







**In 1964, the new breed of radio listeners called 'teenagers' existed in a musical desert.**

The only oases quenching pop fans' thirst for the latest sounds were the Light Programme's *Saturday Club*, Sunday's *Pick of the Pops* and in the evenings, Radio Luxembourg. That same year, the Sixties really started swinging with the arrival of what Kenny Everett was to call "Watery Wireless".

Australian record label owner Allan Crawford began it all in the UK with Radio Atlanta, on board the *Mi Amigo*, anchored in international waters in the North Sea and circumventing broadcasting legislation by airing commercial radio via a powerful on-board transmitter. A fellow pioneer, Ronan O'Rahilly, acquired the *Frederica*, better known as Radio Caroline, bobbing around in the grey seas off the coast of Suffolk.

Unauthorised broadcasting, carrying adverts, had begun in earnest. MPs were horrified. Who knew what immorality might be fomented by malodorous beatniks operating outside the law? The press swiftly dubbed them "pirates". Teenagers were thrilled by the notion of swashbuckling young DJs battling the elements and the Establishment from a ship in the North Sea. A "trannie" tuned to 199 became an indispensable accessory.

Months later, a merger saw Atlanta become Caroline South, and the *Frederica* sailing to anchor in Ramsey Bay off the Isle of Man, as Caroline North. The music was initially middle-of-the-road, but the boat began to rock with the arrival of Radio London. The former minesweeper *Galaxy* dropped anchor off Essex over Christmas 1964, bearing US Top 40-format radio and a massive transmitter, all backed by US money. Radio London ("Big L"), changed the face of UK radio, and rival buccaneers were jolted into rethinking programming.

Thames Estuary wartime forts were eagerly commandeered for broadcasting, the stampede led initially by the eccentric pop star and wannabe Raving Loony MP, David "Screaming Lord" Sutch. Radio Sutch, on the Shivering Sands Army fort, became Radio City. By 1966, a huge audience was grooving to pirate transmissions. Radio London and the two Carolines were joined by Swinging Radio England (pop) and Britain Radio (easy listening), both transmitting from the *Laissez-Faire*, and launched by the Texan founders of Big L. The *Laissez-Faire*, *Galaxy* and *Mi Amigo* anchored within close proximity, in an area christened "Pirate Alley".

Providing the musical backdrop to the Sixties, the pirates gave life to new acts. Aspiring musicians queued to suffer seasickness and plug their latest releases. Procol Harum's *A Whiter Shade of Pale* (better described as a shade of green) was first aired by Big L. Listeners jammed the vessel's switchboard, labelling the song an instant hit. The station then obtained a pre-release exclusive of the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* album, an event that famously reduced a young DJ, John Peel, to tears of joy. The pirate DJs achieved star status.

Inevitably, the British Government decided to end the fun and introduced the Marine Offences Bill, outlawing advertising on offshore stations or supplying them. Most closed down on or before August 14, 1967, the day before the Bill became law. DJs arrived on shore to a ►

# THE REAL POP PIRATES

In the Sixties, UK music fans could almost smell the briny in their wireless sets. As the new comedy, the Boat the Rocked, hits the big screen **Mary Payne** chronicles the history of 'pirate radio', and talks to the DJs who withstood Force 10 gales to spin the latest hits



◀ heroes' welcome from a 1,000-strong crowd. The two Carolines soldiered on for a while, but with advertisers and DJs nervous of prosecution and vital supplies having to come from the Continent, they were fatally holed below the water line. In March 1968 both ships were ignominiously towed away by a creditor.

The BBC tried to recreate the pirate sound with Radio One, employing Watery Wireless jocks, but it couldn't replicate the atmosphere. Millions enjoyed hearing the reassuring bump of the tender coming alongside, then discovering who the passengers were. People wanted to know what pranks the DJs had played – the broadcasters became part of their lives. Arguably, nobody enjoys that sort of relationship with radio any more.

THE NEW FILM, *The Boat That Rocked*, is fiction. Here the original pirate DJs talk about the reality:

#### **Johnnie Walker, 64**

(Radio England, Caroline South), now BBC Radio 2  
JOHNNIE WALKER ARRIVED ON Swinging Radio England in 1966 to discover he had to sleep on the floor. Even after more bunks were constructed, "the guy coming off the night shift had to sleep in the bunk of the one getting up to do the day shift. But the enthusiasm was great and it was so exciting".

Later, Johnnie jumped ship to Caroline South. "Girls used to come out on yachts, usually owned by their boyfriends. Robbie Dale and I got an engineer to show one guy the generator, while we took his girlfriend to our cabin. We were in there for some time... However, in the film, they have a lot more drugs and girls than we had. Girls staying on board was forbidden.

"The time is just right for this film. We are so controlled today. CCTV everywhere, political correctness... The film will take us back to a time in the Sixties when there was enormous energy, optimism and fun. It was a real-life soap opera.

"Not only was the music rebellious, the stations were rebellious. It was a wonderful, exciting time. When Caroline was towed away in March 1968, it was one of the saddest days of my life. I kept thinking about the people who had woken up to find us gone. I thought, 'That's the end, but at least we gave it a go.'"

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#### **Tony 'Bessie' Blackburn, 66** (Caroline South, Radio London), now Smooth Radio, KCFM

TONY JOINED CAROLINE EARLY ON, when the station output was somewhat eclectic. Aged 21, he presented the pop-based *Breakfast Show*, but also hosted a Big Band programme. "A lot of people wrote in saying, 'It's lovely to have somebody so young who knows so much about Big Band music.' I didn't know anything, actually. I was just reading info off the album covers!"

"I think Big L was the best station ever in this country. I was doing the *Breakfast Show* and I'll never forget how the mist cleared and this massive US minesweeper suddenly appeared. Big L started test broadcasting and I heard those jingles and Kenny and Dave Cash and thought, 'I've got to join this station.'"

Kenny Everett had given everyone on Radio London women's names. "He was Dame Edith, I was Bessie. Head DJ Tony Windsor was Mother Superior and called Mum. Even years later, on Radio One, I would refer to Kenny as Edith and he called me Bess!"

"In its era, pirate radio was fabulous. I'm very proud to have been a part of it."

#### **Dave 'The Rabbit' Cash, 66**

(Radio London), now BBC Kent

DAVE CASH AND KENNY EVERETT JOINED RADIO LONDON at the launch. Dave had broadcast on Vancouver's CFUN, but Kenny was a raw recruit. The wild and wacky *Kenny and Cash Show* was born.

Listeners adored it. The sketches and sound effects were impressive, given the primitive production facilities. Dave recalls creating sound effects, like "Seaman Marks" swimming ashore to get requests. "We recorded an apple falling into the sink and fingers twiddling in water. Played back at half-speed – bingo! – man diving in and swimming! None of us knew London was going to be that big, let alone that people would be talking about it 45 years on."

#### **Keith 'Samantha' Skues, 70**

(Caroline South, Radio London), now BBC Norfolk, Three Counties

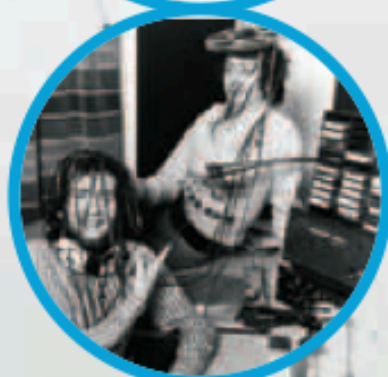
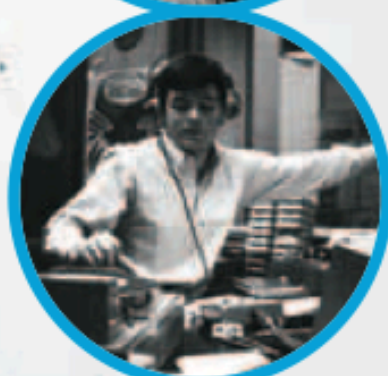
"CAROLINE WAS THE FIRST, THE PIONEER, but when London came along I preferred their professionalism and was





## PIRATE DISC JOCKEYS

Johnnie Walker, top. On August 15, 1967, as the law closed in on the pirates, Walker, and fellow DJ Robbie Dale addressed an estimated 20 million unhappy listeners; Tony Blackburn presenting the *Breakfast Show*; wacky Dave Cash and co-presenter Kenny Everett, who died in 1995; Keith Skues (standing) and fellow DJs larking about on board Caroline South. DJs' pranks became the stuff of urban legend



pleased to be offered a job with them. Did 'Dame Edith' Everett give me a girl's name? Yes – Samantha.

"My favourite memory is the 1967 April Fool's joke, involving Ed 'Stewpot' Stewart, myself and several engineers. Claiming to be another pirate station, 'Radio East Anglia' suddenly obliterated the powerful Radio London transmission. Supposedly operating from a disused signal box in East Anglia, it sounded so realistic that even Big L's managing director was fooled. He rang the Post Office to ask them to get rid of this pirate station as it was jamming Radio London! Come noon, we had to confess all to our listeners. Management threatened sackings, but relented."

## Tom 'Mother' Edwards, 64 (Radio City, Caroline South)

"WHEN I ARRIVED AT SHIVERING SANDS FORT, an excited young man of 20, these 90ft-high structures appeared out of the sea mist and I was terrified. Even more so, when I was hoisted up in what can only be described as a cheese crate. I dived with death many times jumping on to rope ladders, but as a youngster the world was my oyster – and it still is.

"I became Programme Controller and used to cluck around the guys on City, earning the nickname 'Mother', which sticks to this day. The crew would wait until I was halfway along a rope catwalk between the towers and then shake it vigorously, which made me yell with fright, but it was all done in fun. I cried buckets when I closed City down in 1967 with Shirley Bassey singing *The Party's Over*. Within weeks, I joined Caroline South and found the *Mi Amigo* luxurious compared to City, but I was desperately seasick when a storm force 10 hit us.

"My wish is to visit the Shivering Sands towers just once more. They are still standing and I suspect will continue to do so long after I have gone."

## Nick Bailey, 62 (both Carolines), now Classic FM

"I joined Caroline South aged 19. My initiation ceremony was Dave Lee Travis and Robbie Dale chasing me up the mast and pulling my pants down just as the tourist boat arrived!

"I transferred to Caroline North, which I preferred. ►

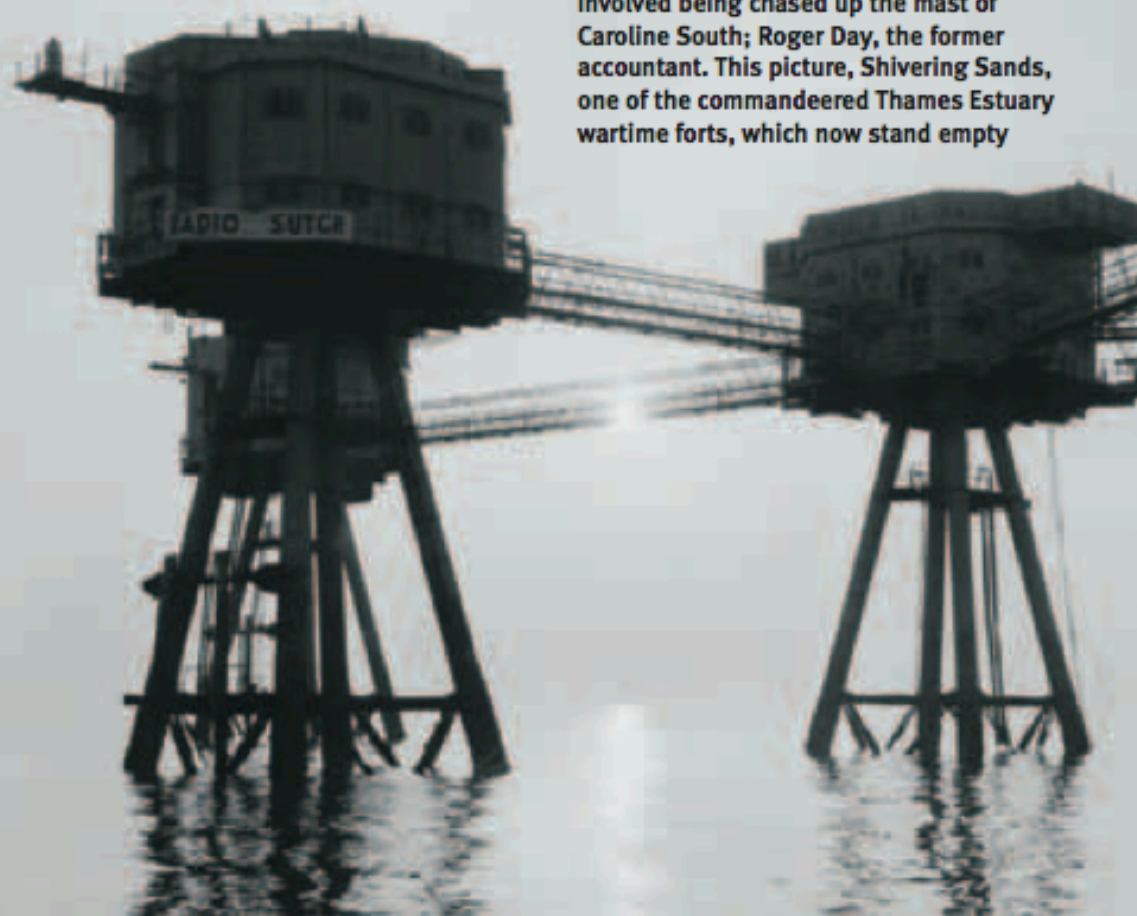






## PIRATE DISC JOCKEYS

From top, Tom Edwards, who often risked death leaping on to the arrivals platform; Nick Bailey, whose initiation ceremony involved being chased up the mast of Caroline South; Roger Day, the former accountant. This picture, Shivering Sands, one of the commandeered Thames Estuary wartime forts, which now stand empty



◀ It was much bigger, which meant we all got our own cabins. Also, the atmosphere was much nicer. I think because no one in the London offices could hear Caroline North, there wasn't the same pressure and clash of egos as on South. The North Ship had just as big an audience as the South. Six million each. North had the monopoly in Liverpool, Manchester, Belfast, Dublin and Southern Scotland, whereas South was getting increasing competition, particularly from Radio London. Also, because of the way radio waves bounced across water, it was North that was heard in Cornwall, and I even picked it up in Tangiers.

"I thought my news-reading job was extremely well paid – £25 weekly, all-found, tax free. I would come ashore, receive £75 and manage to save most of it. The food was superb, we got beer and cigarette rations and our laundry and dry-cleaning was done.

"On Mick Luvzit's afternoon show he set fire to my news script as I was reading it live. I had to speed up my delivery to finish before it went up in smoke!"

### Roger 'Twiggy' Day, 64

(Radio England, Caroline South), now BBC Kent  
ROGER WAS AN ACCOUNTANT AND PART-TIME CLUB DJ before joining Radio England at its launch in May 1966.

"Radio was totally new to me. I did think the Radio England accommodation would be better than it

turned out to be, but I settled in very quickly and soon took to the unfamiliar studio equipment."

When the American venture failed after six months, Roger transferred to Caroline South, where his skinny frame earned him the nickname "Twiggy". He stayed on board to defy the government till the end in 1968.

"Caroline was totally different. Apart from a huge audience, it felt like home. The *Mi Amigo* was a lovely ship and functioned better than the *Laissez-Faire* in storms. Cabins were more comfortable and the whole operation was better organised. Food was better as well. For me, it was the equivalent of a fan being asked to join their favourite team and scoring the winning goal in a Cup Final. The best years of my life." ■

*The Boat That Rocked opens this month. See David Gritten's review and Saga Film Club offer, pages 20 & 21*

*Mary Payne is co-editor of the Radio London website [www.radiolondon.co.uk](http://www.radiolondon.co.uk). Pirates of the North Sea, a Caroline North exhibition, is at the House of Manannan, Peel, Isle of Man till August. [www.gov.im/mnh/heritage/museums/manannan.xml](http://www.gov.im/mnh/heritage/museums/manannan.xml). BBC Essex makes a third broadcast as Pirate BBC Essex from Good Friday to Easter Monday aboard the lightship LV18 at Harwich. The line-up includes all the DJs above. [www.bbc.co.uk/essex/local\\_radio/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/essex/local_radio/)*