

THE BIG ISSUE

SOUTH WEST

COMING UP FROM THE STREETS

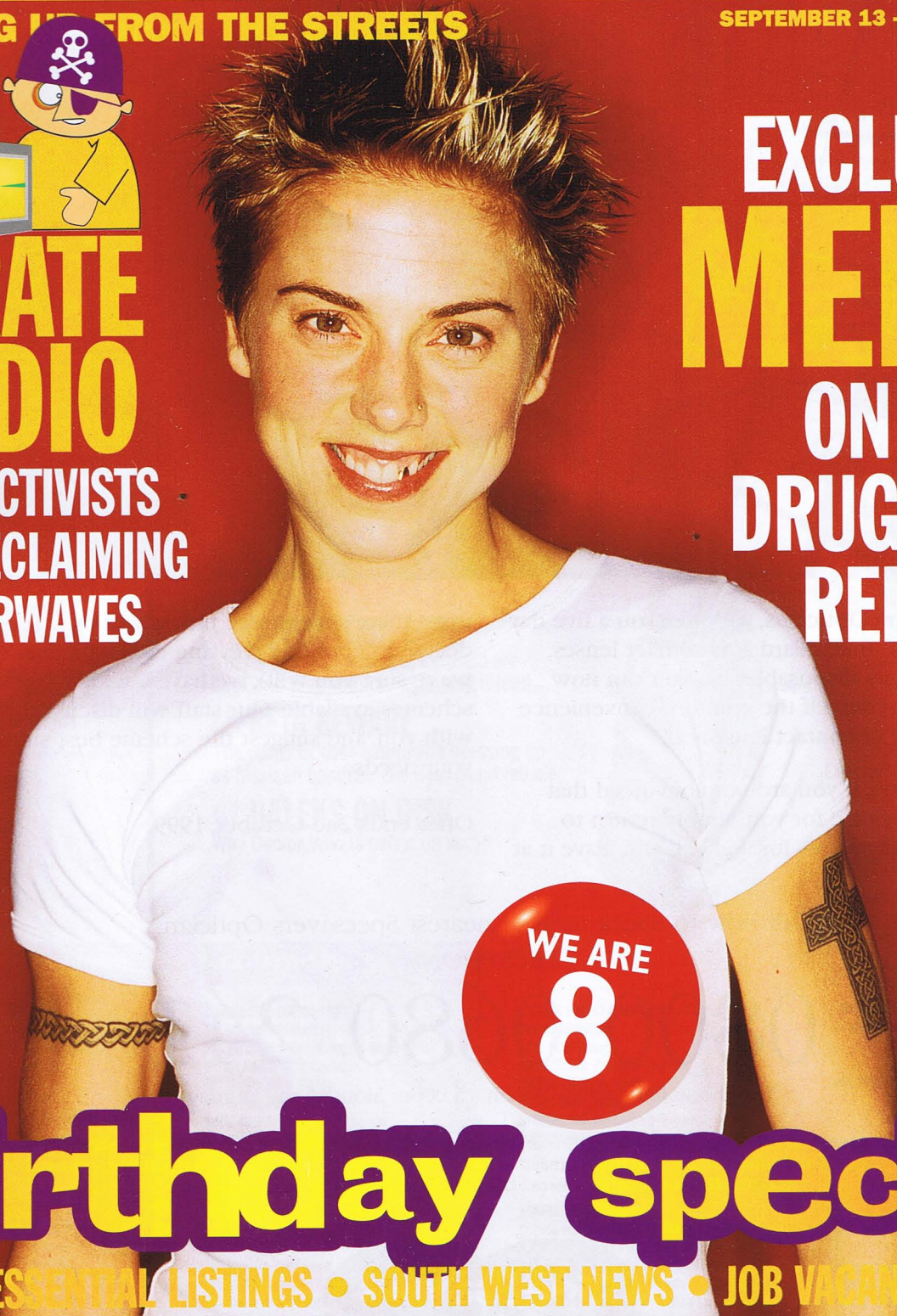
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PIRATE RADIO

HOW ACTIVISTS ARE RECLAIMING THE AIRWAVES

EXCLUSIVE:
MEL C
ON LOVE, DRUGS AND RELIGION



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MUSIC FOR YOUR

WHEN THE AIRWAVES ARE SOLD OFF TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER AND THE GOVERNMENT AND CORPORATIONS REAP THE PROFITS, IT'S TIME TO TAKE A STANCE. GREG LOWE TUNES IN TO THE INTERFERENCE

On Saturday September 11 Interference FM (IFM) Bristol broadcast in solidarity with the international campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal, the African-American journalist who has been held on death row in the United States since 1982. IFM's aim was to highlight US state repression and the case for political prisoners. However, it wasn't just the message that was radical, but also the method of transmission – resistance to state control of the radio frequency spectrum.

When land is sold off to a corporation or when public space is used to advertise the latest fad, most people are aware of it. But what about the airwaves? We're assured that radio licensing and regulation is for our own good, but is it? IFM doesn't think so.

IFM is a pirate radio station with a difference. It's political, it says no to advertising, and it's making a direct assault on state regulation and corporate capitalism. The Government talks endlessly about freedom of information, but in reality only rich corporations have access to the airwaves. IFM's response has been to facilitate an autonomous network of pirate stations nationwide, including weekly broadcasts in London, groups in Bristol, Manchester and Leeds, and Radio4A in Brighton.

'Pirate' stations originally got their name from unlicensed stations, like Radio Caroline, broadcasting from ships in international waters outside of the grip of state regulation. But 'free' radio stations have sprung up in almost every country where freedom has been repressed.

IFM believes that the quality of programming suffers directly from the licensing laws, which favour the pursuit of corporate profit over freedom of expression. "IFM has developed from a band of disillusioned pirates and other people working for social change," says Chris Winton from IFM London. "Its aim is to replace commercial radio, which is absolutely crap. We want to provide a service that isn't available at the moment. There are no community stations – commercial radio is simply for advertisers to sell their wares."

IFM has provided support for various political struggles over the past few years. It helped the Hunt Sabs' Broadcasting Corporation sabotage the 1998 Countryside March in London, provided the only proactive radio coverage of the June 18 Carnival Against

Capitalism, and recently transmitted from the Exodus Collective's 'Free The Spirit' community festival in Luton. "We were in full support of June 18 because we totally recognised what it was making a stand against – the status quo, which is basically against the people and in favour of corporations," says Winton. "Interference stands against exploitation on every front. We were only too happy to support June 18 because the time has come to take a stance."

Such a need for action is echoed in the voice of IFM Bristol, which broadcast specially for the Bristol Reclaim The Streets Party on June 10 and against the eviction of Bishopston Community Centre (BCC) in mid-June. "Everybody involved in Interference Bristol is wholeheartedly in support of Reclaim The Streets. It's proactive, it's positive and it's progressive," enthuses the wryly-

"IF WE DISCOVER A PIRATE STATION IN OPERATION, WE'LL SEEK TO HAVE IT CLOSED DOWN... BUT IT'S NOT FOR US TO HAVE OPINIONS. IF YOU WANT OPINIONS YOU'LL NEED MINISTERIAL CLEARANCE"

named Jolly Roger from IFM Bristol. "And Bishopston was inextricably linked to it. The police who were trying to create a mini-riot on the M32 that day were the same police trying to create one at BCC. We have a common enemy and we're broadcasting the truth about them. Last week we broadcast in support of the American political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal for the same reasons."

IFM joins a long line of political pirates in Bristol; one was even called Radio Interference, though it's not linked to IFM. 'Savage Yet Tender' (SYT), which broadcast from 1988 to 1989 was another. "As well as playing music, SYT had news, local sports features, agit-prop, even a SYT theatre of the airwaves," recalls radio activist Doug Savage.

"Pirate radio is about local groups and communities finding their voice and making it heard. Unfortunately the majority of pirates never move beyond playing music."

The issue of community access is fundamental to the Interference ethic. "We are trying to encourage local communities, especially around Bristol, to put forward their views," says Roger. "We're not claiming to have the definitive answer, but we do feel strongly and we have to get the message across. If you don't like what you hear, do it yourself – but get in touch and maybe we can help each other."

So what are pirate stations up against? Broadcasting has been enforceably regulated ever since the 1949 Wireless Telegraphy Act. The 1990 and 1996 Broadcasting Acts govern allocation of licenses, yet license costs are prohibitive, with non-returnable deposits and high-running costs. Also, convicted ex-pirates are banned from even applying for one. "The licensing system is basically a form of twentieth century enclosure, where only those with loads of money have access to the airwaves," Roger explains. "If you're at the bottom of the pile, you're a consumer and that's it."

The Radio Authority (RA) is the statutory body responsible for 'regulating the spectrum', and was set up by the Government under the 1990 Broadcasting Act. "We license and regulate all commercial radio stations. Frequencies are scarce, so the Government decided it needed a body to manage the spectrum," explains RA spokeswoman Julia McCatty.

Policing the airwaves is the job of the Radiocommunications Agency (RCA), an executive agency of the Department for Trade & Industry. Last year it carried out 944 raids on pirate stations, resulting in 52 convictions and generating £27,400 in fines and costs. "Pirate stations normally broadcast on frequencies that interfere with properly authorised broadcasts," says RCA spokesman Peter Manditch. "If we discover a pirate station in operation, we will seek to have it closed down."

But this argument is refuted by Edward Teach of IFM Bristol: "That's the argument they always use, but it's pretty weak. Broadcasting on a licensed frequency would be suicidal for us." When asked what opinion the RCA had on pirates opening up access for communities, Manditch replies in true civil

BUCCANEARS

AHOY THERE! PIRACY IN ACTION
PHOTO BY IAN HUNTER



servant style: "It's not for us to have opinions. If you want opinions you'll need ministerial clearance."

The high cost of licenses and the RCA's repressive policing compound the politics of radio. "The main aim of the present regulation is revenue generation, a case of Thatcherisation of the airwaves, where chunks of the frequency spectrum are sold off to the highest bidder," explains 'Marconi', who maintains the Irrational website, which provides information on pirate stations. "The notion that the ether is a commodity owned by the state is highly objectionable." This is highlighted by the fact that over 23 per cent of the 230 'independent' stations in the Bristol area are owned by just three corporations.

So do commercial stations worry about pirates affecting their profits? "I do appreciate how hard it is to get a license," says John

Dash, Programming Director for Galaxy 101 in Bristol. "But having pirate stations is wrong. It's unfair." However, it's easy to have such opinions when you're owned by Chrysalis Radio Ltd, who are linked to the Chrysalis record company. And what about Galaxy 101's origins in Bristol pirate station 'Free The People' (FTP), which went commercial in 1988/89? "I wasn't involved then. You're going so far back down the line that I can't comment on the connections," comments a considerably less forthright Dash.

It's interesting to note that while commercial stations play down profit protection, record company playlists and shareholder interest, the Commercial Radio Companies Association's annual radio awards are sponsored by global auditors KPMG, consultants for multinationals such as British Aerospace, Mobil, Tarmac, Vickers and Zeneca.

IFM firmly believes the corporate expropriation of the airwaves matches that of material resources, and it's a message that they're shouting, quite literally, from the rooftops. "The message going out to the corporations is 'we've seen the future and you're not a part of it'. When profit kills people, we support people," says Roger. "And the message for commercial radios stations is, 'we're going to hit you where it hurts most - in the pocket.' Read that how you will, but we'll be in touch."

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<http://www.irrational.org/sic/radio>
See our feature on pages 30 - 32 for information about the underground press.