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January 1978: the pirate demo.

Derek Spinks (Report)

THE SCRUFFY LITTLE MACHINES

Forty years of pirate radio

The guy on the radio sounded like he was selling used cars. Frantic and breathless, an appeal to vote Fianna Fail for stable government. As the commercial reached its end the DJ's voice did a verbal saunter across the fading notes of the party song. "Thank you, sir, and next time try to calm down a bit."

The politicians have been as ill at ease with this illegal form of entertainment which sprang from the swelling youth population as they have been with youth itself. When early attempts to crush pirate radio, through raids and harassment, brought thousands of kids onto the streets, the politicians backed off. The attraction of the medium at election time, and the fear that attacking it might lose them votes, has caused the politicians to cuddle up to the pirates while simultaneously making aggressive noises. In 1978, 1979, 1980 and 1982 the politicians have talked about legislation to introduce licensed local radio and put the pirates off the air.

Gene Kerrigan

Come the 1982 election, the politicians were back on the pirate airwaves, not using it very well, but using it and breaking the law in pursuit of votes. And the pirates know how to use the politicians. On the Sunday before the election, Sunshine Radio took a half-page advert in the *Sunday World* to ask its supporters to vote for Fianna Fail, "If you love your local unlicensed radio station." Fianna Fail, reckoned Sunshine, was more likely to provide licenses for pirates. But pirate radio has been only marginally concerned with party politics, and has over the past forty years in Dublin usually concerned itself with matters of greater importance.

When Radio na Saoirse appeared in 1972 and campaigned along with some republicans against entry to the EEC, some radio freaks in Dublin

thought there was something familiar about the transmissions. The carrier signal was faulty, with a kind of echo on each side. The last time that had been heard was back in the fifties. Radio Galaxy, it was called - "The Station Of The Stars."

There had been pirate broadcasts even before this, back in the forties, when a Dublin group with Nazi sympathies re-broadcast Lord Haw Haw's speeches from Berlin.

The technology of the early days was miles away from the sophisticated set-ups being used by the pirates today. Back in 1964, Davitt Kelly would roll out of bed on the civilised side of noon and decide, what the hell, let's go on the air today. The equipment was a scruffy little machine with wires hanging out of the back, partly made up of an everyday Phillips wireless complete with tumescent glass valves and a little light that lit up the dial - but when you attached it to the rest of the junk you'd put together... Radio Atlantis was on the air. Or

Radio Corinna. Or Radio Whatever Davitt Decided To Call It That Day.

In the beginning, Davitt didn't even have a record-player. But that was a minor problem. The thing to do was pick up Radio Luxembourg on the machine and . . . re-broadcast it through another part of the machine. The only tricky part was fading out the volume at the end of a record and fading in again at the beginning of the next, cutting out the Luxembourg jock and sticking your own ten cents in between.

These early transmissions took place from, appropriately enough, Davitt's family flat on a top floor in Upper Mount Street — now the street in which Fianna Fail and Fine Gael have their headquarters. Davitt was handy with the electrics — which stood him in good stead when the heat came on and he had to take it on the lam. It was a weekday in 1965, around lunchtime. The doorbell rang and when Davitt looked out it was the boys in blue. Davitt ripped the wires out of the Phillips and dumped the machine in a bin, then went to let them in.

The cops grumbled so much about having to climb the five flights of stairs that Davitt decided not to antagonise them any further. He confessed, retrieved the machine from the bin, and they took it away. Davitt then did what any self-respecting outlaw would do in that situation . . . a bunk. He spent that summer in Norwich, using his skill with the electrics to get work fixing juke boxes.

The wheels of justice ground on mercilessly and in November Davitt was, *in absentia*, fined a shilling. His dad, who went to court, was fined a pound for allowing the flat to be used as a base for Davitt's piratical activities.

The motivation of the early pirates had nothing to do with making money or influencing the direction of radio. It was just that some people got a buzz out of putting their own show on the air. It had something to do with communicating with people, something to do with ego. And the music was a part of it — hanging your kind of music out there on the airwaves where other people could pick up on it. Then, it was fun solving the technical problems, twisting a few wires together and threading them through a few valves and you were Broadcasting House. There was also the kick of doing something you shouldn't be doing. For a whole bunch of kids, doing your own radio rivalled the billiard-halls as a method of mispending your youth.

The British pirates, principally the ship Radio Caroline, were an influence.



Left, Davitt Kelly at ARD in October 1978. Right, DJ Pete Lennon.

They sailed into the sixties because of the failure of BBC to reflect the changes in musical tastes that were happening in the clubs and dance halls of the British youth scene. However, although youth in Britain had come sufficiently into its own to support the pirate market, young people in Ireland were not yet as affluent or assertive in their own right.

By 1967 the BBC was catching on and introducing a pop channel. RTE could still get away with the odd Larry Gogan show and no more.

Davitt Kelly came back from exile in Norwich in 1966 — and it has been said that his sojourn abroad fixing juke boxes gave a boost to what is today a very fine record collection. Hardened by his police record and shilling fine, Davitt went back into the pirate game, this time with two guys called Ken Sheehan and Jack O'Carroll. The station, Radio Jacqueline, operated from Seapoint and was on the air sporadically until 1971. Jacqueline was pumping out 100 watts, more powerful than anything up to that, and is fondly remembered for introducing an amount of musical progress to the Irish airwaves via independent record labels from the States.

Jacqueline might broadcast for a couple of months, a few hours a night, a few nights a week — then close down for a week or a month or the best part of a year. It restarted at one point and the name was changed to Channel 70, for no particular reason. Nobody was keeping score. If the guys had something better to do, like working or tracking a hot romance or watching the grass grow, that's what they did and the valves stayed cool. And if anybody didn't like it, let them do something about it.

And anybody did. There was Radio

Caroline (named after the original sea-going pirate), Radio Vanessa, Radio Sheila (operated out of Sandymount by Mick Walker, who had been an engineer on the original Caroline), Radio Santa Monica and Radio Valerie. Perhaps the most important of these, not because of its broadcasting at that time, but because of its part in developments a decade later, was a transmitter operated by Ken Sheehan from his home in Mourne Road, Drimnagh from 1966. It was called Radio Baile Ath Cliath.

The pirate scene remained diffuse and *staccato* for the next few years. The most significant development was the setting up of Radio Melinda in 1971. Two of the principal figures behind this were Declan Meehan and Mark Storey, both later to be employed by RTE Radio 2.

Radio Melinda was located in the basement of a house in Gloucester Diamond in Dublin's city centre and was the first example of community radio. As well as pop music, the station broadcast local information, announcements, greetings. It operated for a few hours on three nights a week and all day Sunday. The local clergy got involved and Mass was broadcast.

Politically, it was a rough time. The echoes of the Arms Trial and the split in Fianna Fail were still reverberating. 1972 would be the North's bloodiest year. Radio Melinda was broadcasting at the time when RTE journalist Kevin O'Kelly was instructed by the courts to finger Sean MacStiofain as Chief of Staff of the IRA, following an interview O'Kelly had done. And when O'Kelly went to jail rather than breach his journalistic ethics, RTE staff had a brief strike.

And that was the time when Radio Melinda was boasting loudest about "fighting for the freedom of the airwaves." No matter in those nervous days that the lads had no subversive intentions and that they merely wanted more pop and less *cheillidhe* — to talk of fighting was to invite closer inspection, and to suggest a deficit of freedom, of whatever variety, was asking to have your wrist slapped.

The boys in blue came one Sunday afternoon early in 1972 and they came mob-handed. The lads were broadcasting away down in the basement and wondering what all the *clump clump* was upstairs. Declan Meehan had just put the stylus down on Donovan's *Sunshine Superman* when a strong torchlight cut down into the basement . . . *They're down here!*

"Sunshine came softly through my window today . . ."

Within seconds the lads were being

hauled up the stairs, *handcuffed*, and hustled into the street where there was a black maria waiting...

Christ-dad-is-going-to-kill-me!!!!

The Melinda crew were in their teens and the heaviness of the raid had a traumatic effect. Though the equipment, including record players and mixers, was confiscated and there were court appearances for all, the fines were only £2 a head. But the experience of learning the hard way that when you step out of line, big men with fists like pianos and uniforms the colour of oblivion may come clumping through the door like the First Infantry Division — that had the greatest impact. For the next three or four years the airwaves stayed relatively quiet.

Over a period in 1975 and '76 the elements that would form the basis for the growth of a publicly-acceptable form of pirate radio began to come together. Davitt Kelly, Mark Storey and Declan Meehan met and began broadcasting from a shed in Davitt's garden in Drimnagh. Mark had the transmitter, Davitt had the shed, they called the result Alternative Radio Dublin, ARD. Mark had in earlier years been a fan of Davitt's Radio Jacqueline and had written to the station.

Meanwhile, the transmitter which Ken Sheehan had used for Radio Baile Ath Cliath found its way, via a DJ calling himself Prince Terry, to Don Moore, and somewhere along the way the name was translated to Radio Dublin. Ken Sheehan had dropped out of the pirate scene following the Melinda raid and swapped the transmitter for

some other piece of sound equipment.

Don Moore linked up with a man called Eamonn Cooke, who owned an electrical repair shop in Thomas Street, and Radio Dublin began broadcasting from Cooke's home in Inchicore.

In the winter of 1976, pirate broadcasting began in earnest — still irregularly and just a few hours now and then, but by now young people in Dublin had, in terms of affluence and a distinctive culture, caught up with their counterparts elsewhere. RTE had still not responded to that development. The pirates, Radio Dublin and ARD, were being listened to.

Another important element in all this was The Engineer. It was all very well throwing a few pieces of equipment together, linking them with bits of a hair-dryer and calling yourself Radio Something. Although Jacqueline and a couple of the other stations broadcast over a few miles every now and then, when the weather was right or the lads could boast a decent transmitter, local pirate radio was usually local with a vengeance. If you were more than a few roads away, you didn't hear it.

The Engineer was a guy who worked with the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. He was a genius at putting together transmitters and he enjoyed it and he liked the idea of pirate radio. So, most of the best transmitters built from then onwards were built by The Engineer, even while he worked with the P & T, whose detection branch was out looking for the transmitters.

Over at Radio Dublin, Eamonn Cooke was a dominant and somewhat eccentric personality and a split with

his partner, Don Moore, was inevitable. Moore moved out and although he owned the transmitter and had previously operated Radio Dublin from various houses around the city, the transmitter and the name remained with Cooke.

Moore linked up with the ARD crew, Davitt Kelly, Mark Storey and Declan Meehan, and ARD began transmitting from Moore's house in Cabra.

The next developments were crucial — the move to take advertisements in an organised way and the setting up of a regular transmission schedule. Moore began getting adverts from local businesses and the adverts were recorded at Davitt Kelly's house. After a few months of this, Davitt cottoned on to the fact that his contribution was helping to make ARD some money but that he wasn't getting any of it — so Davitt Kelly dropped out.

One of the business people from whom Don Moore sought adverts was Bernard Llewellyn, owner of two TV rental shops. Llewellyn decided there was money in pirate radio and, over a meal with the ARD crew in The American Connection restaurant in Talbot Street, he and Moore became joint owners of ARD. Declan Meehan and Mark Storey, who were also at the meal, were somewhat bemused by this development and found that they had become "associates" of the new station. They dropped out soon afterwards.

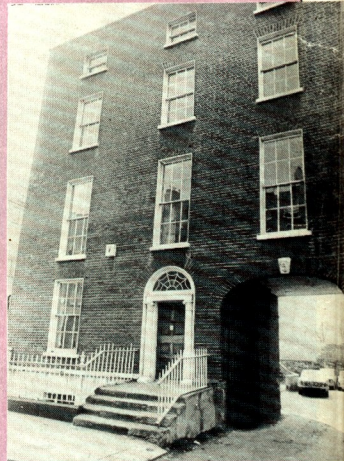
ARD began the move from Don Moore's house in Cabra to Llewellyn's suite of offices in a four-storey building in Belvedere Place. At the same time, Eamonn Cooke over in Inchicore



Big D in Chapel Lane...



...Radio Dublin in Inchicore...



...ARD in Belvedere Place.



Don Moore
DJ and joint owner of ARD



Bernard Llewellyn: from TV to Radio

core began broadcasting Radio Dublin on a 24-hour basis. It was December 1977.

That Christmas, the pirates, principally Radio Dublin, blew RTE off the air. Twenty-four hours of non-stop pop. The pirates' listenership grew, letters flowed in. Eamonn Cooke, now dubbing himself Captain Cooke, grew cocky. Every now and then he would tune a radio to RTE, place a microphone beside the speaker and switch on just as the RTE news began. As the news ended Radio Dublin listeners would hear, "Thank you Maurice O'Doherty, and we'll have more news in an hour."

The arrival of pirates operating on a commercial basis brought two reactions. An announcement by RTE that they would shortly be setting up a pop station, Radio 2, and that this had absolutely nothing to do with the success of the pirates. The other reaction was raids. Both Radio Dublin and ARD had equipment confiscated — and both were back on the air shortly afterwards.

In January 1978 Eamonn Cooke began calling on listeners to demonstrate in support of his station. ARD, having problems installing its equipment in Belvedere Place and with a much smaller listenership, at first stood aloof from this — then, ARD threw in its lot with Cooke and urged support for the demonstration.

The size of the crowd that turned up for that demonstration, on January 21, has been estimated at up to ten thousand. The obvious support for the pirates was such that the authorities tuned out the RTE calls for action against the unlicensed stations. Although there were further raids, they

were occasional and for the record, and there was no concerted attempt to put the pirates off the air.

The events of the next few months were to determine the direction of radio in Ireland. Although there seemed to the casual listener little difference between the stations, two branches grew from the pirate roots.

The direction of ARD was largely under the control of Ray McGuigan, a journalist from Belfast hired by Llewellyn. McGuigan based his decisions partly on his knowledge of Downtown Radio in Belfast and partly on a general understanding of how local radio in Britain worked. The station hired journalists, some fledgling, others such as Howard Kinley, who had RTE experience, and set about creating a local news service and current affairs programmes.

In the beginning, many of the items on the hourly news service were simply lifted from RTE or from the newspapers and rewritten. As the station gained experience it began to compile lists of contacts in community groups, trade unions, tenant associations, pressure groups and voluntary organisations and to generate its own stories. As a result, the ARD local news was often of far more interest to Dublin listeners than that on RTE. For instance, during a sudden CIE maintenance strike ARD could, by phoning every garage in Dublin once an hour, give an accurate and up to date account of precisely how many buses were still operating and how many were breaking down. RTE, on the same story, would rely on a statement from the CIE press office which said little more than the fact that there was

a strike, since detailed news of the buses in Dublin was of little use to RTE listeners in Cork.

ARD's seriousness was not entirely philanthropic, with a view to enhancing the social and cultural life of the city. Llewellyn and McGuigan were aiming at putting on a professional station which might stand a chance of getting a licence, if the political wind blew that way. Each week-day evening had an hour-long current affairs programme: consumer advice, national politics, women, local politics and sport. The women's programme on ARD was the first time such a show had been produced in Ireland, pre-dating RTE's *Woman Today* by a couple of years. At first the show was run by a group of radical feminists — the result was boring and self-indulgent and didn't last long — and later by the Women's Political Association.

Politicians were all too eager to take advantage of the new local medium and TDs, Lord Mayors, Councillors and aspirants to these titles flocked along. Fianna Fail was in office and their politicians were under constraint, but some of them found ways of getting their propaganda across. Even Sinn Féin The Workers' Party, which regularly issued denouncements of the pirates and calls for State control, sent their press releases around to ARD.

The other branch of pirate radio was almost entirely pop music. There was no shortage of disc jockeys. They flooded in from the discos and from the bedrooms where youngsters who fancied themselves as John Peels or Kid Jensens rabbitbitted on into tape recorders ("And now we have a cool cut from a guy called Elvis Presley —

take it away, El!"). Of the demo tapes that flooded into the stations few were worth listening to, some brought acceptable voices.

It was this aspect of the game that interested most of those involved in the stations. Some of the DJs tried to establish some kind of rational music policy but many more were simply chuffed to be on the air at all and played whatever they happened to bring into the studio with them.

In April 1978 Eamonn Cooke went on holidays. Hardly had he left the country when his station was hi-jacked from under him. Some of the DJs had already been referring on the air to the station as "Big D" — it seemed at the time like slang for the station's proper name. However, when Cooke returned he found much of his equipment smashed, the aerial chopped down — and a new station on the air called Big D — run by several of his top DJs. That Sunday Cooke, with a virtuoso technical performance, managed to get back on the air and astonished listeners with a diatribe against those who betrayed him and a denial of charges that had never been publicly made — charges that he had interfered with young people who hung around the station. These, he said, were false and cooked up.

There were now three main stations in Dublin — ARD, Big D and Radio Dublin, with others springing up; Capitol, East Coast, Radio City. Mark Storey, Declan Meehan and Davitt Kelly were prominent in setting up Big D along with ex-Radio Dublin people and two business people, Noel Kirwan and Frank Murray. Big D made a token effort at providing a news service but it remained primarily a pop station and their news reporter was recruited by ARD.

During 1978 Big D and ARD changed — technically, musically, and in atmosphere. There were periods at each station where everything was clicking and the programmes and listenership swung from one to the other. Radio Dublin just kept chugging along, with the more amateur DJs and a casual attitude to professionalism, but retaining a solid core of loyal listeners.

The short happy summer of pirate radio, when everyone was enthused by the new medium, when it seemed possible that any month now the government would move to change the outdated legislation on radio, and when the whole thing was still fresh and evolving was already coming to an end.

Three weeks before Christmas 1978 Big D owner Noel Kirwan was killed in a car crash. Shortly afterwards there was a leak in the roof of the abandon-

ed factory in Chapel Lane from which the station operated. Electric fires were set up to repel the damp — one thing led to another and the station burned down.

Around the same time ARD began feeling the financial pinch. Journalists were laid off, cuts were made. Joint owner Bernard Llewellyn was already in financial trouble following the collapse of his Anya TV shops.

Big D was revived, ARD kept going and rehired when the money was there. Davitt Kelly left Big D for ARD and as musical consultant made efforts to give the station a musical identity of its own. Suspicion had been rife that some DJs on the pirate scene had been accepting bribes from record companies to plug certain records — leading to a professed love of Irish records among certain DJs whose other musical tastes seemed at odds with this concern for the home product.

At ARD Davitt Kelly attempted to ensure that no such practices would creep in, by instituting and supervising a playlist of approved records.

After the raids at the beginning of 1978 there was little harassment of the pirates. Occasional raids were made but they were largely for form's sake. ARD remained aloof from it all — thanks to The Connection. Don Moore, joint owner of the station had early on become friendly with The Connection, a highly placed individual in the detection branch of the P & T. Any time a raid was ordered Don Moore got the word from The Connection, the ARD transmitter was hidden and an old crock put in its place for the boys in blue to remove.

RTE's Radio 2 opened in May 1979 and took some of the best DJs away from the pirate stations. (It also, implicitly, left some of the even better ones behind.) Rónán Collins moved over to RTE from ARD — in the same time slot and using the same signature tune. Dave Fanning, who had stumbled into radio while reviewing an album for Big D and was offered a programme on the pirate station, switched channels in the same time slot, as RTE's token bow to progressive music.

The new licensed station initially took listeners away from the pirates, but there wasn't much to choose between them. Set up in a hurry, Radio 2 was mishandled from the start. After a lot of public criticism it was decided that changes should be made and Declan Meehan, who had moved over from Big D, was fired. The firing was an arbitrary one as Meehan had already been pencilled into a new schedule and his programme was not noticeably any worse than any others, and better than many. It was widely believed among Radio 2 presenters and producers that Meehan was fired

as a token gesture to improving schedules and because he was insufficiently timid at staff meetings. Meehan moved to Sunshine Radio, another pirate, and thrived happily.

ARD abandoned its separate identity at the end of 1979 when Ray McGuigan pulled out and Llewellyn sold the station to the DJs.

Over the next two years the old pirates toddled along, indistinguishable from the new ones that were springing up. By now the idea had spread down the country and few cities or big towns were without experience of the phenomena. There are now a dozen pirate stations operating in Dublin, some coming and going. Davitt Kelly had another try with KELO, attempting to present some coherent music policy. NOVA appeared and won a large listenership on the basis of cutting down the often inane chatter of DJs.

In the important months of 1978 and 1979, when the major influential pirates were establishing a format, there was little constructive criticism of what they were doing and RTE felt constrained to fight this blot on their dignity by winning back listeners, rather than learning from the pirates' mistakes and successes.

When the politicians get around to providing the legislation which will regularise the changes which people have already effected there is little hope that they, no more than RTE, will consider what form of radio best suits the people who created the new structures — both the listeners and the pirates themselves. The chance that the new directions in radio would encompass genuine community involvement was lost even before the pirates found their voices.

On the first full day of broadcasting of RTE Radio 2 Declan Meehan was doing the breakfast show. He gave a time check: "It's eighteen after eight!" Everything was working fine, no sweat, and even if that pirate stuff had been great fun all those years, well, you had to hand it to RTE, what you have here is *professional*. Just look at this gear . . . hell, this *chair* cost more than some of the transmitters we had out there in pirateland!

In walked the producer. Nice guy, lots of experience, veteran of Radio 1, the real station. "What was it you just said?"

Uh, what was it I just said?
"You're in RTE now, and it's eighteen minutes, and it's *past* eight . . . not eighteen after eight."

Yes, sir.
But, man, you people, you goddam civil servants, you sure as hell know how to take the buzz out of this game!