Some of the djs left voluntarily but Kerr, Kemp and Allen, who were all fired, were particularly outspoken about their employers. Gary Kemp and Mike Allen had sent up advertisers on the air, Allen simulating a coughing fit during a cigarette commercial. Cigarette advertising, banned from TV was at the time accounting for 12

per cent of all offshore radio sales revenue. Allen also firmly believed that the pop music policy and 'Good Guys' image were a mistake, and was quoted at the time as 'fed up of being a screaming moron'. Many of the djs were audibly unsuited to the kind of slick presentation normally associated with American commercial radio. Where they were supposed to invoke brevity they merely sounded indulgent, and where they were supposed to introduce personality several sounded as phoney as the 'BBC scripted automatons' that they had previously decried.

Few of this first generation of Caroline djs were suited to the role of mould breaker. Two years after leaving Caroline Graham Webb, for instance, was back in Australia presenting 'Two way Family Favourites' for the BBC. Most of this first generation were in fact highly regarded traditional broadcasters of the old school. Allen, previously a hit songwriter, had been largely responsible for the bulk of Caroline's jazz and blues input and he sold the concept of musical appreciation like a true Reithian. But his tendency to deride pop music over the air clearly did not endear him to his employers.

This period of major upheaval effectively represented the end of the first phase of Caroline's broadcasting history, and between late 1965 and the spring of 1966 Radio Caroline South entered a period of transition, a period which was prolonged in ways which could not have possibly been foreseen, when on the night of 20 January 1966, the South ship, the *Mi Amigo*, ran aground on Frinton beach after breaking its anchor and drifting during heavy North Sea storms. It would be three months before Radio Caroline South returned with a fully rejuvenated service. When it did return it was with some of the most genuinely spontaneous pop radio ever heard in Britain.

1966

What occurred on Radio Caroline during 1966 illustrated the essential folly of halfheartedly pursuing radical objectives whilst remaining largely subservient to established groundrules, and during this period Caroline unwittingly constructed the perfect prototype for the subsequent failings of most oppositional subcultures of the 1960s. The two factors which helped most to regenerate Radio Caroline at this time were a fresh approach to recruitment and the adoption of a programming philosophy which perhaps for the first and only time clearly articulated the freewheeling mood of Ronan O'Rahilly's Kings Road cultural milieu. It gave voice to the kind of latent intent and nebulous ideals which had previously lost much of their potency in the translation from Chelsea set whim to the business realities of the music industry. Something fairly fundamental was now occurring out on the North Sea. Of crucial significance here is the fact that Caroline was realising particular programming objectives outside the reaches of formal policy, agenda setting and legislative procedure. The floating radio station as a working environment suddenly became the sole centre of focus and this world in microcosm began to resonate with possibilities as the station whose founder had begun London life dabbling in the fashionable self-absorption of method acting now began to translate such tendencies into something tangible and audible. The focus for mediation was the dj.

The rather literal brief that had previously constituted the dj's orthodoxy began to be eroded. Tom Lodge, Caroline South programme director during this period, continued to pay lip service to the assumed requirements of the profession, a good radio voice, enthusiasm, personality etc, but they were no longer regarded as

prerequisites. Instead Lodge articulated a new set of priorities, talking of the right spirit, attitude, commitment and involvement. One of the prominent features of the team Lodge assembled to instigate his free-form agenda was the number of successful dj's recruited without any previous radio experience, all of whom sold themselves to their prospective employers on dedication alone. Lodge gave short shrift to the kind of groundrules and conventions which most of the other offshore stations were busy trying to emulate, and introduced to the South station something of the infectious enthusiasm he had long been used to on the North ship, which had enjoyed a relatively continuous run of success, free from formidable competitors and suffering none of the lurches in policy or staff purges which had so badly hampered Caroline South. The predominant accents on Caroline North were either undiluted Mancunian or Canadian, and the rejuvenated Caroline South team was built around a similar nucleus of North American experience and provincial enthusiasm. Lodge attempted to instill in his new team an approach built upon intuition, empathy and spontaneity. He built a programming policy on these notions, promoting the maxim that if spontaneity and empathy were mutually compatible then the ideal preparation was not to prepare, but just to be:

My whole approach to programming was totally different to anything else. The DJ's have to be totally involved with the generation they are playing to. This meant that you have to be the kind of person who goes to the concerts, who wants to meet the new people who are coming on the scene, and be involved in the music in every way. And then you give the on-air personnel total control of their show.²

For the first, and possibly the only time, a pirate radio station was accurately capturing the essence of its circumstances. The mechanics of the approach celebrated the ever-passing present and therefore embraced the cultural paradox that pop music is built upon. It successfully provided a context for ephemera which elevated rather than denegated pop's necessary obsolescence. In its most lucid moments it acknowledged that there was possibly more to an audience than a mere passive entity, a demographic convenience, collectively drying the dishes while musing upon the range of consumer durables available for purchase. All the tired assumptions about playing it safe, built largely on the premise that what the audience wants is familiarity, were radically re-assessed. The format, that totem of conformity, propagated by the music industry, and faithfully valorised by Radio London, was temporarily transformed by its new irrelevancy.

The idea of a format on Radio Caroline had always been a somewhat elusive concept anyway, and aspirations towards streamlined uniformity had never sat easy on the station's agenda. The 'Good Guys' initiative of early 1965 was hampered by an unwilling and unsympathetic staff and the experiment had lapsed into resentment and inconsistency. Now, given completely free reign, Caroline dj's had to rely on intuition in order to re-locate their notions of professionalism. Few concessions were made to the trappings of format radio during this period. Daytime programming maintained recognised slots for childrens' requests, coffee break, factory call, etc., but these were mere token gestures. Unlike the other stations who followed the dictates of convention by playing the obligatory selections of nursery rhymes in their children's slots, or family favourites like Jim Reeves or Ken Dodd in their housewives' sections, Radio Caroline was just as likely to present Jimi Hendrix or The Who in both!

Later on sweeping boardroom changes would bring into play the most visible

manifestation yet of the underlying contradictory forces which had always threatened to rise to the surface in the Caroline organisation. the conflict between, on the one hand, a spontaneous creativity rooted within Caroline's embryonic anarcho-capitalism, and, on the other, an imposed accountancy (and accountability), designed only to balance the books, had by the end of 1966 been more clearly defined and situated. Caroline had been born out of nebulous motives and its two ships had given substance to an unlikely whim, but such ill-defined and hazy origins were always likely to be susceptible to a dose of economic reality. Although financed by traditional City resources, the fact that Caroline had always largely ignored the rules rather than play to them had temporarily been its strength. Initially Caroline's very existence symbolised a striving for alternatives. Its claim to cultural territory had been as valid as that of the Beatles. Its place in the iconography of youth every bit as necessary as Carnaby Street or purple hearts. By late 1966 the pirate radio issue was becoming a convenient mechanism through which all the seemingly fragmented and disparate areas of the entertainment industry could talk to each other. The pirates themselves could not help but provide concrete linkage between all that newly mobilised capital. There was obviously going to be some sort of role in this for Radio London's brand of organisational efficiency, and given the range of subcultural initiatives on display, there was no reason why Caroline's particular brand of hip capitalism should have a harder time of it. But by late 1966 there were signs that the case for Caroline's defence was dwindling into little more than a kind of limp moral indignation, naively demanding the right to broadcast and the right to be left alone. Embroidered with a threadbare patchwork of Swinging Sixties rhetoric this was plainly going to be insufficient for survival let alone opposition, and obviously had to become something far more formidable if Caroline was to embody anything more than naive hope. Later the Kings Road crowd were to become a bit of an idealistic luxury and by the end of 1966 there were clear indications that individual business initiatives were beginning to take precedent over programming values.

It was precisely at this juncture of the mid-1960s, when the gestural options of rebellion and resistance were being pitted against the tangible ones of commercial success, that Caroline entered its crisis period. Opposing forces were now relentlessly mobilising against the flotilla of floating jukeboxes. Caroline was about to adopt the mantle of an unlikely David against the Corporate goliath, equipped with little more than the hollow non-conformist ring of playpower politics. By 1967 the residue of the programming ideals which Tom Lodge had attempted to put into practice remained as little but a tantalising reminder of what could have been. The account books were full, the plug records proliferated, the money men were in charge, and Caroline's benign *laissez faire* approach was at their mercy.

When the BBC started its own pop channel, Radio One, on 30 September 1967 it was the pragmatism and the professional ethos of Radio London which perhaps unsurprisingly translated best from the North Sea to Broadcasting House. What could not be so readily adapted was the spontaneity, the innovation and the sheer shapeless, formatless, targetless, inconsistent and erratic splendour of Radio Caroline at its peak. Libertarian gestures sat far less easily on the Radio One agenda than Radio London's legacy of corporate planning and watertight boardroom strategy.

Because it anticipated cultural tensions to come Radio Caroline remains a potent symbol of the 1960s optimism and naivety. Radio London's notion of risk

taking, tempered by the security of its corporate structure, its multi-national funding, and its integrationist stance, lead to a highly professional and predictable approach, which calls into question the very notion of pirate radio rebelliousness. And it was the appeal of that kind of consistency which ultimately delivered Radio London as a job lot into the awaiting arms of the BBC.

Endnotes

1 Personal interview 1987.

2 Personal interview 1987.