

This is Radio Sunshine, all set to make money and become legitimate

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And it's plain sailing so far for the latest pirate station crew, as Brian Blake reports

THE MUSIC and chat were being heard as far away as Belfast and the North of England as well as throughout Dublin as Robbie Robinson set about wrapping up his show on the radio. He carefully placed his albums back into their cardboard sleeves, glanced quickly at his producer in the tiny room on the other side of a sound-proof window, and, moving the microphone slowly towards him, signed off with his customary farewell to his listeners. Another illegal show was over.

Every morning for two hours — and at various other times throughout the week — Robbie breaks the law. He is one among hundreds of airwave pirates throughout Ireland who every day commit a crime — technically, that is — by providing hours of listening pleasure to thousands of people. Robbie is a pirate disc jockey and owner of Sunshine Radio, the pirate radio station in Portmarnock.

Robbie is a very busy businessman. He travels daily between Portmarnock and the station's offices in Baginbun Street as station owner, disc jockey, advertising rep, personnel manager and programme controller — but for him it is all worth it. He believes he is on the verge of changing the face of illegal broadcasting in Ireland.

When Sunshine Radio, Dublin's newest station, began broadcasting some three months ago, it marked a turning point for pirate radio in Ireland. For the first time, a high-powered financial organisation with £100,000 to invest had entered the ranks of 1 illegal broadcasting and was planning not only to broadcast in Ireland but also overseas, be it only the North of England. The idea being to break into the highly lucrative advertising market there.

Then a spate of bad publicity hit the station, leading people to believe that it was in the hands of English businessmen but, as Robbie Robinson, the station's owner and major investor, himself an Irish national, explained: "In reality, 70 per cent of the company is held by Irish nationals". Some in pirate circles hotly dispute that assertion.

The station experienced what has by now become a traditional Irish welcome for any new pirate in the Dublin area — its £5,000 aerial was chopped down in a sabotage attack. At the time Sunshine Radio claimed that it was the work of broadcasting rivals. Other stations have experienced similar setbacks. South Dublin pirate, Southside Radio, had £3,500 worth of equipment stolen, forcing it off the air for three months earlier this year.

But now they have ironed out most of their problems. They broadcast from five o'clock in the morning to nine o'clock at night and have a full time staff of 17 which includes seven DJs and producers, two news staff for their five news bulletins per day, three advertising staff and two night watchmen.

Their impressive list of production staff includes Chris Carey, former Radio Caroline and Radio Luxembourg DJ, who thought up the name "Sunshine Radio."



ROBBIE ROBINSON . . . wants to show that his outfit is successful and useful.

his English accent — he was, in fact, born in Dublin.

Then comes Colin Russell, Adrian Horseman and former RTE Radio 2 DJ Declan Meehan and finally, the two news readers, Marion Christey, a 19 year old Irish girl with a French name, and Shiobhan Walls.

RTE 2 DJ Declan Walsh

Former RTE 2 DJ Declan Meehan, widely believed to have been sacked for his views about the national station, is the most recent of the acquisitions. The inevitable question is sure to arise: is Sunshine Radio better than RTE Radio Two?

Robbie Robinson firmly believes that it is, in terms of station equipment anyway. His experience in broadcasting is unquestioned — he spent 18 months he rose from junior station DJ to the dizzy station, Radio Caroline, during which time working on the original British pirate years working on Dutch television and radio heights of station manager, and another six — and he has imported the most up-to-date equipment and most knowledgeable radio technicians.

Indeed, some of the equipment he is using is, he claims, not in use anywhere else in Ireland or Britain. One particular piece

SUNSHINE RADIO, and indeed all the pirate stations throughout the country, operate by courtesy of a legal loophole in the existing Wireless and Telegraphy Acts (1926-72), which enables them to repossess their equipment—including transmitter—within seven days of any P & T raid. The loophole revolves around the definition of a transmitter.

In any case, the present law means that on a first conviction the pirates are fined only £25, followed by £50 on a second, hardly bankrupting sums. Consequently, the Department of Posts and Telegraphs stopped carrying out raids a long time ago after a spate of activity that hit the headlines and virtually turned the pirates into local heroes. Recently, the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Mr. Albert Reynolds, openly admitted in a radio interview that the present legislation is inadequate to stamp out the pirates.

"recomputerises" the music played on the station, giving Sunshine Radio a characteristic sound that, he claims, is psychologically more pleasing for listeners.

Without doubt, Sunshine Radio is in Ireland to make money. "Sure, what else?" says Robbie, "Of course, we are very much involved in the community with natural 'spin-offs' from the station, for example, in the area of charities. Radio and charities are great bed-fellows. But I'm risking it all. I've invested most of the £100,000 and have sold my house and furniture in England. It's a calculated risk — every risk in life is calculated."

Sunshine Radio is established as a limited company and intends, like other legitimate business, to pay VAT, PAYE and be "subject to all standard forms of taxation of the state."

For Robbie Robinson, it is something of a dream come true. Educated and brought up in Co. Tipperary where his mother comes from, he has always felt that he would someday like to return to Ireland. Then, earlier this year, the ideal of setting up a radio station came to him and having thoroughly examined the viability, he decided to go on the air with Sunshine Radio, broadcasting from the Sands Hotel in Portmarnock on 539 metres on the medium wave.

The listenership reaction to the station was "beyond all my wildest expectations," says Robbie who claims a 15 per cent listenership north of the city, five per cent in the city and another 20,000 regular listeners in the North of England — although adding up to about 200,000 listeners after three months on the air.

In the year year, Sunshine Radio plan to extend their operations and open up advertising offices in Liverpool and other major centres in the North of England. If and when the Irish Government introduces legislation for independent local radio — Robbie Robinson believes that it will be in about 12 months time — they plan to apply for a licence. A major part of their application will consist of how successful — both in terms of finance and community service — they are between how and then.

If their application is turned down, they are adamant, as are many other pirates, that they will close down. "We're scooting around the present law, using it as a stepping stone to show that we can do it, that we are professional broadcasters," argues Robbie.

So confident, in fact, are the "nouveau riche" pirates, they are "seriously considering" lodging a complaint with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) — the international "watch dog" organisation that overlooks broadcasting throughout the world — about a Liberty Radio station that causes interference to their signal at certain times during the day.

Eight of them on the air, all 'breaking even' and obviously filling a gap

AT PRESENT, there are about eight pirate radio stations on the air in the Dublin area — Big D Radio, Radio Dublin, Radio City, Capital Radio, Radio 1257, Southside Radio (SSR), Dublin Community Radio (DCR) and Sunshine Radio — and about another 40 stations in country areas, 25 to 30 of these broadcasting on a day to day basis.

Most of the stations cater for the "younger generation" — 15 to 25 year olds — playing "pop" and top 40 music, although their evening programmes tend to specialise in rock 'n' roll, new wave, Irish traditional or country and western music, depending on the particular DJ.

The majority of stations are without doubt

any figures for fear of a visit from the tax man. In fact, one country pirate, Radio Big L in Limerick, has received an income tax demand for £17,000 which station owner, Mike Richardson, described as "crazy" and added: "There's no way we can pay this amount". Other stations now expect similar demands.

When the pirate stations were first set up, the response from the public was overwhelming. Requests — always a measure of interest in a station — flooded in and advertising contracts followed. All of the stations claim to have taken listeners away from both RTE Radio 1 and 2, but, as is expected, RTE claim otherwise.

There is undoubtedly a huge interest in the pirate stations amongst young

Radio (SSR) in Dun Laoghaire, recently claimed to have received 108 phone calls during a two-hour request show — but as the rating battle rages on, it's too easy to get caught up in figures. Both RTE and the pirates have throngs of devoted fans.

Southside Radio is, in fact, one of the more successful pirates. Operating on the south side of Dublin in a monopoly situation of its own — it is the only pirate based in this area — it has about 40 regular advertisers and over 30 full and part-time staff. It broadcasts from the Hotel Victor in Dun Laoghaire on 300 metres on the medium wave and, as it says itself, for "24 hours a day, 365 days a year". Although they too are reluctant to release any profit figures they re-