

MARY PAYNE'S COMMENTS

Dear Peter,

Sadly, the feature on the Focus website that supposedly tells the real story of offshore radio is full of nonsense. I've been running a website devoted to the subject for over ten years and have published magazine features and written chapters of books on the subject, so I do know a bit about it!

That photo isn't 'the Caroline ship' it's one of the TWO Caroline ships. The picture is very tiny but it would appear to be the North ship Fredericia (renamed Caroline) which broadcast from Ramsey Bay off the Isle of Man to the northwest of England and parts of Scotland and Ireland. The south ship, anchored three miles off the Essex coast, was the Mi Amigo.

The founder of Radio Atlanta was not Oliver Smedley, but Australian Allan Crawford. When Crawford brought his plans for marine broadcasting to the UK, he chose to share them with Ronan O'Rahilly, who soon latched on to a potentially profitable idea and decided to fit-out his own ship. Crawford also allowed his Radio Atlanta vessel to be fitted out at the Irish port owned by O'Rahilly's father. O'Rahilly's ship was finished first and Radio Caroline launched several weeks before Radio Atlanta.

The offshore stations were by no means 'almost all' financed by American capital. Three of them were. Radio London, the station that brought Top 40 format to the UK, was Texan funded. Radio London's Texan founder Don Pierson later launched a second ship, housing two short-lived stations that broadcast as Radio England (Top 40) and Britain Radio (easy listening). Most of the offshore broadcasters e.g. Radio City, Radio Scotland and Yorkshire's Radio 270 were run by local businessmen.

Pirate radio was NOT illegal. This is an oft-repeated myth. The stations were sited in international waters and therefore outside of jurisdiction. Parliament could not stop the broadcasts, which is why it was obliged to introduce the Marine Offences Act. It scuttled the pirates by outlawing advertising on the stations and making it illegal for British citizens to work aboard them or provision them.

As for, "In retrospect the pirates had little impact on the mid-60s emergence of British rock." What absolute rubbish! Who was pioneering the sounds of the Small Faces, Them, the Yardbirds, the Who, the Spencer Davis Group, Traffic, et al?. It wasn't the BBC!

Unfortunately, I am not 'allowed' to post this comment on the Focus website, because I don't have a US zip code.

Best wishes,

Mary

COLIN'S CONTRIBUTION

Hi Mary

I've taken your lead and written my own letter as well.

Best wishes, COLIN

The Editor

Film In Focus

You will hopefully have already read the submission regarding your 'Ahoy Pirate Radio' article, from Mary Payne of Radio London Limited.

As one of the very original 'radio pirates', joining when it was a secret project known to only a handful - and also later as one of those 'Good Guys' referred to (we copied that promotion

from Australian radio stations in, for instance, Sydney - and Perth, where I had been one), I must support Mary's comments and add a few of my own.

Perhaps the writer is of a similar apparent background as the Director of the film 'The Boat That Rocked' (they were ships, by the way), in that his experience of offshore broadcasting was at a distance physically and now in time and overlaid with myth and teenage fantasy.

Not that I wish to in any way disparage their work, their impressions are similar to those believed by many and a great number of cinemagoers who saw that film either took it for fact or were happy with the romp depicted. Of course, as must slowly now be realised, the film had very little in common with the real story of British pop pirate radio, which was far more interesting and exciting. Like many ex-pirates, I was very disappointed with the film; somewhat shocked, in fact.

Being created by an Australian, Allan Crawford, UK pirate radio was originally based on radio in his country of origin, although by extension, there was an American antecedent to that. Many of the disc-jockeys (myself included) were Australian and I was the first and only one of them in the beginning, who had experience in radio. Experience of commercial radio was why so many Australians were employed, as well as their being - possibly - less legal complications about their nationality than might be for British, a precaution later found unnecessary.

In my two and a half years on the pirates, late 1963 to mid-'66, I was never aware of any "public school" accents or attitudes aboard. Most of my colleagues were from more a working class rather than middle class background. Simon Dee did have a good educational background, but affected a mid-Atlantic accent. John Peel was a much-admired specialising broadcaster but not the only one who loved the music - we were all high on the sounds of the day and felt privileged to be doing something we so enjoyed.

Late in the development of Crawford's original Radio Atlanta project Ronan O'Rahilly came along, ostensibly as an investor, who then used information gained from Crawford to hastily set up Radio Caroline, named through a connection with Jocelyn Stevens and Queen Magazine. Ronan did involve American advertisers in his project and worked extensively at interesting US advertising agencies, especially when UK advertising started drying up. But most pirate operations, including Atlanta and Caroline, were not American financed, just a couple were. Radio Nord set an example there, that was an American operation and their ship later became that for Radio Atlanta / Caroline South.

Caroline was first on air on Easter Saturday 28th March 1964, not the 29th. The earlier English-language pirate radio broadcasts were indeed from the Dutch Radio Veronica, but started late 1960 and ran only into the first few months of 1961 before being stopped as unviable. Apart from other considerations, the ship could not carry a generator of sufficient power to allow the signal strength necessary. This operation was called CNBC - the Commercial Neutral Broadcasting Company and was run from Admiralty House, Soho, London, by Paul Hollingdale and Doug Stanley, amongst others.

The significant Radio Syd (Sud, as opposed to Nord) off Malmö, Sweden, was missed in your story and it was very famous in its time. Its owner was Britt Wadner, the also famous 'Swedish Pirate Radio Queen'. Their ship, the MV Cheeta II was used in early 1966 as a replacement for Radio Caroline South after the Mi Amigo went aground at Frinton-on-Sea. I helped fit her out for the job.

"The Beatles success predated the pirates (and was in many ways shaped by BBC rather than commercial broadcasting" is a quote used in your story countered by Beatle Paul McCartney, who was reported as saying they would never have been as successful as they were without the pirates. Right or wrong, he acknowledged the offshore broadcasters, as did the Rolling Stones and very many others. We made the music scene of the time and broke the monopolies and cartels in the music and broadcasting establishment.

A significant point needs to be made: British offshore radio was conceived, in the first instance, not for the sake of creating a commercial radio station; that was secondary to the intent of creating a means of exposing new records from Crawford's companies, thus getting around the 'needle time' and other restrictions burdening on-shore stations.

Supporting a point made by Mary, I have to underline and correct the comment that the pirates were 'illegal'. That is a common fallacy which strikes at the very heart of the whole concept. Offshore broadcasting was possible because it was not illegal.

As my efforts over recent years attest, I strongly support the maintenance of the saga of British pirate radio broadcasting, but do deplore the way the stories have been re-worked over the years.

Whenever a film producer and company are ready for the real story, it is readily available from many sources including willing providers of first-hand experience. But that will need to be soon.

Colin Nichol / Colin Nicol