

SUPERMAN

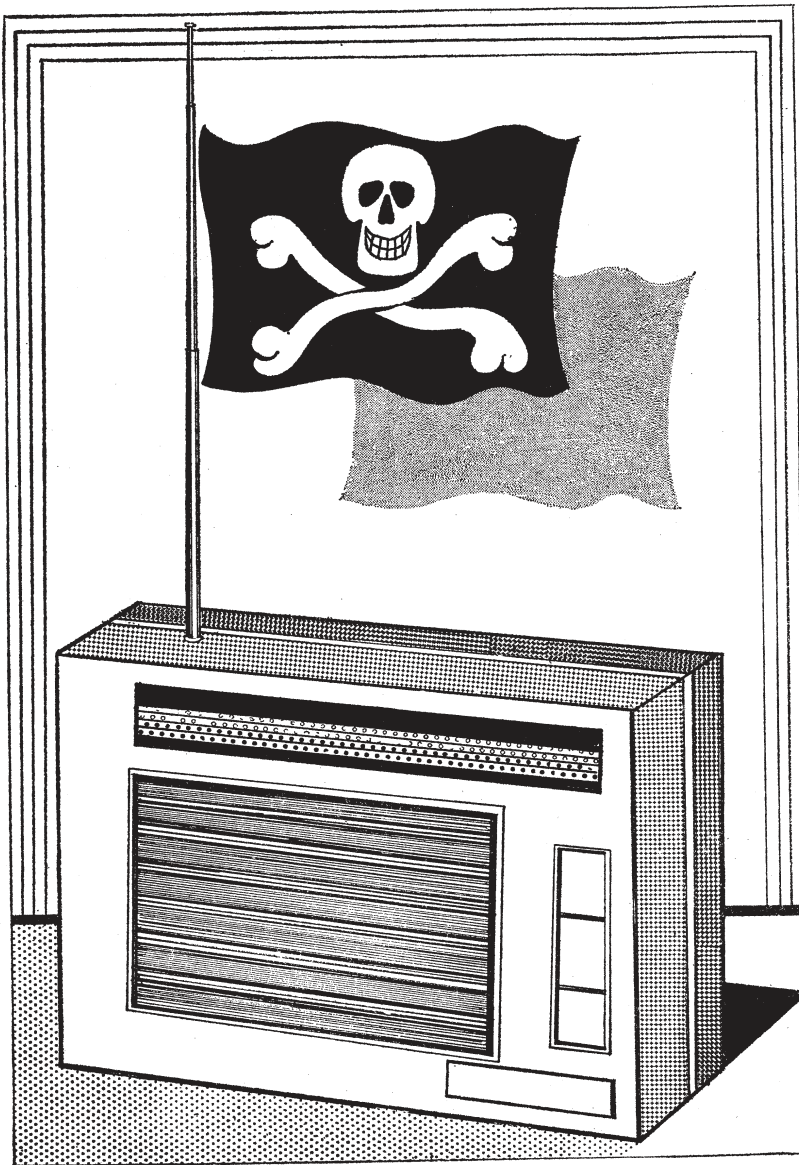


SWINGING LONDON

a guide to
where the action is

written by
KARL DALLAS





A LITTLE REQUIEM FOR BIG L & CO

SURPRISINGLY, and possibly for not much longer, one of the centres of swinging London is miles out in the Thames estuary, atop the 212 ft mast of the ex-minesweeper *Galaxy*, now used to beam out the pirate radio transmissions of Radio London. For although the pirates aim for listeners all over the country—Big L claim an audience of 10 million plus all over England and Wales—it is their daytime broadcasts from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. the next day that make all London a transistor-hugging radiotheque.

Sitting in their seaborne studio, before a battery of RCA cartridges playing on three Gates turntables, a British-designed Ampex tape recorder, Scully playbacks, Elkon attenuators for fades, all of which they operate themselves while carrying on a genial burbling of verbal Muzak, working in a constant temperature of 68°F—with a complete change of air every four minutes—the pirate disc jockeys contribute something basic to what makes London swing.

In fact, if whoever is postmaster-general this week—and it's difficult these days to keep up with them—succeeds in his/her ambition of closing down all the pirates it will re-

present a definite victory of the non-swingers over everything that makes London rock like Gibraltar.

Yes, yes, we know, they are violating international transmission space agreements, like every other country in Europe. They still get closest to real piracy in their feet-dragging leisure in negotiating any proper royalty return for the discs with which they saturate the air, though Radio 390 are paying up now. And one must sympathise with Brian Blain of the Musicians' Union in his desire to keep his members in work, though as the old-style dance band musician becomes an extinct species, this must be a difficult job.

On paper, the mechanics of London's "Formula Radio" sound so sterile, so pre-digested, so . . . *dull* . . . that one wonders if that's really what we've been enjoying.

Of course, the formula is packaged up pretty skilfully. In between the half-hour weather forecasts and the newscasts which are given with all the vibrant, deadpan dramatics of an old March of Time commentator, the disc jockey in control has three hours in which to take his listeners through the Big L Fab Forty—they don't know, or more probably don't need to care that "fab" is as old hat as "gear" and "with it"—and to scatter about revived 45s, new releases, and American or LP album tracks.

No record can be played more than once in any three hours, the whole Fab 40 may not be played more than five times on any one day, and the other records can only be played once a day. Then there is the advertising: six minutes every hour at something like £2 a second. Plus the frequent station identification signals which make witty variations on the "wonderful Radio London" jingle.

In cold print it sounds pretty vacuous. American pediatricians use the word formula to mean baby food, and this in a way is just what it is, a sort of radio Complan, a strictly non-fattening product which has positively no effect on any areas of the brain. But the strange alchemy of pop, which can turn electronic feedback into music and non-design in garish colours into something that fairly . . . *zings!* . . . turns this vacuum-packed mish-mash into something we never knew we needed, until we got it.

If the BBC weren't so aunty, so abysmally yawn-provoking, so irrelevant to our needs and (except for occasional flashes of aberrant genius and they're working hard on *them*) dull, the pirates wouldn't have stood a chance of getting anywhere. Except, one asks, while Music While You Work jingle-jangles its way past our consciousness, how can a monolith like BBC fail to do otherwise, given the grubby energy of bureaucrats to tidy everything they touch out of existence and the general tendency of the Establishment to remake everyone it handles in its own image?

Like commercial TV in its earlier, less respectable, more barnstorming days, when it acted as a sort of emetic to liven up our cultural digestion with all its vulgar works—remember when the intellectuals welcomed "Coronation Street" for its realism?—the pirates probably succeeded *because* they were beyond the pale, though Mr. Philip Birch, managing director of Big L, won't thank me for saying so. "We are not and have no intention of becoming lawbreakers and we are not assisted in our cause by the pirate label," he says. Spoken like a true graduate of JWT, Phil baby.

But this sort of front office talk has little to do with the product he is marketing, fortunately. If it was, we'd be back in the arms of aunty again, only tarted up in scarlet drawers instead of her good old Mrs. Grundy bloomers. But it looks good on company reports and marketing surveys.

Pirates they are, thank God, and pirates they will remain until Mr./Mrs. PMG succeeds in doing away with them entirely, until he/she has had time to think of something to take their place. The mind boggles at what it will be: the Light Programme converted to all-day, dripping-tap-type pop, probably. Of course, being completely unable to get within a Three Mile Limit of what's behind the whole pop-swinging-now revolution their reaction to anything new like the pirates has a sort of Hindu wheel of life inevitability about it.

Anything genuinely popular is such a threat to the aunty-knows-best philosophy that a sop has to be given us while the original creation is quietly disposed of.

"What are you complaining about?" the old girl wheezes. "We gave you your nice sop, didn't we? How can you call us

out-of-date now?" Quite easily, in fact.

People who rarely listen to pirates lump them together, although they are all different. Big L seems to have the most successful general sound—rather like the total sound of a beat group being better than its individual members—but they have no single disc jockey with half the style of Caroline's Emperor Rosko, who translates into audible terms something of Jimmy Savile's manic manner, or Murray the K's wild enthusiasm.

Rosko is the son of Hollywood producer Joe Pasternak, but what that's got to do with his success I don't know. None of the pirates pays its disc jockeys very well, even compared with the BBC, and being marooned on a pitching and tossing ship, or on a converted anti-aircraft fort, for two weeks out of every three isn't everyone's idea of fun. But what it means is they get the triers, broadcasting's out-crowd who have created their own In situation, with the galling result that they have captured more audience, percentage-wise, than their opposite numbers on legal stations, and more than the oldest "pirate" of them all, Luxembourg, operating from the offshore island moored off the continent of England.

Luxembourg's fate is evidence that the race isn't to the firstest, and for that matter so is Caroline's. Radio City's stronger transmitter didn't help her beat Big L.

Radio 390, now, which worked on the principle "if you can't beat them, start your own race", got itself a nice following of lonely and depressed housewives by taking the basic ingredients of the average Light Programme broadcast—"good" music like Sinatra and Percy Faith and Mantovani—and putting it in a nice sexy wrapping.

The result was as successfully sloppy as a good woman's magazine and occupied the same vicarious place in the lives of its women listeners as the brush salesman or milkman popping in for a cup of tea. Managing director Ted Allbeury started 390 as something of a crusade on behalf of these lonely women, which is why from 9 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. it was devoted to "Eve—the women's magazine of the air". There was also a Dales-type serial, "Doctor Paul", a programme of

medical hints for women given by a doctor, and a programme for young children.

Then they banned it. The rest, presumably, will follow. But as we bow our heads in the sudden silence of the transistors, the dammed energies the pirates buccaneered to their purpose are even now seeking a new, subversive outlet.

RADIO CAROLINE 259 meters medium wave. 24 hours a day, all week. Disc jockeys: Keith Hampshire, Tommy Vance, Johnny Walker, Steve Young, Mike Ahern, Robbie Dale, Dave Lee Travis.

RADIO LONDON, 266 meters medium wave. 5.30 am through midnight to 2 am all week. Disc jockeys: Chuck Blair, Peter Drum-

mond, Lorne King, John Peel, Paul Kay, Ed Stewart, Kenny Everett, Mark Roman, Keith Skues.

RADIO 390, 390 meters medium wave, 6.30 am to 12 midnight all week. Disc jockeys: Edward Cole, Paul Beresford, Lee Gilbert, Christopher Clarke, Clement Shaw, Alan West, Jonathan Hall, Wolfe Byrne, David Sinclair.

BRUCE DUNNET PRESENTS for Folksong Promotions

**The New
Contemporary
Folk Club**

Sundays at 7.30 p.m.

**The Horseshoe,
Tottenham Court Road**

featuring

**BERT JANSCH
JOHN RENBOURN**

membership 5s
admission
7s 6d

**THE ROEBUCK
Tottenham Court Road
London W1**

Fridays at 8 p.m.

Guests include

**THE BRACKEN
LAVERNE SQUIRES**

JOHNNY JOYCE
and other folk stars