

Pirates of the Airwaves:
The Story of Radio Free London

as told by Nigel Grant and others
to Al in Sydenham

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A U T H O R ' S N O T E

My original purpose when I began writing the RFL story was to squeeze enough information out of Nigel Grant for a sixteen page booklet. I intended also to produce a spin off, a feature of up to two thousand words for a music or local magazine. Fortunately, Grant was able to provide me enough material for both, however, as he was still in short trousers when RFL started, (not a pretty sight), he was unable to shed much light on the station's genesis. Further research has though proved fruitful, so the RFL story is written from several different viewpoints. If in some places it seems repetitive and if interpretations differ, this is because different sources have been used. All references are cited, either in the text or in the notes at the back. To maintain continuity I have avoided strict chronology; this is both a dynamic and a personal history rather than a series of stagnant press cuttings dated 1968 to the present day.

Unfortunately, as both my time and my funds are limited, especially the latter, I have not been able to research this volume to the fullest extent possible, particularly the years 1969-78. However, this is the first monograph ever to be written on RFL and presents, I like to think, a unique insight into land-based, non-commercial pirate radio, the kind of people who run it, and what makes them tick.

THE STORY OF RADIO FREE LONDON

PIRATES WITH CONSCIENCE

Ask the proverbial man in the street what he associates with giving and chances are he will mention the word 'charity' at some point. Charity is about giving; I know that because ever since I bought twelve hundred British Gas shares I've had a constant stream of junk mail from charities telling me both how wonderful are they and the work they are doing, and can I please send a donation?

Actually I'm not such a cynic; on the whole I've received far more charity in my life than I've given. On two occasions, had it not been for charity I'd have found myself out on the street, and were it not for a special kind of charity, this slim volume would not have been possible. But let's face the facts: for whatever reason(s), today, charity is big business.

There are though, other ways of giving besides charity; idealism and altruism manifest themselves in many ways, not the least being through the medium of music. There are, up and down the country and across the world, many crazy bunches of idealists who run pirate radio stations. I'm not familiar with the various overseas set ups, but I know that in this country, pirates are prosecuted and persecuted by the authorities, their equipment is confiscated, they give up their free time - evenings and weekends - and fund their operations out of their own pockets without even the promise of a reward or return. Nor are these pirates upper class twits or spoiled rich kids with too much time and money on their hands. Rather they are ordinary working men (and women) doing something they believe in. This is the story of one such station: Radio Free London.

Al in Sydenham
August 1990

FIRST ENCOUNTER

The exact date eludes me, but some time late in 1989 or early 1990 I turned on my radio, and, as people often do, moved the needle up and down the dial. Perhaps it was a Friday night and I was looking for Radio Mercury which broadcasts an excellent rock programme between 7pm and 11pm. I don't remember, but what I do remember was finding an FM station which was belting out a good dose of rock music. And it was local. The station was called Rock FM or simply RFM, and was broadcasting on 101.1. A phone-in number was given for requests and dedications: 0279 414678, so I phoned in, made a request and asked them who they were and when they were on air.

The phone-in was manned by a young lady named Debbie; she was based in Harlow but the station itself operated out of East London. I tuned in regularly after that, but it was frequently off the air until it disappeared altogether. The request I had played was a Wishbone Ash track; I asked for an instrumental, or perhaps Cosmic Jazz off their latest album but had to settle for The Way Of The World. I've still got the request on tape somewhere, but the tape itself had an argument with my cassette player and lost, so it's not in a playable condition at the moment. I'm fairly certain that my request was played by Nigel Grant. Eventually I found his distinctive voice on the dial again, but this time the station he was broadcasting from was called RFL. A couple of phone calls and requests later my confusion was cleared up.

On talking to Grant et al I was surprised to learn that this particular pirate radio station had been on the air since the late sixties. I remembered listening to Radio Caroline at boarding school when I was a kid, albeit vaguely. Apart from Caroline, the only pirate radio stations I ever recalled having heard were one or two black music stations, and as I like soul not at all and reggae even less I only ever tuned into these by accident.¹

RFL, I soon discovered, was based in South London; the mailing address was c/o 47 Melbourne Road, Wimbledon, London SW19. and the phone-in was (formerly 01) 081-542 0467. At the time of writing, it's 081-528 9001 page number 815874: Grant's number.

Earlier this year, Grant, who is a sometime disc jockey off the radio as well as on, announced that RFL would be putting on a series of gigs at a venue in South East London, Bonnie's, formerly The Saxon Tavern in Southend Lane, Catford. Actually this is Bellingham and is walking distance from where I live, so I went along to the first one. The gigs were meant to become a regular Friday/Saturday night event, unfortunately, for reasons which will be explained later, they didn't work out. The first gig featured The Wandering Crutchlees, who although they played it strictly for laughs, were just about the worst band in the world. They didn't come on until after ten by which they'd all had a few, then played maybe a couple of original songs following them up with a bizarrely eclectic mix, everything from Sweet

numbers, (remember them?) to the Hawai Five-0 Theme. The Wandering Crutchlees were just awful; their reputation must have preceded them because a mere handful of loyal, mostly female fans turned up. In spite of this catastrophe there were two bright spots to the evening: as an RFL listener I got in for free, and I managed to spend quite a lot of time talking to DJ Peter Russell on the door. Russell has since left the station. Grant, assisted by the able and esoterically charismatic Jodie, was playing the records.

As well as finding out as much as I could about what makes RFL tick and about its history, I asked the team if they'd ever been mentioned in the press. I think Grant said they'd had a few words written about them in Kerrang here and there, but when I mentioned Time Out he laughed: That's something we try to avoid - evidently thinking I was referring to a listing. I told Grant I'd like to do an article on the station sometime and he was enthusiastic. Time Out and City Limits were on the tip of my tongue, but I thought something a bit more ambitious: The Independent or even The Guardian might be worth trying for. The motivation for this was to get the station a bit of publicity as a first step towards getting it licensed. Over the previous few weeks, Grant has mentioned the fact that the station would be losing its mailing address and phone-in next year, 1991. Then he'd announced that these facilities might well be vanishing even quicker. This will be explained in due course.

Over the next couple of weeks I flirted with the idea of approaching various magazines and newspapers with the lowdown on RFL. Eventually, I decided to approach the metal glossies. Sounds ad nauseum are worse than the gutter press, run as they are by a motley crew of piss-taking, semi-literate winos notwithstanding their academic qualifications.

The guy I contacted at Metal Forces told me if I sent in an article he'd look at it; I told him I couldn't do it on spec and contacted Metal Hammer where I spoke to Ray Bonici who told me to phone back later. When I did, he was in Germany, but I managed finally to catch up with him again on Friday 27th July, when he told me to send in a 400 word piece and a couple of snaps by the following Friday, 3rd August.

I paged Grant the same evening, the following evening when the station was off the air (as will be explained later), and Sunday. About 11 o'clock Sunday night when I was crashed out with the tape on, Grant phoned me from a call box and we arranged to meet the following evening at Forest Hill station.

I turned up half an hour early for the eight o'clock meet, and at about ten past eight, Nigel Grant accompanied by Jodie and chauffeured by Jodie's boyfriend, Mick, pulled into the car park in a van. Grant, all six feet three and sixteen and a half stone of him, was dressed in jeans, bullet belt and Motorhead T-shirt with the obligatory radio pager clipped to his waist. He or Jodie presented me with a roll of film which she offered to develop. I took it saying I'd arrange that myself; the following day I took it into Joe's Basement in Wardour Street.

Grant said he knew a good pub, (if his reputation is anything to go by, he knows several), so we walked down to The Malt Shovel, and, secreted in a corner, hunched over a micro cassette with the music blaring ever louder, Nigel Grant recited the history of RFL, RFM and his involvement with pirate radio. The following is based largely on this interview supplemented by a further tete a tete with Grant et al and some research into the general background of pirate radio conducted at the British Library. Quotation marks only, denote verbatim quotes.

NIGEL GRANT'S STORY

Nigel Grant is 28 years old and has been involved with pirate radio stations since about the age of fourteen. ".....my job used to be to stand at the corner of this field every Sunday afternoon and watch for vans coming up the road." This came about because somebody bought him a transistor radio for his birthday; the station in question may have been Radio Jackie, (2) but Grant has been involved with so many radio stations over the past fourteen years that he isn't sure. He found it on the dial and began tuning in; obviously he liked the station but he was also curious that they broadcasted only one day a week. Contacting them week after week, he eventually went down to see them, somewhere over Carshalton way, again he can't quite remember. The set up in those days was very different from what it is today; in those days it was all hanging around in the middles of fields and woods with car batteries, tape recorders and things. One station was even based in the middle of a sewage farm - ".....which was wonderful, particularly if it was a nice hot afternoon." Again this may have been Radio Jackie, though this was somewhere in the South West London area. The DTI took an active interest in the station and it suffered quite a few raids.

RFL was started sometime in 1968 and went out on medium wave. (3) It was set up by three or four guys after the Marine Offences Act came in on August 14th 1967. (4) At this point a few words about Radio Caroline are in order. My own recollections of the origins of Caroline, vague as they are, are probably no worse than Grant's because I am six years older than him.

PIRATES OF THE HIGH SEAS

Up until 1964, radio in the UK was monopolised by the BBC. (5) In February of that year the Frederica, a 188 foot motor vessel and 763 ton ex-Danish passenger ferry built in 1930, sailed from Rotterdam to Greenore in the Irish Republic where it was fitted with a 168 foot radio mast. Renamed Caroline (6) after the daughter of the late US President John F Kennedy, it made its first broadcast from international waters five miles off Harwich at 9pm on Good Friday 27th March. This was a test transmission. Regular transmissions began on Sunday 29th March. (7) Thus, Radio Caroline was born! Response to Caroline was enormous: it drew fan mail by the lorry load rather than by the sackful, and at one time claimed eight million listeners. Radio Veronica, which broadcasted to Holland, predated Caroline. (8)

Caroline was a commercial radio station, it advertised and made a handsome profit. Soon another ship joined Caroline, so there was Caroline North and Caroline South. DJs who worked for the station included Tony Blackburn, whose other antecedents include playing in a band with Al Stewart, and Dave Lee Travis.

Where Caroline led, others followed, and soon there were more than a dozen pirate radio stations broadcasting to the UK. The government's response to this was not favourable, and, on 15th

August 1967, the Marine etc Broadcasting (Offences) Act (M.O.A.) came into force, making pirate radio stations illegal. All but Caroline closed down. (9)

NIGEL GRANT'S STORY (cont)

Grant's predecessors had obviously been influenced heavily by Caroline's philosophy of "Loving Awareness" - freedom of the airwaves, music for everyone. (10)

According to Grant, before RFL came on the air, no one had ever run a pirate radio station from land. The first broadcasts were very sporadic, they were busted at about their second broadcast, then they were off the air for a few months, back for a couple of weeks, off etc. It's possible that RFL was started by a guy named Mark Ashton (11) who was involved with the station up until 1989; he's now married with kids and trying to be respectable! In 1974 the first FM broadcast was made on 94.8 but they had to move because the BBC put Radio London on 94.9. They changed briefly to 94.3 then finally to 92 and broadcast regularly on this frequency from the late 70s till the early 80s. Details are necessarily vague because Grant didn't join the station until 1979. At this time it was run predominantly by Kenny Meyers and Mark Ashton. Meyers, who is about 33 or 34 still broadcasts for the station and is noted for his caustic and often biting wit.

Before joining RFL, Grant had done a short spell with Invicta, another pirate station broadcasting on FM. This is not to be confused with the legal station of the same name.

Now a few words about RFM. Rock FM or RFM was on the air for some three and a half to four years until it closed down early in 1990. It grew out of a conglomeration of ex-RFL staff and ex-Alice's Restaurant staff. Alice's Restaurant, (named after the Arlo Guthrie song/album/film of the same name) was another pirate station which was set up around 1980 in direct competition with RFL. It was closed down because RFL was far more popular. In 1989, Grant became despondent with RFL because the station was going through a really bad patch. It was also experiencing technical problems. The founder of RFM was Arthur Burton, who had been a member of RFL during the late seventies and early eighties. Mark Rogers and a couple of others helped out and the station broadcast on 94.3, predominantly to East London. Within a month of Grant's leaving RFL, the two station closed down, but problems soon loomed large for his new outfit.

At one point the stations, RFL and RFM had been working together broadcasting on the same frequency, 92FM. RFL did Saturdays while RFM did Sundays, but RFM got involve with something it couldn't handle. LWR, a black station decided to muscle in on their act, and this progressed to an all out war. Grant was co-ordinating on behalf of RFM, though RFL was also involved. At one point ".....there were two people that decided we were gonna carry on the fight and finish them off."

"Literally?"

"If necessary, yeah."

Though after one of RFM's phone staff was threatened with a shotgun, the others backed down and said they ought to move frequency. Grant said if they did, he wanted out. Discretion proved the better part of valour and they did, so Grant got in touch with Meyers and they put RFL back on the air again, this time on 101.3.

On Sunday 29th July, RFL was broadcasting on 101.4, I pointed out. Grant said this was because of problems with another black pirate station, but that they intended to deal with this within the next few days. Horrified at the thought of my favourite DJ getting involved in a Wild West style shoot out I asked how, but he assured me that all they intended to do was give the station the option of moving (their equipment?), ".....if not, we'll move it for them."

Pirate radio is not all trouble, strife and open warfare; RFL has a symbiotic relationship with another black station who, Grant says, are very sensible about frequencies and things. This station is just a bit lower down the dial than RFL, who, because of their superior technical understanding of radio, help them set up their rig up from time to time. Referring to the new station who are trying to muscle in, Grant says: "Between the two of us we'll get rid of them because this new station has just appeared from out of nowhere and not asked anybody what frequency they're on....."

His next words would have drawn convert approval from any DTI engineer: "We have a sort of self-regulating body amongst the responsible stations on the air, and we make sure that there isn't unnecessary jamming going on between the pirates or even, (in the past) that nothing too outrageous has been broadcast by another station."

A few years ago two such 'outrageous stations' were promptly shut down by RFL. Radio Enoch: basically a bunch of National Front idiots who got hold of a transmitter - ".....so me and a couple of others went and got rid of that."(12)

While at the other extreme was 'Radio Gaywaves' -.....which got a bit out of order as well from time to time."(13) Rock fans especially have little sympathy and no time for this particular perversion.

RFL AND THE DTI

When I contacted the Department of Trade and Industry's press office and told them I was writing an article on pirate radio stations in general and RFL in particular, the gent on the other end of the phone was pleasant enough, and helpful. Until I told him I was a regular listener, then his tone hardened and I felt the temperature drop. At one point he referred to RFL as "your friends" and read out a prepared statement, one which Nigel Grant

takes issue with. No mention was made of the Marine Offences Act; the conversation went something like this:

Why don't you give these guys a licence?

The new community licence is aimed at persuading stations to go legal. An amnesty period was announced in 1984/5 in conjunction with the Home Office to allow stations to go legitimate.

The catch here was that pirate stations had to get off the air in the meantime, and those applying for a licence must not have committed an offence in the recent past. He singled out London Greek Radio and Kiss FM as examples. He claimed also that the latter was HM orientated, a logical enough assumption in view of its name.

What have you got against these guys? What harm are they doing etc?

The prepared statement was issued in icy tones: "Any unauthorised broadcasting station on mainland Britain that is continually using part of the radio spectrum is in breach of the Wireless & Telegraphy Act, 1949. DTI Radio Investigation Service continually monitors for such illegal broadcasting, and will act as appropriate to close down the illegal stations. "The priority is of course to keep the spectrum free for legitimate users - not just radio stations but also vital emergency services....."

The latter, I was told, referred to not only police and ambulance services but gas board, British Rail engineers etc. What are the penalties on conviction? The option of a fairly heavy fine or three months gaol.(4)

I put the above to Grant: Why don't you, (the DTI), give these guys a licence?

Because they're illegal.

They wouldn't be illegal if you gave them a licence.

An amnesty period.....etc.

According to Grant, this 'amnesty' was not what it seemed.

"The bit about if we've committed an offence recently is a bit ambiguous because LGR, the Greek Station, were (sic) possibly the most frequently busted pirate station in existence, ever. I know they lost three rigs in one day once! The DTI announced that they were going to start licensing some of these incremental stations that have since appeared on the air, and that if any of the existing pirates wanted to apply for a licence, they had to close down and stop committing an offence before they applied. Which LGR and several others like Kiss FM did. Some of them were successful in getting a licence, some of them weren't, but originally, the amnesty time he's talking about there, '84 or '85, they originally said, (it was coming up to New Year), they

said get off the air by midnight at the end of this year and we'll think about doing the licences. Then after six months of not hearing anything, during the summer they announced that all the plans had been shelved for two years."

In other words, I said, it was nothing but a cynical ploy to get pirate stations off the air? Yes, he said, they got about half the pirates off the band, then when the truth sank in ".....everybody came back on again." So Grant and everybody else were more sceptical when they said it again?

The licence? Some pirate stations have got it, but licensing needs enormous finance. The original incremental stations were financed to the tune of about three quarters of a million pounds each. They had to find all the backing themselves. At the time of writing, July/August 1990, these stations, five or six of them according to Grant, are already in severe financial difficulties; a more realistic sum to back them would have been a million.

Why does it take such colossal backing to run a legal station when RFL is run for virtually nothing every week? Grant for one couldn't understand, but he speculated intelligently.

"Having run a pirate station for the past ten years or so, it seems ridiculous, but then looking at it from a business point of view you would have all these outlays that we don't have."

Buying buildings - we use somebody's bedroom.

Staff wages - nobody at RFL is paid. And so on.....

Grant is uncertain how much is the licence, probably not that much, he says, but stations have to rent their transmitters from the IBA as part of the licensing agreement. Certain IBA and BBC standards must be adhered to ".....quality control and that sort of thing."

These criteria and related expenses seem to be deliberately obstructive. How says Grant? No, the reality is that setting up a station as a business, (part of the criteria), is incredibly difficult because radio is an incredibly expensive medium to run. Legal stations have to pay copyright to the BPI; RFL have offered to pay this in the past but were politely turned down because they are illegal!

You claim to be the only dedicated rock station in Britain and probably the only all-rock English-speaking station in Europe. What about Kiss FM? "Kiss FM are a black music station.

Not only that, they were/are the most successful black music pirate radio station. Currently they are off the air but are due to start broadcasting by the end of August. By the time this book is published, we should have some idea how likely they are to succeed as a legitimate going-concern. I put the following to Grant: You finance yourselves, you get nothing out of it,

materially, you clamber about on rooftops in your spare time, you get busted, criminalised..... why?

His reply was that there are basically two types of pirate radio operators - ".....what I call the 'Anoraks'," people who are into it because it's illegal, who are into building transmitters to see how far away their signals can be picked up etc. He is not into it for that, but strictly for the music. Not enough rock music is played in Britain. "From a personal point of view I will keep going illegally until a 24 hour a day rock station is licensed in London, and then I will probably close RFL down and go and work for them".

Later he contradicted himself on this point, saying that he is looking for a job in the States, possibly L.A. where he can play music around the clock. He's already sent off some demos. Whether or not he goes, remains to be seen, somehow I doubt it. Obviously a man of moods, Grant used the word "despondent" several times during the course of our interview - chiefly he desponds for the domestic rock music scene.

RFL is financed totally out of their own, (the staff's pockets). When I spoke to Peter Russell at the Wandering Crutchlees' gig, he told me they put in three quid a piece, (or whatever), to pay for the equipment and chugged along like that. Currently, (then) there were about seven staff including back up. At the time of writing there are three: Grant, Kenny Meyers and Jodie. Russell left the station recently because, as Grant put it, he became emotionally involved with someone and was unable to make the necessary commitment. Grant is currently top man at RFL, in a literal sense too since it's him who sets up the transmitters. A former girlfriend of his, Suzie, used to be involved with the station, answering the phone etc., but Peter Russell has presumably embarked on a less public and more intense romance.

How much does it cost them to set up a transmitter? That varies extremely. If they've got a very tall building or a smaller building on top of a big hill they can get away with a relatively small transmitter which will cover the whole of London. The price range here is about thirty to fifty pounds. For a hundred pounds, says Grant, you can go completely over the top. Because they use spares which have been around for years, and because they know what they're doing, RFL can knock up a transmitter faster and cheaper than other stations. Their technical expertise is one reason why they have relatively little hassle off the DTI.

Since January 1989 they've only lost two transmitters to the authorities, and a couple to other people. The previous Saturday they were off the air when they found themselves locked out of "RFL Towers", the name they give any site they broadcast from. Apparently the DTI contacted the local council and told them to take steps to keep Grant and company out.

Grant is pleasantly philosophical about the DTI and insists they have a good working relationship. They are on first name terms

with all the site engineers and the DTI have a contact number for Grant in case of technical problems. ".....we've often gone and raided ourselves when there's been a problem with one of our transmitters - a technical problem, we've gone and taken it off ourselves."

RFL's mailing address, c/o 47 Melbourne Road belongs to Dominic. Dominic has, or appears to have a thick West Indian accent, which is very uncharacteristic for rock fans. In fact, Dominic, both white and French is a dedicated rock fan; he contacted Grant and co after hearing them broadcast. He's been a friend for about eight years, and its probably no coincidence that when the current mailing address and phone-in are closed down by new legislation that RFL will be using a French connection.

JODIE

The newest recruit to RFL is Jodie, who refused to tell me her age but admits to being older than she looks. Not only is she a looker with the most laid back, dreamy, lyrical voice, she also knows her music. So much so that she scored a perfect 100% on the RFL rock quiz and was their second ever champion. (Modestly does not permit me to divulge the name of the first). She is also an artist and photographer, and was kind enough to supply me with some shots for the Metal Hammer article.

Jodie has been a listener for about ten years and rang up on a regular basis. RFL has never recruited people it doesn't know, says Grant. Listeners get friendly, then get involved. In about May of this year she was invited down to help out and made guest appearances on Grant's show. Then the opportunity came up for her to do her own show, and, as Grant rightly points out: ".....she was certainly good enough to do it."

Up until the beginning of this year, Grant used to work for a bank, handling its property portfolio: maintenance, landlord/tenant agreements etc. Lately he's been doing a bit of work for a musical booking agency, which is currently on the verge of bankruptcy. Apart from that he's been trying to survive on doing gigs and things, but says he's spent so many years perfecting his radio technique that he's never established himself as a club DJ. One would think someone with his talent, enthusiasm and knowledge of rock music would be snapped up in a hurry, but it's a cruel world out there.

RFL plays a wide variety of rock: Heavy Metal, thrash, blues-type material, hard, soft, all shades of the spectrum and all permutations. Inevitably some bands get more airplay than others; regulars on RFL include: Black Sabbath, Ozzy Osbourne, Deep Purple, Rainbow, Whitesnake, Gillan, The Doors, Motorhead, Magnum; and new bands like St Hellier, Little Caesar and Savatage. Magnum, Motorhead and Gillan have made jingles for the station; Gillan is a listener. St Hellier, whom Grant likens to Def Leppard, are a local band who have been plugged heavily. He

says if he can help St Hellier do the same as them, he will be pleased.

Where does RFL obtain its records? The staff have large personal collections; Grant buys his imports from Shades, a London record shop, and they get sent quite a few by record companies.

"Although publicly they might deny sending us records and things because we're not paying any copyright fees on them, but obviously if they can get their records played on another source which will expose it [sic] to more listeners who then might go out and buy it, it's worth their while to send us a copy."

All three current staff are based in South London: Grant lives by the Oval, Kenny Meyers in Bellingham and Jodie in Croydon.

BONNIE'S - RFL DESERVED BETTER

RFL's projected Friday/Saturday nights at Bonnie's was a disaster. Grant: Bonnie's was previously known as The Saxon Tavern. It held regular rock discos on Friday nights which used to draw vast crowds. Then there was a fire, in the meantime the place changed hands, there was no music there for a while, then the venue held a couple of acid house discos and things. The result was that everybody, (rock fans), deserted the place because they still think that it's an acid house-type venue. We tried it for three or four weeks, but sadly it didn't work out: the place has completely lost its reputation. He/they are hoping to do some more gigs elsewhere. One possibility is Wednesday nights at the Hippodrome; Grant has worked this before with a friend, Monty Zuo.

How many listeners does RFL have? It's difficult to gauge except from the feedback they get from the telephone and mail.

At this point, Grant broke off to fetch his jacket from the van. Jodie, who had been sitting at an adjacent table with Mick, was adversely affected by the smoke in the place. Sensing an asthma attack coming on, she went outside with Mick. I got the impression they were leaving, but on Grant's return they waited outside until we were through.

Continuing with the problem of gauging RFL's audience, Grant: The response fluctuates from one extreme to another. One night calls might come in virtually continuously; another there'll be next to nothing. Mail follows the same pattern.

Peter Russell said you've probably got about three thousand listeners.

"I would imagine it's a fair few more than that," he commented, but couldn't put a figure on it. Of the phone-in he said a whole bunch of people phone in religiously every week, some of them two or three times a night; the same thing applies to letters. ".....the encouraging thing about it is that every week we have

people contacting us who have never contacted us before." People who come in from the pub and play around with the radio and find the station, or who've been told about it by friends.

The quality of the response is also encouraging; listeners very rarely complain. Because the station only plays rock music, comments are usually very constructive. Grant's programme caters for the heavier section, but in a two hour slot you can't keep everybody happy.

DIRTY ROTTEN CRIMINALS

Contrary to popular belief, (a belief he does little to discourage), Grant is not an alcoholic, but he does drink a lot and smoke heavily.

On the legal side, he admits to being a dirty rotten criminal, but although the station has been raided innumerable times over the past ten years, he has only been caught red-handed a couple of times.

The DTI have no powers of arrest, but invariably they turn up with the police. And, says Grant, you have to be caught in flagrante delicto. Although they have suffered only two raids in the past eighteen months, there was a two month period a few years back when they lost everything every single week. Black stations get far more attention for two main reasons: one is that some stations are on the air all day and everyday and making a lot of money from advertising. The other is because of their lack of technical expertise. A third possibility is that DTI engineers like reggae a lot less than they like rock, which is certainly understandable, but there is a serious side to the issue of broadcasting, that of interference of emergency services.

Other radio stations tend to buy their equipment off the shelf. Because of this and because they are not into radio except as a means of communication, they can interfere with other (emergency) services without even being aware of it. The London Ambulance Service was jammed out by a soul station; there have even been instances of aircraft coming in to land to reggae - some very dodgy situations. Because of this, there has to be some regulation on the band.

ADVERTISING

Have RFL taken advertising in the past, and will they in the future? Grant: we have taken advertising in the past; if somebody approaches us, we'll consider it, but we don't go out of our way to attract attention to it. Grant in particular is more interested in advertising bands, gigs and events, mainly locally. Both the station and Grant are committed to the music and are not

into using RFL as a means of making money, even as a secondary goal. But, as previously mentioned, he is growing so despondent about the UK scene that he is thinking of moving to the States. He can't see anything happening in the UK on the legal side for a long time, if ever.

TOP DOG

Grant is the top man at RFL, literally. Because of the current staff situation it's his responsibility to put up the aerial, which can be a limb endangering if not life endangering affair. Shortly after our Forest Hill meet, he injured his leg and they were forced off the air. Pirate radio is in any case a notoriously capricious entity due not so much to the vagaries of its operators as to unpredictable intangibles: the DTI, sudden non-availability of broadcasting sites etc.

RFL's studios are very basic: a couple of record decks, a mixer, a CD machine, tape recorders, microphone - soundproof the room as much as possible to make the sound quality "listenable to" [sic]- and away we go. How do they choose their broadcast sites? After spending ten years crawling about on rooftops, Grant is thoroughly familiar with most of the tower blocks in London. Quite a few work well and we rotate between them. Most of their broadcast sites are council-owned properties, but not always..... a couple of years ago, with the Imam's permission, they used a mosque. "The only mosque in London not to have minarets - it had aerial masts," laughs Grant. They have also used a cemetery and the roof of the bank where he worked. How quickly can/have they been raided after setting up their equipment? Grant says the DTI can track down a pirate station in less than an hour.(14)

CRIMINALS GET COURT

Grant has two convictions for "outright broadcasting" and a couple for silly related things. Last time he got away with a three hundred and fifty pound fine and hundred pounds costs which is nothing!! They can fine you up to a couple of thousand, he says, and that's due to double very soon. On his last appearance the prosecution tried hard to persuade the magistrate to bang him up for a while because he is such a persistent "offender", ie known but not caught. Fortunately, not all magistrates are arseholes, but fining someone the best part of half a grand is still a novel way of rewarding idealism.

Grant's aforementioned doom, gloom and despondency is likely to be increased when the new Draconian legislation comes in. Although it's part of the new broadcasting bill and is not aimed specifically at pirates, it will effectively close down their UK mailing address and telephone number. It will also make it illegal for anyone to assist a pirate station in any way, manner, shape or form, eg. hiring or lending them a studio. Grant says he hasn't seen a draft of the new bill yet, so doesn't know the full details, penalties etc.

RADIO FREE LUTON

RFL's stronghold is East London/Essex, but they once had a phone call from Stoke-on-Trent and fairly regularly get calls from Luton etc. Grant puts this down to a freak weather condition called "the lift". Talking of calls and freaks, Grant himself is a self-confessed phone freak, and when he's not clambering around on rooftops, in the studio or down the pub, he's giving someone a call. "Give us a call," is in fact Grant's well worn catchphrase.

At this point we left the pub and found Mick and a very unwell looking Jodie waiting for us across the road. We talked for a few more minutes then went our separate ways - until RFL's next broadcast, that is.

ON THE TRAIL OF RFL'S FOUNDERS

On 8th August at the British Library, (which I generally visit two or three times a week), I looked up RFL in The Times Index for 1968 on. There were several references under the heading: Broadcasting - Pirate; the following day I obtained the relevant press cuttings from Westminster Central Reference Library. According to The Times, 16th August 1968, the first ever Radio Free London broadcast went out on 204 metres medium wave at 7am on 15th August. Broadcasting non-stop "pop music", it made frequent invitations to listeners to contact the Free Radio Association which was based in Rayleigh, Essex. The chairman of the Free Radio Association denied having any contact with RFL.

RFL went off the air at 12 noon. The same report said that police and GPO officials entered a house in Addison Gardens, Shepherd's Bush where seven men and a woman were found with a radio transmitter; it did not make clear whether or not there was any connection between them and RFL.

The Times of Monday 19th August reports that a flat in Olympia was raided by GPO engineers at the weekend for the second time in two days. Apparently operating the transmitter was "Spangles" Muldoon, formerly of Radio Caroline. I say apparently because the transmitter which was seized was a dummy. The real transmitter, which was hidden in the same room, was spirited away. The GPO men told Mr Muldoon he would be reported under the Wireless & Telegraphy Act.

Also mentioned was Mr Dick Fox-Davies of Radio Free London. As Fox-Davies is an unusual surname, I thought it might be worth looking him up in the phone book. The only Fox-Davies listed was M.S. so I tried to contact this person. At the second attempt I got through and briefly explained who I was and what I was doing. The reply from this somewhat elderly person was very encouraging: Oh yes, I have heard of Dick Fox-Davies: he's my cousin! Yes, that's the sort of thing he would have been involved with. Yes, I think he was. My contact passed on his phone number and address explaining that Dick Fox-Davies now lived in Somerset. Another phone call and I was speaking to Daniel Fox-Davies, his son, who as soon as I mentioned Radio Free London, responded enthusiastically saying his father had a pile of press cuttings, photographs, even original Radio Free London badges. Later that evening, Grant called and immediately recalled the name Spangles Muldoon.

After speaking to Daniel Fox-Davies I sat down and immediately wrote to his father. There appears to have been some confusion though, because when I phoned back the following Friday, Daniel told me both that his parents were divorced and that his father now lived in Bromley. I phoned the vodafone number Daniel had given me and, on speaking to his father, we arranged to meet outside the Pawleyne Arms public house in Penge at midday Sunday. Intriguingly, one of the first things Dick Fox-Davies told me was that he had once lived/stayed in my road, though not apparently

at the same address. The following pages are based on our interview in the Pawleyne Arms; again, quotation marks only, denote verbatim quotes.

THE DICK FOX-DAVIES STORY

Dick Fox-Davies was born in 1947 and started listening to Radio Caroline in 1964. With the M.O.A. looming on the horizon, somebody at Cambridge or Oxford, he can't remember which, started the Cambridge and Oxford Free Radio Association, (COFRA). COFRA got some air time off Caroline and possibly Radio London, (15) and, when the M.O.A. came in, COFRA metamorphosed into the Free Radio Association. Dick got involved with the FRA; Radio London closed down like all the other pirates, and only Caroline remained.

"..... a number of us were down in Rayleigh, Essex" (Eastwood Road) where the FRA was run by Geoffrey Pearl. "..... this was the land-based legal arm of the campaign." With wry humour Dick said, "It wasn't illegal to broadcast, nor was it illegal to have a radio [transmitter] but, under the terms of the Wireless [and] Telegraphy Act, it was illegal to listen to a station.

Opposition to the M.O.A. was fierce and a tremendous amount of popular support was generated. The full extent of this support for free radio and opposition to the M.O.A. can be judged from the FRA's membership; at one time it had 20,000 paid up members, received sacks of mail everyday, contributions, issued badges and a newsletter. Dick was at one time General Secretary - "..... whatever that may mean." There were various other offices: treasurer etc.

As the first anniversary of the M.O.A. approached, the idea of a rally in Trafalgar Square developed. The rally had to be announced and publicised and it seemed sensible to do it through a radio station. The idea for the rally (on Saturday 17th August) was originated by Dick Fox-Davies and Paul Harris, who later wrote a book "When Pirates Ruled the waves". (16)

RFL'S FIRST BROADCAST

The flat in Addison Gardens, Shepherd's Bush from which RFL made its first broadcast, belonged to two girls. "I can't remember how people came to be living there, but it had become one of the bases where people met and stayed when they were over from the ships." including Andy Archer and Chris Cary, (better known as Spangles Muldoon).

Nor can Dick remember the names of the people who had the original transmitter, but they were associated with the FRA. The aerial was set up behind the flat across a railway line and was tied to a fire escape on the building opposite. Again, after more than two decades Dick's memory is a bit vague and he can't remember who actually made the first broadcast, but he does remember that during the week, Stevi Merike, Spangles Muldoon and possibly Jason Wolfe came over. And he remembers too the irony of it.

The operators transmitted a telephone number which belonged to a call box at one of the Shepherd's Bush stations and there were people running backwards and forwards taking messages. Then they got a call from the staff at the BBC; the fire escape which the aerial had been tied to belonged to the Beeb. Later, large gentlemen in heavy shoes were seen walking up and down the road.

So, RFL didn't set out to become a pirate radio station, it was simply a publicity stunt set up to announce the Trafalgar Square rally and was continued on a more ad hoc basis. In those days it played 60s MOR, singles "..... nothing very wonderful. It ran on and off that first week, and during the rally, and without any planning, just evolved in its own way.

"The broadcast on the day of the rally was actually made from Trafalgar Square, which made the police less than happy." They sent along a senior officer to formally pull the plug.

SAME OLD STORY

Then as now, stations like RFL tried to go legit but were always given plausible reasons, (bull) why they couldn't - how all available frequencies were taken up, ad nauseam. And, how during their last unlicensed transmission 'seventeen ambulances crashed and forty-three people died of heart attacks because they couldn't be rushed to hospital in time.' That didn't stop them, the authorities, finding space for the new stations when commercial radio finally came in.

Dick Fox-Davies was with RFL for about six months then moved on to other things. At one time RFL had an office in Greek Street, a bank account and produced car stickers, badges etc. Sadly the Free Radio Association gradually went into decline. Dick puts this down to economic forces and the progress of commercial radio. Although he is reluctant to apportion any credit to RFL and the FRA, it is undoubtedly true that if it hadn't been for such organisations and the pressure they exerted, radio as we know it today would not exist. Music fans in general are spoilt for choice, rock fans less so, but there is currently five hours of dedicated rock a week on national Radio One and a fair amount on other, local stations. A fair amount? Well, anything is better than nothing.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Apart from Trafalgar Square, RFL broadcasted from all over the place in those early days. The Times of 9th September 1968 reports one of the earliest broadcasts as having been made from an attic bedroom in Croydon, (8th September). One of the DJs was a 19 year old restaurant chef named Tom Russell. Any relation to Peter Russell? Dick says they also broadcasted from Beckenham, and in general they had three hours on the air before they could be tracked down.

In those days, the senior investigator for the Post Office was a certain Mr Smith, who lived somewhere in South West London; his base was in Vauxhall. When a report came in of a pirate station on the air, Mr Smith and his assistant would drive up to Vauxhall, haul out the detector van and drive around looking for the aerial, which in those days had to be very long. RFL had no formal membership, just a very loose team of people; whoever was available would turn up (to broadcast) - a converted field radio, turntable and mike, a flat with a mains supply and access to a rooftop, and there they were.

That's where they were then, but where are they all now? They grew up! and moved on to other things. Dick Fox-Davies works in the boom industry of information technology. Spangles Muldoon aka Herb Oscar Anderson or plain Chris Cary is now a successful businessman.

Spangles was originally an engineer with Caroline then became a DJ. Others are still around, says Dick, but he is none too sure who is where.

KENNY MEYERS

Kenny Meyers is thirty-five years old and has been with RFL since 17th March 1973. At the time he joined, the station was run principally by Mark Ashton and his wife-to-be, Jane. Meyers became involved with RFL after having "messed around on medium wave". Mark Ashton too had been involved with a couple of medium wave stations: Radio Samantha and Radio Tracy. Ashton, whose name was/is Ivor Herdson, was initially a driver and lookout. The recently departed Peter Russell joined the station about two years ago and does not appear to have been related to Tom Russell who was one of the early broadcasters. He was still in babies' nappies then, as Meyers put it.

Meyers himself is what Grant would term an "anorak", although he says his commitment is stronger than that. According to him, anoraks only talk about building transmitters, while he actually does build them. He certainly has the training; he works for British Telecom and worked for them when they were part of the Post Office.

Like Grant, Meyers has been stigmatised with a criminal record for his part in bringing music to rock-starved Londoners. He was nicked for the first time in November 1973 and again around 1975.

One of these convictions was for "listening to pirate radio", that is he was acting as a lookout. This was not RFL but TRANSLONDON RADIO, something which went out on medium wave on Bank Holidays for half a dozen broadcasts or so. The first court case resulted in his being fined £20 with £3 costs and 90p witness expenses!

Other people who have been involved with RFL over the years have been Jerry James and Ray Thomson (or Thompson). The former, Meyers thinks, is still working somewhere in radio under his real name, probably with County Sound, a legal outfit based in Sussex.

RFL AND THE FUTURE

The above information was extracted from Kenny Meyers over the telephone on October 4th 1990. Shortly after I began researching this monograph, RFL went off the air and have been kept off ever since by a number of technical problems, not the least being the lack of a driver. They've also had a (quite appalling) Soca Radio muscle in on 101.25, which effectively steals their wavelength. I asked Dominic what they were doing to shift them. His reply was that they haven't yet managed to obtain any semtex, but they're working on it! Probably they'll come back on a different wavelength, not if, but when they come back. Dominic told me later that they have been off the air for up to six months since he joined the station.

The problems non-commercial pirates like RFL have to overcome are enormous; why they continue to stick at it, God alone knows. It is though a pity that the authorities continue to give them hassle rather than co-operation. If more people had the same attitude as Nigel Grant, Kenny Meyers et al, the world would be a far better place regardless of how many broadcasting "offences" they commit.

PIRATES OF THE AIRWAVES

Metal fans in the States are spoilt for choice; numerous stations play rock music round the clock. In Britain though there are no stations devoted entirely to rock music. No legal stations that is, but a pirate radio station, Radio Free London has been broadcasting rock and only rock since 1968. Initially the station went out on medium wave but moved to FM in 1974.

The men behind RFL, which goes out on 101.3 are 28 year old Nigel Grant and a slightly older Kenny Meyers. Grant, who stands 6 feet 3 and tips the scales at sixteen and a half stone, spends most of his free time clambering around on rooftops and showing a clean pair of heels to the Department of Trade and Industry's anti-piracy squad.

On Sunday 22nd July their transmitter was raided and they were forced off the air. The following Saturday they found themselves locked out of "RFL Towers", the name they give to any block of council flats they broadcast from.

Notwithstanding this, Grant claims to have a good working relationship with the DTI, and is on first name terms with all its inspectors. This is only the second time they have been busted in over a year: the DTI gives them less hassle than black pirate stations because their equipment is professionally set up and they don't interfere with emergency services operating on their part of the spectrum. The government though is less tolerant, and later this year, RFL (and all pirate stations) will lose their mailing address and phone-in when new legislation makes them illegal. Undeterred, they plan to use a mailing address in France.

Currently RFL has only three staff, the latest recruit being Jodie, a young lady with a lyrical voice, who as well as being a trained photographer, (see photos) is a walking encyclopedia of rock music.

Until recently RFL were on the air 7 night a week: 7pm till 1am Saturdays; 6pm till midnight Sundays with live and recorded hosted programmes, and a continuous music service on weekday evenings. The latter has had to be temporarily suspended but weekend broadcasts continue.

In spite of its name, Radio Free London broadcasts are regularly picked up as far afield as Luton, and under freak conditions they have been heard as far north as Stoke-on-Trent. Black Sabbath, Motorhead, Whitesnake, The Doors, Magnum, Rainbow and Gillan feature heavily on RFL. Magnum, Motorhead and Gillan have made jingles for the station and Ian Gillan himself is a listener. As well as these golden oldies, lots of new bands get airplay including GWAR and St Hellier, the latter, who have also had airplay on Radio One's Friday Rock Show are hailed by Grant as the second coming of Def Leppard. RFL has a small but loyal audience estimated by the recently departed Peter Russell to be around 3,000 but thought by Grant to be much higher. Although the station has been around for 22 years, Grant in particular is despondent about the radio scene in the UK; currently he is looking for a job in the States where e can play rock around the clock, a prospect which he feels will never come about in Britain.

The above piece is as submitted to Metal Hammer with minor corrections.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- Ref 1 There have been others, I now recall, including Skyline, Laser 558, and, possibly, Radio Jackie; Nigel Grant was once involved with the latter.
- Ref 2 There have been at least two stations called Radio Jackie. A pirate ship of that name began broadcasting in March 1969 - Rebel Radio: The full story of British pirate radio - Hind & Mosco (Pluto) 1985. [This book is a good read but promises rather more than it delivers; RFL is listed in an appendix but apart from that, doesn't get a mention].
- Ref 3 The first ever RFL broadcast went out on 204 metres medium wave at 7am on 15th August 1968 - The Times 16th August 1968.
- Ref 4 For the background to the origins of RFL see "On the Trail of RFL's Founders" and "The Dick Fox-Davies Story".

In the Official Publications Library I found The Public General Acts And Church Assembly Measures 1967 (HMSO) which lists

Marine, & c., Broadcasting (Offences) Act 1967.
An Act to suppress broadcasting from ships, aircraft and certain marine structures [14th July 1967]

coming in one month from the day passed, presumably at midnight 14th/15th August.

There are three acts besides the M.O.A. aimed at criminalising Grant et al:

The Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1949;
The Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1967;
and The Telecommunications Act, 1984.

Sentences on conviction are currently up to 3 months gaol or a two thousand pound fine; conviction under section 13 of the 1949 Act can draw a 6 month gaol sentence, a two thousand pound fine or both - Hind & Mosco (op cit)

On Sunday 5th August, Grant declared Tuesday 14th August "Anorak Day" and announced a special broadcast to celebrate RFL's 23 years on the air. He was actually a year and a day out; RFL's first broadcast went on air on August 15th 1968 - The Times, (ibid) which means RFL was 22 years old on Wednesday 15th August. It is 23 years since the M.O.A. came in; i.e. RFL came on the air exactly one year after this notorious piece of legislation was introduced. As it happened, RFL were off the air on "Anorak Day" and the following weekend.

- Ref 5 Last of The Pirates - Bob Noakes (Paul Harris) 1984
- Ref 6 Broadcasting From The High Seas: The History of Offshore Radio in Europe 1958-1976 - Paul Harris (Paul Harris) 1977, and Offshore Radio - Gerry Bishop (Iceni Enterprises) 1975. According to Bishop, the Frederica was "a 702 tons gross ex Danish passenger ferry....." According to On The Radio: Music radio in Britain - Stephen Barnard (Open University) 1989, it was called the "Frederika".
- Ref 7 Harris (ibid)
- Ref 8 Barnard (op cit) see also Bishop (op cit) for details of Radio Veronica, Radio Mercur et al.
- Ref 9 ie at midnight on the fourteenth (op cit)
- Ref 10 See "The Dick Fox-Davies Story".
- Ref 11 It wasn't. See "The Dick Fox Davies Story".
- Ref 12 See Hind & Mosco (op cit) for an alternative view of Radio Enoch.
- Ref 13 Hind & Mosco (ibid)
- Ref 14 "On a tower block in London, the Home Office can tell where you are within 20 metres, 10 minutes after you turn on. "Hind & Mosco (op cit)
- Ref 15 Radio London was originally a pirate - Bishop (op cit)
- Ref 16 Harris (op cit)

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