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The devil has all the best songs: reflections on the life and times of Simon Dee

Simon Matthews

The death of sixties broadcaster Simon Dee in August produced a crop of obituaries that commented on his brief period of fame and the claims he subsequently made about his career's demise. Most of the accounts suggested that he was eccentric, slightly paranoid, of little talent and had an exaggerated sense of his own significance. The reader's attention was drawn to his comments that he had been classified as a national security risk by the Special Branch and that the CIA effectively controlled broadcasting in the UK.¹

Dee served in the RAF from 1953 to 1958, spending much of this time in the Middle East, culminating in his being attached to RAF Intelligence in Baghdad in 1957-1958. This was a critical period that saw the UK humiliated by the USA during the Suez crisis in late 1956. At its simplest this event, more than any other, highlighted a split in the British establishment. One section took an essentially Gaullist view: Britain should be able to act alone and should retain a domestic economy and services commensurate with this. Another increasingly influential and powerful section saw Suez as proof that Britain could no longer operate either as a separate force in the world or have a particular role of its own that it was at liberty to pursue and should work closely with the US and engage in a number of other activities, such as

¹ See *The Daily Telegraph* 30 August 2009 and others the same day.

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'modernising' its economy on more liberal lines than the post-1945 political consensus had hitherto indicated.

With his military service complete Dee had various occupations in the more fashionable areas of London, including running a coffee bar in Soho and working for a society photographer. In the early 1960s he met Ronan O'Rahilly, a young Irish hanger-on in the London music scene. O'Rahilly told him that he would be starting an independent commercial radio station – the first venture of this type in or near the UK – and offered Dee a job as a presenter. Dee accepted and started broadcasting on Radio Caroline in March 1964.

Radio Nord

Prior to its dropping anchor off the coast of East Anglia, the ship used to accommodate Radio Caroline had an interesting history. Originally known as the MV Olga, it was a small coastal cargo vessel of the type commonly found in northern Europe. In 1960 it was purchased by two wealthy US businessmen, Gordon McLendon and Clint Murchison Junior. The Olga was registered in Nicaragua and equipped to operate as a floating commercial radio station, broadcasting music and news bulletins to southern Sweden (Stockholm essentially) while anchored just outside Swedish territorial waters. It commenced transmission in March 1961.² Its radio broadcasting equipment had been shipped across the Atlantic from Texas (where McLendon and Murchison were based) and assembled by US specialists. It was sufficiently powerful to be heard far beyond the southern part of Sweden. In good weather conditions the signal was accessible as far east as

² McLendon and Murchison were keen not to be publicly identified with Radio Nord. The station was thus managed by Jack Kotschack, a Swedish/Finnish businessman, who had produced a couple of minor Swedish films in the 1950s. It is not clear how Kotschack came to be in contact with McLendon and Murchison.

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Leningrad, Karelia, Finland, the Baltic States, northern Poland and East Germany. Broadcasting in Swedish would not have represented an impenetrable difficulty to many listeners in these areas, the language being widely understood and spoken then and now in Finland, Karelia and Estonia.

Given that both McLendon and Murchison had significant business experience – McLendon's in commercial broadcasting – we might wonder why (or if) they pursued this venture purely on economic grounds. A floating radio station is far more expensive to operate than a land-based operation. In a typical land-based station, for example, the studio, offices and broadcasting equipment would all be contained in 2 or 3 floors of an office block or within a medium sized building. A ship, however, requires a crew, regular maintenance in a dockyard and a supply vessel while on station, as well as the usual technical staff, presenters and a land-based office. Would the income from radio commercials targeted at the relatively small population of southern Sweden really be enough to cover all this and produce a profit? And why have a US-manufactured transmitter shipped across the Atlantic and installed by US specialists? Was there really no comparable equipment available in Europe? If the rationale of McLendon and Murchison had been solely to open up the then restricted European radio market to a profitable US-style commercial radio station they could surely have selected another location – such as off the coasts of France or Italy or Germany for example – where their ship would reach much greater audiences and would broadcast in a far more widely spoken language. Given the location actually chosen by them, which was certainly convenient for reaching an audience behind the Iron Curtain, Radio Nord looks just as likely to have been an arms-length, privately funded operation broadcasting propaganda to Eastern Europe. Radio Nord broadcast until June 1962 when the difficulties caused by the Swedish government restricting supply of the vessel resulted in her

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sailing to Spain, to await orders from its owners.³

The UK interest

In September 1962 Radio Nord sailed north from Spain and anchored off the south east coast of England while McLendon and Murchison tried to conclude the sale of the ship to a group of UK investors led by Alan Crawford, an Australian music publisher. Crawford, who owned a number of record shops in London, said subsequently that he was interested in setting up a commercial radio station that would broadcast pop music to UK audiences because it would boost sales in his record shops at a time when pop music received very little exposure on the BBC Light Programme. Crawford may have had other reasons for involvement in this venture. He was also, for instance, a business partner of Major Oliver Smedley. Smedley was a founder member of the Institute of Economic Affairs and a prominent figure in UK free trade and libertarian political circles. Both Crawford and Smedley knew of the broadcasts of Radio Nord and both had been directors of a company called CBC (Plays) Limited, which aimed to promote commercial radio, since 1960 – the year that McLendon and Murchison purchased the MV Olga.⁴

Interviewed in 1984 Crawford could not remember how he found out who the owners of Radio Nord were or how he contacted them. Whatever the circumstances, McLendon and Murchison were happy to do a deal and gave Crawford specific advice on the arrangements and legal structures he needed to put in place to successfully operate a privately owned offshore station in an environment where it would be unlawful:

establish a core group of investors with whom the

³ Radio Nord remained on the air through the winter. During this time the Baltic freezes over, there is little daylight and temperatures are below zero for many months on end – hardly pleasant conditions for the crew of a small cramped ship.

⁴ See <www.offshoreechoes.com>

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company would be publicly associated whilst having all the companies and bodies associated with the venture registered offshore – preferably in a secretive domain.

The immediate problem facing Crawford in 1962 was that possible UK investors knew from an elementary perusal of the Radio Nord finances that the amount of money needed to run a floating commercial radio station was enormous compared with a land-based option; that the UK authorities could still hamper the operation of any proposed station; and that profits might be considerably less than expected. As a result of this negotiations with Crawford took until August 1963 to finalise.⁵ The eventual deal was that Radio Nord would be leased by McLendon and Murchison to a consortium led by Jocelyn Stevens, the owner of the UK high society gossip magazine *Queen*. The funding came via a network of companies registered in Liechtenstein and day-to-day management of the business was carried out by Major Smedley. Noting the difficulties in supplying an offshore vessel and the sanctions that any irate government could use against it, Crawford, Stevens and Smedley reached an agreement with Egan O’Rahilly, the owner of a private harbour at Greenore in Eire, that the vessel would be serviced and supplied there. O’Rahilly’s son, Ronan, an appropriately youthful figure who knew Crawford through Crawford’s record shops in London, was the public front for the operation.⁶ The MV Olga/Radio Nord ship was renamed Radio Atlanta, and sailed to Greenore to be fitted out in late 1963.⁷

The assorted investors bought a second ship, a

⁵ Because the negotiations with Crawford took so long to conclude, the MV Olga/Radio Nord was ordered back to Galveston, Texas and decommissioned by McLendon and Murchison.

⁶ In O’Rahilly’s account of this period he gives himself a central role in bringing Jocelyn Stevens into the venture. It is not clear that this was the case.

⁷ The name Radio Atlanta was selected to commemorate the town of Atlanta, Texas, where McLendon had established his first radio station.

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redundant Danish ferry, the MV Fredericia, in December 1963 for use as a radio station and it was registered by its new owner (ostensibly Ronan O'Rahilly) in Panama. By early 1964 both Radio Atlanta and the MV Fredericia were under refit at Greenore. On 28 March 1964 the Fredericia, now renamed Radio Caroline, took up station off Harwich and began broadcasting. Simon Dee presented its first programme. It was joined on 12 May 1964 by Radio Atlanta which dropped anchor in approximately the same location. The presence of two offshore stations so near to London, and their (for the time) refreshingly new broadcasting style and popularity with a young audience, quickly led to official enquiries. The Director General of the BBC duly received a confidential briefing on their activity on 21 May 1964 which stated:

Approximately 50% of the funding for both ships came from UK backers, specifically Jocelyn Stevens and the British Printing Corporation via its key directors Sir Geoffrey Crowther and Max Rayne.⁸

The remainder of the funding was held in bank accounts in Liechtenstein under the control of Dr Peter Marxer.

The transmitting equipment on both vessels was powerful and of US manufacture.

Both ships had been fitted out in a privately owned port in Eire owned by a Mr O'Rahilly.⁹

The memo concluded with its author drily requesting 'a word on the telephone about the confidential nature of this information....'

⁸ Granada TV interviewed Stephens and O'Rahilly on May 12th 1964 in the offices of *Queen*. These served initially as the administrative HQ for Radio Caroline.

⁹ Egan O'Rahilly, father of Ronan, was a close colleague of Eamonn de Valera and Sean MacBride. MacBride, who was Chairman of Amnesty International at this time, wrote the legal opinion that Radio Caroline would have relied on if subjected to serious legal challenge. Through his wife, an Irish-American, Egan O'Rahilly also had connections to influential figures in US politics.

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This comment presumably indicates that there were certain things that the author of the memo did not wish to put in writing.

The UK backers

Jocelyn Stevens, the most prominent of the UK figures associated with the venture, had a conventional upbringing for a member of the privileged elite in the 1940s and '50s – Eton, the Rifle Brigade and Cambridge. Socially well connected (his wife was a lady-in-waiting to Princess Margaret) in 1957 he became proprietor of *Queen* magazine, announcing in the publication that 'he wanted to destroy British Establishment society as it was as a result of the 1956 Suez debacle.'

The most significant figure he employed at *Queen* was Robin Douglas-Home, nephew of Sir Alec Douglas-Home. Robin Douglas-Home, who counted himself a friend of both Frank Sinatra and John F. Kennedy, appears to have had access to quite a considerable variety of interesting information. On 31 July 1962 *Queen* published the first piece of gossip linking John Profumo to Christine Keeler and Eugene Ivanov. It is not known who supplied *Queen* and/or Robin Douglas-Home with this information, but its appearance was a significant part of the events that led to the collapse of the MacMillan government.¹⁰

The career and political inclinations of Major Oliver Smedley have already been noted. During the negotiations to purchase the MV Olga by UK investors, Smedley was also active as a founder member of the Keep Britain Out campaign. This campaigned against the attempts then being made by

¹⁰ Robin Douglas-Home was divorced by his wife, model Sandra Paul, in 1965 as a result of his affair with Princess Margaret. He was found dead in 1968, the death being ruled as suicide due to clinical depression. Sandra Paul later married David Wynne-Morgan, who ran Annabel's night club, and is today married to Michael Howard MP, Conservative Party leader 2003-2005.

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Harold MacMillan to take the UK into the Common Market. Smedley, who was Vice President of the Liberal Party at this point, actually announced when Radio Atlanta started broadcasting in May 1964, that it was intended to be 'the last bastion of freedom if the country went Communist.' This could only have been an allusion to the possibility that the general election that was due in late 1964 would result in a Labour government that Major Smedley and his colleagues regarded as seriously – even dangerously – left-wing.

Sir Geoffrey Crowther went from Cambridge where he had been President of the Union in 1928, to Yale via a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship. He had an American wife and was editor of *The Economist* from 1938 until 1956.¹¹ He was a member of the Council of the Royal Institute of International Affairs and in the 1940s had edited *Transatlantic*, a magazine published at that time by Penguin Books.

Max Rayne was a property developer and conducted various business ventures with SAS founder David Stirling in the 1950s and '60s. He later married Lady Jane Vane-Tempest-Stewart, sister of Lady Annabel Birley, subsequently the wife of Sir James Goldsmith.

At the simplest the common denominators that the above figures shared were:

a disinterest in the post-1945 political settlement of high spending on social welfare and various state and governmental activities;

a belief instead in the efficacy of the free market;

a recognition that Harold MacMillan, the candidate favoured by the US for the Conservative succession in 1957, was by the early 1960s struggling badly and was seen by

¹¹ During his stewardship *The Economist* invented the humorous character 'Mr Butskell', a British politician who combined the attributes of both R. A. Butler and Hugh Gaitskell and whose commitment to a high spending state enabled him to be at home in either of the two main political parties.

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many as a failed leader who would produce electoral defeat and the return to power of Labour.¹²

The wider context

The association of public figures such as Stevens, Smedley, Crowther and Payne with what was then an unlawful venture in the UK also needs to be put into a broader social and cultural context. There were many people in Britain in the 1950s and 60s who believed that US society offered a valid model for the UK to emulate. There is not sufficient space here to record every step in the Americanisation of Britain but significant episodes in this long march were surely the legislation in 1954 that established commercial television, the 'Traffic in Towns' study of 1960 (which led to US style developments and road networks in city centres)¹³ and the scrapping of retail price maintenance in 1963, which produced the great supermarket expansion of the 1960s and 70s.

¹² Note should also be taken of the satire boom – which began in the UK in 1961-1962 – attacked and mocked the MacMillan government which it portrayed as ineffectual and complacent. It thus shared some common ground with the line taken by *Queen* magazine and the promoters of Radio Caroline.

¹³ 'Traffic in Towns' studied the growth of car ownership in the UK and recommended major road construction schemes including some within town centres. It appeared at the same time as Reshaping British Railways – aka 'The Beeching Report' – which proposed closing 50% of the UK rail network. 'Traffic in Towns' studied mainly US models rather than European options and was prepared by a Committee led by Sir Geoffrey Crowther. Other members were T Dan Smith, Leader of Newcastle City Council (a local authority that, more than any other, opted for US style redevelopment during this period) and Oleg Kerensky, a noted bridge engineer. Oleg Kerensky was the son of Alexander Kerensky, briefly Prime Minister of Russia in 1917, until ousted in a Bolshevik coup. T. Dan Smith actually began his political career in the Revolutionary Communist Party – a significant UK Trotskyist group – with Gerry Healy, Ted Grant *et al*, where he learnt the importance of a tightly organised and disciplined political machine. One wonders if Smith and Kerensky Jnr. discussed politics while serving on 'Traffic in Towns'.

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But not all efforts to change the fabric of cultural and social life in the UK necessarily went the way of those who were pro-American. The Pilkington Committee which between 1960 and 1962 looked at the future of broadcasting in the UK is an interesting case in point. Its conclusions severely criticised ITV for relying too much on recycled US product. It recommended that the BBC should start a second, high brow, television channel. It was opposed to the licensing of commercial radio stations and it recommended instead that the BBC should set up a network of state-run local stations specifically to thwart this objective. Lobbying for commercial radio and funding an offshore 'pirate' station was thus quite a logical activity for some of those disappointed by the outcome of the Pilkington Report and was of a piece with the other initiatives listed above.¹⁴

In July 1964 both ships were under the same management and were broadcasting across the whole of the UK from two different locations. Radio Atlanta (ex-Radio Nord) moved to a position off the Isle of Man and was renamed Radio Caroline North, while the other vessel, the original Radio Caroline, stayed off the coast of East Anglia and was known as Radio Caroline South. Test transmissions showed that their signals had sufficient power to reach the USA from these positions in favourable weather conditions. The existence of privately owned commercial radio stations owned by figures in the UK who were sympathetic to the Americanisation of their own country does not prove that the US either planned or engineered such a course of events at an official level. However if the Radio Nord template was in any way typical, it

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of these issues see 'How American Mass Media Manipulated British Commercial Radio Broadcasting', an academic paper published by the *Romanian Journal of English Studies*. Its authors, Eric Gilder and Mervyn Hagger, are involved with the John Lilburne Research Institute, a free market think tank based in Texas. Its website <www.johnlilburne.com> contains some fascinating information.

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was clear that political, cultural and social influence favourable to the US could be exerted by wealthy freelance individuals (or companies) operating at arms-length from government. The circumstances around the establishment of Radio Caroline fit with this theory.¹⁵

Fighting Mr Wilson

Despite the curious memo prepared for the Director-General of the BBC, the Conservative government lead by Prime Minister Douglas-Home government took no action against Radio Caroline. This was noted at the time by Anthony Wedgewood Benn MP, who commented in his diaries for the period that he assumed that this was because they were actually quite happy with the station broadcasting. Although they trailed Labour by 10% in the opinion polls in May 1964 the Conservatives narrowed the gap considerably and only just lost the October 1964 General Election.

The new administration formed by Harold Wilson took a very different line about unlicensed privately owned radio stations, but with a parliamentary majority of only four could not immediately make the issue a major priority. This state of affairs lasted until the March 1966 General Election when Labour were re-elected with a majority of 96 – sufficient to contemplate a wide programme of parliamentary legislation.

It is still curious that while the record of the 1966-1970 Wilson government indicated a general inability to deal with a range of issues – devaluation, Rhodesia and trade union reform for example – no such inhibitions existed when it came to their taking action against unlicensed popular entertainment. One possible reason for this may have been

¹⁵ We should note that from the early 1950s the CIA sponsored a Gray Broadcasting programme in which either fully or partially privately funded and run radio stations produced pro-US material in various parts of the world. <www.faqs.org> has a number of badly scanned documents on this topic.

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the multiplication of offshore radio stations between 1964 and 1966.

By 1966 the two Radio Carolines had been joined by others, the best known of which was Radio London. This, too, had an interesting background. The station was owned by Don Pierson, a successful businessman from Dallas, Texas, who had discussed setting up the venture with Gordon McLendon, founder of Radio Nord. Pierson originally wanted to name the station Radio KLIF London, after KLIF, the radio station that McLendon ran in Dallas. McLendon was not happy with this and it broadcast instead as Radio London from a vessel anchored off Essex. Radio London earned substantial revenue from relaying programmes and advertising from the Texas based Radio Church of God, a Christian evangelical organisation led by Herbert W. Armstrong, that produced a current affairs programme 'The World Tomorrow'.¹⁶

In addition to Radio London others that could be heard included Radio 270, anchored off Scarborough and funded by a former Conservative MP, Wilf Proudfoot, (who owned an early chain of UK supermarkets) and Radio City, based in a disused WW2 fort off Margate and run by Reg Calvert, a successful manager and promoter of a number of 1960s pop groups,¹⁷

¹⁶ Herbert W Armstrong was a major US evangelist from the 1930s onwards who moved into radio broadcasting. A core part of his creed was that the white citizens of the US, UK and British Commonwealth were the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel and therefore entitled, according to Biblical prophesy, to inherit the Earth. Armstrong and the Radio Church of God also took the view that the coming Armageddon of World War Three would be caused by a United States of Europe, led by Satan – in this instance German Christian Democrat politician Franz Josef Strauss, a key advocate of European unity. Because of this much of their broadcasts from Radio London were stridently anti-Common Market. In this they had something in common with the views of Major Oliver Smedley.

¹⁷ His roster of artists included Screaming Lord Sutch, the Rockin' Berries, the Fortunes and Pinkerton's Assorted Colours. In 1964 The Fortunes released 'Caroline', a single on Decca, that was used as the daily theme music for Radio Caroline.

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as part of an arrangement he had with Major Smedley. Calvert also dabbled in politics. Under his guidance Screaming Lord Sutch stood as a National Teenage Party candidate in the 1963 bye-election caused by Profumo's resignation and also ran against Harold Wilson in Huyton in 1966 – when the government forcing 'pirate' radio stations to close was something of a political issue with younger elements of the electorate.

Despite their popularity, neither of the two Radio Carolines were profitable – no doubt the extremely high operating costs noted above accounted for this – and as a result Smedley, Stevens and the other backers soon wanted the ships sold and the broadcasting equipment moved into a disused coastal fortification off Margate. Calvert established Radio City as the first stage in this process with a generator supplied by Smedley. It transpired that, despite being outside territorial waters, the disused coastal fortress was still owned by the Ministry of Defence. In May 1966 Smedley arrived at Radio City in a motor launch with a group of dockers and seamen.¹⁸ They removed the generator, thus forcing Radio City off the air. Hearing of this Calvert went to Smedley's home and in the ensuing fracas Smedley shot Calvert dead. At the ensuing trial Smedley was acquitted on the grounds that he had acted in self-defence. Calvert's tinkering in politics and the sensational nature of his death thus provided a second reason for the Wilson government to use valuable parliamentary time on legislation against 'pirate' radio stations, time that could have been used to better effect on other issues. A bill making Radio Caroline and its imitators illegal was introduced to Parliament in late 1966 and became law as the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act in August 1967.

The passage of the legislation through Parliament

¹⁸ The dockers and seamen used in this expedition were temporarily unemployed at this time due to the National Union of Seamen's strike, an issue that also preoccupied Wilson.

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provoked a campaign of opposition which did much to tarnish Wilson's and Labour's reputation with the younger section of the electorate at this point.¹⁹ The campaign against the Act reached its crescendo in May, June and July 1967 during the final stages of the legislation. In reply to a question put to him in Parliament Edward Short, the Postmaster-General, solemnly informed his colleagues that Radio Caroline had influenced the outcome of the May 1967 Greater London Council (GLC) elections, in which Labour had lost control of London for the first time since 1934. This was nonsense. The GLC had been established by the previous Conservative government in 1963 as the replacement body for the London County Council (LCC), precisely because enlarging the LCC area to include the surrounding suburban parts of London made it easier for the Conservatives to win the elections for the new authority. Short made his comments, though, against a backdrop of Labour having lost control of a range of major local authorities in May 1967.²⁰ The notion thus being propagated by Short, to assembled Labour MPs, many of whom represented marginal seats affected by these disastrous results, was that Radio Caroline and possibly other stations represented a sort of anti-left, fifth column that ought to be curtailed in the interests of democracy. The truth appears to have been that by May 1967 Wilson and Labour were unpopular for a range of reasons and that pirate radio stations played only a minor role in this change.

The campaign in favour of the 'pirate' stations particularly involved The Move, a group who had just

¹⁹ In 1969 the Wilson government agreed to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 with effect from 1970. Thus those voting for the first time in June 1970 would have been aged 15,16 or 17 when the 'pirate' stations were taken off the air and some may have felt hostility to Labour in 1970 as a result.

²⁰ In the May 1967 local elections Labour lost control of Bradford, Bristol, Cardiff, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Southampton and Wolverhampton.

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established themselves at that point, and their manager Tony Secunda. In May and June 1967 The Move began destroying effigies of Harold Wilson on stage with an axe as part of their 'auto-destructive' pop art stage act. Secunda followed this in August 1967 by distributing promotional postcards for their latest record, 'Flowers in the Rain', showing a naked man in the bath on which the Prime Minister's face was superimposed, with a caption that implied that Wilson was having an affair with his secretary, Marcia Falkender. The postcard found its way into the hands of George Wigg MP, who passed it to Wilson. Wilson sued Secunda and The Move and won.²¹

During the period between the appearance of the postcard and the subsequent legal denouement, Secunda and The Move found themselves under surveillance by the state (presumably Special Branch) who followed them on tour around the UK as they promoted 'Flowers in the Rain'. Wilson's lack of humour arose from the allegations that he was having an extramarital relationship with Falkender. Attempts to smear him with this stretched back as far as 1960 but were not that well known or in the public domain in 1967. Who told Secunda that Wilson was having an affair with Marcia Falkender? The use of the security services against a pop group suggests that Wilson may have taken the activities of Radio Caroline and the other pirate stations somewhat more seriously than has previously been thought. Did he think that they were part of the attempts to destabilise and

²¹ The litigation was dealt with on Wilson's behalf by Lord Goodman. Goodman instructed Quintin Hogg QC MP to pursue the case against Secunda. This was ironic (or intentional) given that Hogg had raised the issue of a Wilson-Falkender relationship – without naming names – as early as 1963. The BBC's response to the 'pirates', Radio One, went on the air in September 1967 with Tony Blackburn playing 'Flowers in the Rain', possibly an act of mild rebellion by Blackburn, who had been a Radio Caroline DJ.

In settlement Wilson was allocated the entire royalties of 'Flowers in the Rain' in perpetuity.

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discredit him? If he did the presence of free market, libertarian, UK figures and US oil magnates amongst their backers would have been significant to him.

When the Maritime Broadcasting Offences Act became law in August 1967, the majority of the 'pirate' stations closed and virtually all of the better known DJs and presenters transferred to the new BBC pop station, Radio One. Radio Caroline stayed on the air. By this point Stevens, Smedley and the other publicly known backers had dropped out due to the furore between the Calvert shooting in 1966 and the passing of the Maritime Broadcasting Offences Act. The Radio Caroline operation was now reduced to Ronan O'Rahilly with finance coming from Phil Solomons, an Irish record company owner.²² Despite this, in March 1968 both Caroline ships went off the air. They were towed back to harbour in Amsterdam following failure by O'Rahilly and/or Solomons to pay for their crew, servicing and maintenance costs while on the air.

Radio Caroline never produced the profits expected by its backers in its early years. Its final financial crisis in 1967-1968 seems to have been exacerbated by O'Rahilly diversifying into film production. He spent a great deal of time in 1968 as Executive Producer for the film 'Girl on a Motor

²² Solomons owned and ran Major Minor records which had an early success with the Irish protest singer David McWilliams and his single 'Days of Pearly Spencer'. This was played continually on Radio Caroline and as a result charted everywhere in Europe. It was not played on Radio One due to the involvement of Major Minor with Radio Caroline and was not, therefore, a hit in the UK. Major Minor achieved a no. 1 hit in the UK in November 1969 (at a time when Radio Caroline was no longer broadcasting) with 'Je T'Aime Mois Non Plus' by Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin – the first instance of a record that was banned everywhere and impossible to hear on the radio reaching the top of the charts.

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Cycle' which starred Marianne Faithful and Alain Delon.²³ Very much a European prototype for 'Easy Rider' and its slew of imitators, it gave an indication of the direction that O'Rahilly would now follow.

Dee time

Simon Dee left Radio Caroline in 1965²⁴ and joined the BBC Light Programme where he worked successfully as a record presenter. He later became one of several figures hosting Top of the Pops before being given his own BBC TV chat show, 'Dee Time', in April 1967. Down to the present day, the many other programmes of this type still follow the original 'Dee Time' formula: a mixture of live music and interviews with contemporary celebrities, politicians and cultural figures. It was hugely popular. On one occasion an audience figure as high as 18 million was recorded. While Radio Caroline passed into temporary obscurity, Dee enjoyed enormous success, covering the 1967 Miss World competition and being seen in the company of Princess Margaret. In 1969, though, he angered the BBC by demanding a pay rise. They dropped 'Dee Time' and he switched to London Weekend TV where he started a new series, 'The Simon Dee Show', in January 1970. On 28 February 1970 Dee hosted an episode in which he interviewed George Lazenby and Diana Rigg, the stars of the then current James Bond film 'On Her Majesty's Secret Service'. Lazenby, who was managed by Ronan O'Rahilly, used his appearance on the show to speak at some length about the

²³ 'Girl on a Motorcycle', known as 'Naked Under Leather' in the US, was based on an obscure French novel in which a young woman rejects bourgeois conformism and rides across Europe on a motorbike visiting various lovers whilst wearing a one piece leather jump-suit. The film was moderately successful despite, or because of, being described as 'sub-porn claptrap'.

²⁴ Dee said at the time that he was leaving Radio Caroline 'while the going was good' possibly an indication of the parlous state of the station's finances and of the looming legislation to ban it.

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assassination of JFK.²⁵ He named a number of living US public figures as having played a role in the killing. This was an extraordinary direction for a piece of TV to take in 1970 but 'The Simon Dee Show' was broadcast live and not pre-recorded and/or edited as would be the case today. London Weekend TV told Dee immediately after the programme that his show would not be continued and that his contract was being terminated.²⁶ The curtailment of 'The Simon Dee Show' ended Dee's television career.

Challenging Harold again

Whatever the circumstances behind the demise of Simon Dee's TV career, both Dee and O'Rahilly – and Radio Caroline – reappeared in public life in the run up to the 1970 general election. The background to this episode was intriguing.

When Radio London ceased broadcasting in August 1967

²⁵ Various accounts say that Lazenby was either drunk, stoned or tripping while making these statements. Dee himself was known to be a regular cannabis user at this time, something that may have accounted for the freewheeling and slightly disorganised nature of some of his shows. This was not the first time Dee had been associated with the murder of JFK. In 1969 he had tried to get a copy of the Zapruder film for broadcasting on Dee Time.

²⁶ A discussion of the little that is known about this episode is at <<http://educationforum.ipbhost.com/lofiversion/index.php/t14731.htm>>.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that LWT was not unhappy to have a reason to fire Dee. His audience was falling. Further, one of LWT's shareholders, David Frost, also had a chat show (in a similar format) on the station and was trying to break into the American market. He may have surmised that this would be less likely to occur if he could not demonstrate that action had been taken about the antics of Dee and Lazenby.

The media in 1970 had not yet left behind the era of Reithian deference and was quite capable casting into oblivion individuals who committed minor infractions or told inappropriate jokes. Kenny Everett was sacked by the BBC in 1970 for speculating about whether or not the wife of the Minister of Transport (John Peyton MP) had bribed a driving instructor £5 so that she could pass her driving test.

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its owners, the Radio Church of God, offered the vessel to two Swiss businessmen, Edwin Bollier and Erwin Meister, with extensive interests in the electronics industry. Ultimately they decided against purchasing Radio London and fitted out their own ship instead, the SS Mebo II, with transmitting equipment twice the power of anything previously carried by either Radio London or Radio Caroline. Named Radio North Sea International, it took up station off the coast of Essex in January 1970 and began broadcasting. Despite Post Office jamming from April 1970 it remained on the air. Ronan O'Rahilly contacted the owners in early May 1970 and persuaded them to rename the station Radio Caroline International during the immediate run up to the 18 June 1970 UK general election and to explicitly endorse the Conservative Party.

There was a straightforward reason for this. The Conservative opposition, under Edward Heath, had included in its manifesto proposals to introduce legislation to licence a number of privately owned commercial radio stations across the UK.²⁷ As well as using Radio Caroline International to relay the vote-Conservative-not-Labour message, O'Rahilly and Dee also took a road show around selected UK parliamentary constituencies in a double decker bus covered with pictures of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung on which the face of Harold Wilson had been superimposed. O'Rahilly said of this later:

'I have had some very heavy battles, politically, very heavy battles. The biggest one was with Labour in 1970. I produced 5 million posters. I fought in a 100 marginal constituencies in the UK. We had double decker buses all over, we had hundreds of thousands of young people handing out leaflets.' ²⁸

²⁷ The first independent local radio stations – as they were called by the Heath government – were set up in October 1973 in London (LBC and Capital Radio) and December 1973 in Glasgow (Radio Clyde).

²⁸ Interview at <www.offshoreechos.com/oem_interviews-01.htm>

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As Labour had been consistently ahead in the polls by as much as 49% to 42%, most political observers were taken by surprise when Heath won the 1970 general election. Various explanations were advanced then and subsequently for this unexpected outcome. The key factor in all of them is a recognition that the UK electorate of the time were actually more conservative and traditional than either the Wilson government of 1964-1970 or the political intelligentsia realised; and that the extremely rapid social, economic and cultural change during this period alienated a section of the population without affecting the outcome of contemporary opinion polls (which were in any event less sophisticated than those of today).²⁹ In this context the role of Radio Caroline International and the O'Rahilly/Dee road show in May and June 1970 may have been more significant than was generally realised at the time. Harold Wilson evidently thought so – he is reputed to have vowed to 'finish off' O'Rahilly during the election campaign. But dealing with O'Rahilly – a citizen of Eire, who resided overseas – was not straightforward. Simon Dee was an easier target. Wilson and the Labour Party made a formal complaint to the police that Dee had broken electoral law by campaigning in a partisan fashion during an election without submitting expenses. As late as December 1970 Dee was still being questioned by the Special Branch on this subject, though charges were never brought.

Loving Awareness

While Dee assisted the police with their enquiries O'Rahilly

²⁹ Re rapid change in the 1960s: between 1963 and 1971 the following occurred: the end of National Service, the abolition of the death penalty, decolonisation, legalisation of homosexuality and abortion, the closure of 50% of the national rail network, the reconstruction and demolition of numerous town centres, the development of tower blocks, the appearance of large, visible ethnic minority communities in the UK, decimalisation and the announcement that metrication would follow.

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pursued his career as a film producer. He steered George Lazenby away from starring in any more films in the James Bond series, persuading Lazenby that plots in which a solitary British agent continually demonstrated amazing prowess in beating the enemies of the West were of declining relevance and would not sustain their box office appeal. Instead of this O'Rahilly assembled the funding for 'Universal Soldier', intended originally as a starring vehicle for George Lazenby and Jimi Hendrix. Unfazed by the death of Hendrix, the film continued in production with Lazenby playing an amoral mercenary whose services are sought by various post-colonial states in Africa. The female lead opposite Lazenby was played by Germaine Greer. In the film Greer gets Lazenby to see the error of his ways and persuades him to follow an alternative life style.³⁰ 'Universal Soldier' was an expensive film to make and had only limited box office success when released in early 1971. This, together with the clear inaccuracy of O'Rahilly's advice on the longevity and appeal of the Bond franchise, led to Lazenby dismissing him as his manager.

With his career as a mainstream film producer over, O'Rahilly finally paid off most of the debts that had encumbered the original Radio Nord/MV Olga vessel and the ship sailed from Amsterdam and started broadcasting off the coast of Essex, as Radio Caroline, once more. Initially and anachronistically the station played in 1972 the same records (and radio commercials) that it had broadcast in 1967-1968.

In March 1974 O'Rahilly completely revamped the format

³⁰ Greer came to prominence in 1968 as co-presenter, with Kenny Everett, of the TV series 'Nice Time'. She was also a contributor to *Suck*, a sex magazine published in Amsterdam and banned in the UK, and *OZ*, which was run by a fellow Australian Richard Neville. *OZ* at one point published a photograph of her vagina. In 'Universal Soldier' Greer appears in hot pants, smokes cannabis and has a lot of sex with Lazenby. During this time she was also a lecturer at Warwick University. A profile of her in *Rolling Stone* while they were making *Universal Soldier* is at <www.ibiblio.org/mal/MO/philms/germaine/>

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and launched his latest business venture – the Loving Awareness concept. This involved switching the Radio Caroline play lists to the type of AOR (adult orientated rock) that was popular in the US but hardly heard at all in Europe at that time and specifically promoting with it the benefits of a meditative, West Coast-style hippy culture. As part of this project O’Rahilly put together and funded a rock group that he hoped would promote this concept with their music. This was the Loving Awareness Band who were eventually unveiled to the media in simultaneous press conferences at the Hilton Hotel in Amsterdam (this event being hosted by Simon Dee) and the World Trade Centre in New York in May 1976.³¹ These events were largely ignored by the UK media but were covered very extensively in Europe and also by 3 major US TV stations. The publicity that O’Rahilly had devised for the launch went to great lengths to proclaim that the Loving Awareness Band were as good as the Beatles and would be acclaimed – like the Beatles had been in the 1960s – as the dominant musical force in western culture in the years to come.³² The Loving Awareness Band duly went to Palm Springs, California, where they recorded an LP that was released on the Dutch Phonogram label in September 1976. Despite being broadcast continually on Radio Caroline it did not sell in significant quantities. A limited number of live appearances by the group across Europe did not promote sales either.

What was striking about Loving Awareness even at the time was how out of kilter it was with everyday existence in the UK in the mid 1970s and how musically conservative the

31 By 1976 Dee’s career was in low gear. He had spent a period in prison for debt and had not been regularly employed for some time.

32 The members of the Loving Awareness Band were not the Beatles but were certainly seasoned session musicians. The core of the group came from the North East of England and had formerly been in Skip Bifferty, a moderately successful psychedelic band in the period 1967-1969. One track by the Loving Awareness Band can be heard on <www.youtube.com>.

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material performed by the Loving Awareness Band sounded when compared to what was available from other artists at that time.³³ The changing fashions of the mid 1970s and the lack of any relevance that Loving Awareness had to its audience meant that it fizzled out. In August 1977 the Loving Awareness Band left O'Rahilly and became the Blockheads, backing band to Ian Dury, and a very different, more accessible and more successful musical entity altogether.

Fade out

Gordon McLendon and Clint Murchison Junior remained prominent figures in Texas business and politics throughout the 1960s and 70s. McLendon became of interest to the continuing investigation of who had killed President Kennedy in Dallas in November 1963. It was noted that McLendon was known to Jack Ruby, who made a point of asking to speak to him directly after his arrest for killing Lee Harvey Oswald.³⁴ McLendon was also alleged to have provided funding to help establish the Intercontinental Penetration Force (a.k.a. Interpen) – a private sector sponsored mercenary group that attempted to overthrow Fidel Castro in 1961-1962.³⁵ McLendon was also a friend of David Atlee Philips, arguably one of the CIA's most influential figures in the post-war period. He helped Philips establish the Association of Former Intelligence Officers in 1975, during the aftermath of the Watergate affair, when the reputations of many in the CIA and their supporters on the political right in the US were at a low

33 Loving Awareness was launched at a time when groups like Dr Feelgood, Kraftwerk and Can had just achieved commercial success. By November-December 1976 the first records by Blondie, the Damned and the Sex Pistols had been issued in the UK.

34 Ruby was a frequent visitor to McLendon's radio station KLIF. This has led some commentators to speculate that McLendon and Ruby were connected to the group of people who organised and carried out the Kennedy assassination.

35 See <www.cuban-exile.com>

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ebb. Clint Murchison Junior is less well known and after he inherited his father's considerable fortune in 1969 he devoted himself to his extensive business interests.³⁶

The loans affair

Allan Crawford returned to his chain of record shops in London and his music publishing business after ending his involvement with Radio Caroline in 1966. His career prospered: in the late 1960s he was responsible for the 'Top of the Pops' series of LPs issued on the Pickwick label. These were sold at a budget price and contained cover versions of contemporary hit records. In the mid 1970s he reappeared in Australia as the business partner of and official spokesman for Tirath Khemlani. In 1974 Khemlani offered a substantial loan – ostensibly from sources in Saudi Arabia – to the Gough Whitlam government at a time when, like every other country in the western world, Australia was battling with inflation and a shortage of funds for key investment projects. The loan was designed to reduce the dependence of Australia on raising funds from US banks, to access sources of funds outside the jurisdiction of the various US dominated financial institutions (such as the World Bank and the IMF) and also to circumvent the bureaucratic attitudes and restrictions of the Australian Treasury. The Whitlam government did not instigate the negotiations with Khemlani, never received the money, and never paid commission to either Khemlani or Crawford. After awaiting the appearance of the Saudi funds in 1974-1975 (which failed to materialise), Whitlam switched instead to the conventional approach of requesting a loan from a US bank, which insisted as part of its requirements that any other loan

³⁶ Clint Murchison Snr. was a major business figure in the US from the 1930s onward. He was a friend of J. Edgar Hoover and Lyndon B. Johnson. There are numerous postings on the Web detailing a gathering that he supposedly organised in Dallas on 21 November 1963.

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negotiations were ceased. By late 1975 details of the Khemlani loan had been leaked to the Australian press, causing considerable embarrassment to the Whitlam government and playing a factor in its eventual removal by the governor-general of Australia.³⁷ An involvement in these events, even if marginal, was quite a career step for Crawford given his prior role in producing *Pickwick Top of the Pops Vol. 8* (or similar), complete with a sleeve showing a girl in a bikini, and destined for sale to unsuspecting shoppers in Woolworth's.

Jocelyn Stevens relinquished any involvement in Radio Caroline in 1965 and in 1968 sold *Queen* magazine to the Hearst Corporation, the owners of *Harpers*, the longest established high society magazine in the US. Stevens moved to Beaverbrook Newspapers where he became Managing Director of *The Evening Standard* (1969) and later *The Daily Express* (1972). He remained an influential and extremely well connected figure in the UK media into the 1990s.

Other individuals prominent in the launch of Radio Caroline continued to feature in public life for many years afterwards. For Major Smedley shooting a business rival dead in 1966 did not prove any impediment to continuing his political ambitions. In the 1970 general election he stood as the Liberal Party candidate in Bethnal Green – an area noted for the robust, individualist opinions of its electorate. He remained active in various anti-EEC campaigns throughout the 1970s. His colleague at the Institute of Economic Affairs, Sir Anthony Fisher, became one of the most influential exponents of the renewed right-wing economic liberalism of the late 1970s and early 80s.

³⁷ The Khemlani Loan is covered extensively at <www.theage.com.au> and elsewhere. Khemlani was later detained in the US in 1981 attempting to sell stolen securities.

For the Australian left's view of the 'loans affair' as a CIA operation to discredit the Whitlam government see <www.serendipity.li/cia/cia_oz/cia_oz2.htm>.

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Ronan O'Rahilly remains a problematic figure and one whose influence is difficult to determine. Partly this is due to his tendency to provide accounts of events that are difficult to verify and often at odds with the recollections of others. Prior to the launch of Radio Caroline he claimed that he ran the Scene Club (he didn't); that he managed the Beatles for a week (did Brian Epstein know this?); and that he was so annoyed by his failure to secure Georgie Fame a record deal in 1962 or 1963 (details of when are hazy) that he eventually produced a record by Fame on an independent label (there is no proof of this). After Radio Caroline began broadcasting he maintained that the station was named after the daughter of the late John F. Kennedy (it wasn't). This tendency continued down to the press conferences that launched the Loving Awareness Band in 1976 when various claims were made – equally difficult to either prove or disprove – that the new group had the support of the Beatles. In a nutshell the account that O'Rahilly gives of how Radio Caroline started is designed, in the opinion of some commentators, to draw attention away from who its backers actually were and what their intentions might have been.

Radio Caroline continued broadcasting until early 1980 when a storm beached the vessel on the coast of Essex. The ship was then 60 years old and had not been properly seaworthy for some time. It was towed away and scrapped. O'Rahilly has continued to own and promote Radio Caroline either as a ship-based station or an on-line broadcasting franchise; but in an era with a bewildering array of radio stations it has never matched the popularity and impact that it had between 1964 and 1967.

Gaddafi

The most curious – and dramatic – aftermath of all concerns Radio North Sea International, the station that had broadcast

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briefly as Radio Caroline International in 1970. In August 1974 Radio North Sea International went off the air when the Netherlands banned unlicensed offshore radio stations. The ship was then laid up in a Dutch harbour by its owners, Erwin Meister and Edwin Bollier, and eventually sold in February 1977 to the Libyan government. Renamed Radio Jamharia, it anchored off Tobruk and broadcast 'Libya International in English', supporting and endorsing the Gaddafi regime, much of it aimed at neighbouring Egypt. This continued until 1984 when the ship was decommissioned, stripped of its fittings and sunk as a target for bombing practice by the Libyan air force.

The extent of the business relationship between Meister, Bollier, their company Mebo Electronics and the government of Libya became clear – and publicly known – at the Lockerbie bombing trial in 2000. Bollier was called as a key witness in the trial, it having been determined that a timer manufactured by Mebo Electronics had detonated the explosives that had brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie on 21 December 1988. Careful procedural arguments made by the prosecution underscored that while Bollier was not being charged at that point as either an accomplice or an accessory, such charges could be made against him at a later date if thought to be justified. Questioned extensively in June 2000, Bollier admitted that he had travelled to Berlin to meet Markus Wolf, the head of the foreign intelligence service of the STASI, in 1970.³⁸ Mebo Electronics had subsequently supplied detonators, encryption systems, electrical timers, lie detectors and suitcase bombs to East Germany. The view the STASI had of Bollier was interesting: recently released documents from

³⁸ Radio North Sea International was anchored very near the Orford Ness Atomic Weapons Research Establishment. Orford Ness had a very extensive array of Over the Horizon radar antennae that were used to track Soviet communications and monitor Soviet missile tests. The pirate station could, therefore, have been either interfering with this work or listening in to it on behalf of the eastern bloc.

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their archives indicate that they were not sure of his loyalty and thought it possible that he was working for the CIA.

In 1977 Mebo Electronics broadened its interests to Libya and supplied significant amounts of the same equipment to the Gaddafi regime. As well as a straightforward trading relationship the company was also used by Libya as a means of passing loans to organisations and individuals that Libya wished to fund. Bollier admitted that Mebo Electronics rented office space to Abdelbaset Al Megrahi, the man eventually convicted of the bombing, in the building it used as its HQ. The trend of the questioning that was put to Bollier evidently unnerved him. In the later stages of his testimony he made clear, through his lawyer, that if charges were brought or considered against him he would call an extensive array of witnesses on his behalf. This list included Colonel Oliver North, President George Bush Snr., General von Tenda (the former head of BOSS the South African intelligence service), Gerrit Pretorius (formerly secretary to President Pik Botha of South Africa) and a range of other individuals including serving CIA officers. It is not clear that these witnesses would have attended if requested to do so, what connection if any they had with Bollier. It is possible that if the Lockerbie bombing is subject to a full enquiry – as some hope – Edwin Bollier may yet be questioned further about his trading activities in the 1970s and 80s. The events listed above certainly make a deeper evaluation of the activities of Radio North Sea International between 1970 and 1974 of interest.³⁹

Postscript

In December 2003 Channel 4 TV broadcast 'DeeConstruction', a discussion programme involving Simon Dee that analysed the changes that had occurred to the media since his period of fame and commented on the contemporary prevalence of the

³⁹ Details of the exchanges involving Bollier at the Lockerbie Trial are at www.web.archive.org/web/2002110541308/

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celebrity cult. It was followed by a 30 minute, one-off episode of 'Dee Time' that used the same format as the 1960s series: live unedited interviews with well known figures and some incidental music. Despite poor reviews it seemed on the night no worse than Jonathan Ross (which has, of course, much more money thrown at it) and Dee himself (contrary to what would later appear about him in his obituaries) appeared modest, not particularly bitter, and intelligent.

The programme did not mention his claims about MI5, the CIA *et al* in detail but did remind viewers that the specific reason for his demise was being deemed responsible for the broadcasting of George Lazenby's theories about who killed President Kennedy. What should we make of his claims now? He said he was monitored by the security services. It turns out that this was indeed accurate – and would clearly have been the case anyway due to his closeness to Princess Margaret at one point. (Anyone near the Royals will be looked at by the security services). He was also on record as having made comments on TV about the Prime Minister Harold Wilson that were highly disparaging, and, for the time, regarded as unprofessional. We also know that his electoral antics in 1970 with Ronan O'Rahilly led to a Special Branch investigation. If, as some suppose, Radio North Sea International was an eastern bloc intelligence operation, then Dee touring the UK promoting Radio Caroline International would also have been of interest to them.

Dee also said that the CIA controlled the UK media 'then and now'. For this the most that can be said is that there is no evidence for such sweeping claims. But given what we know about the peculiar history of how pirate radio came about between 1961 and 1964, what it was intended to promote, the various propaganda programmes that the CIA *did* run, a statement of this type cannot quite be regarded as the silly conspiracy theory that many would have us believe.