

RADIO IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ANDREW DUBBER

Radio in the Digital Age

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ANDREW DUBBER

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
1 What is Radio?	1
2 Radio in the Digital Landscape	25
3 Radio and Everyday Life	47
4 The Sound of Music	74
5 Stories in the Air	101
6 Radio and Technology	125
7 Radio in Society	150
8 Don't Touch That Dial (What Dial?)	175
<i>References</i>	183
<i>Index</i>	192

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encountered. John took me under his wing at the beginning of my career and showed me that radio, technology, culture and the human mind were all things worthy of close and thoughtful examination. He planted all of the seeds. This book is just one season's crop.

Abbreviations

AAC	advanced audio coding
A&R	artists and repertoire
ADAT	Alesis Digital Audio Tape
AM	amplitude modulation
API	application programming interface
CB radio	Citizen Band radio
CEG	Consumer Expert Group
CHR	Contemporary Hit Radio
DAB	digital audio broadcasting
DAT	digital audio tape
DAW	digital audio workstation
EBU	European Broadcasting Union
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FM	frequency modulation
FTP	File Transfer Protocol
IBOC	in-band, on-channel
IP	Internet Protocol
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
ISDN	Integrated Services Digital Network
kHz	kilohertz
LDBK	Laid Back Radio
LPFM	low-power FM
MB	megabyte
MED	Ministry for Economic Development (now Ministry of Business)
NAB	National Association of Broadcasters
NRK	Norsk rikskringkasting
OfCom	Office of Communications

PCM	pulse code modulator
PRS	Performing Rights Society
PRX	Public Radio Exchange
R&D	research and development
RAJAR	Radio Joint Audience Research
RBDS	Radio Broadcast Data System
RCA	Radio Corporation of America
RCS	Radio Computing Services
RDS	radio data system
RIAA	Recording Industry Association of America
RSS	Rich Site Summary
SD	Secure Digital
SMS	Short Message Service
TB	terabyte
UGC	user-generated content
USB	Universal Serial Bus
VHS	Video Home System
VoIP	Voice over Internet Protocol
XML	Extensible Markup Language

CHAPTER ONE

What is Radio?

So much has changed in radio since I started. You know, the whole technological revolution that's gone on. I remember doing a show with Steve Lamacq in the early days and the title was 'What is the Internet?' and there will be archive of us somewhere going 'Just explain how this works then? What? Really?' and we must sound incredibly stupid and naïve, but then everybody was – we all were. When I started broadcasting, you got letters from people. That was the way they communicated. And you spoke to your audience. Now there are just so many different ways of people communicating with you. It's constant. It's this barrage. And it's a two-way street. They're texting you, you're texting them, you're tweeting them, they're tweeting you, it's Facebook, it's everything. There are cameras in the radio studios. When I went into radio I was fairly shy. I used to embrace the time you could go in and you could just wear a tracksuit and no makeup and that was great. But now you're thinking, 'Oh no, actually, there's a camera there and you have to put a bit of makeup on.' So it's just such a different medium. But at the same time . . . it's you and it's a microphone and it's somebody listening, wherever they are around the world. So radio, I think, still essentially remains the same.

Jo Whiley

(interviewed on Paul Gambaccini's 'Music in the Air: History of Music Radio', BBC Radio 2, episode 6 of 6, first broadcast 18 December 2012)

Introduction

Before I became a radio academic I was a radio practitioner; and so, like many people who study and write about radio, I draw upon both sets of professional experiences. The benefit of this is

that it ensures our analyses are influenced and informed by both our experience of the 'real world' of radio and our arms-length academic research. However, it also presents the danger that we will start our study with some (so-called) truisms about radio that have not been tested through intellectual rigour or painstaking analysis, but that have instead been arrived at through the discourse of pragmatic and routine practices. In other words, there are many things about radio that have come through the academic tradition and reside within the canon of radio studies literature, but that have their origin in things that are simply 'known' or 'obvious' to radio practitioners.

It is important, then, that I recognise that my own understanding of radio, like that of many radio academics, originates very much in the world of practice; in the discourse of radio professionals; in the day-to-day experience of making, presenting and producing radio programmes, programming music formats, writing and recording commercial copy. I am, perhaps, an entirely typical radio academic in this respect: I try to draw upon my previous professional background as well as my ongoing involvement in radio today.

It is perhaps also important to start with some reflection on how we come to study radio, because this ensures that we do not forget that the understanding we have of radio, of media, of technology and of society is a personal and cultural understanding, and not simply an accumulation of objective facts. It is filtered through a veil of life experiences, moments of personal profoundness, and the unique set of baggage and contextual frames we bring to bear on the object of analysis. In short, we can never quite become the dispassionate and aloof intellectuals who observe and interrogate a subject while bringing nothing to bear on that observation themselves. I am instead persuaded by the anthropological tradition of analysis, which attempts to give a voice to the objects of analysis themselves, to get out of the way as much as possible, but also to admit to the undeniable fact that the storyteller cannot but shape the narrative. It is with this in mind that I introduce myself in what, in another context, might

seem an unnecessarily comprehensive and personal manner. With that in mind, I hope the reader will indulge the following personal history, in the hopes that it might add context and coherence to the content of this book.

Geographically speaking, I grew up and lived a significant proportion of my life in Auckland, New Zealand, but it seems to me that it was, in large part, radio that provided the environment within which that life took place. It wasn't time to walk to primary school until Merv Smith had chatted to MacHairy the Scottish spider just after the 8 o'clock news on 1ZB (1080 kHz on the AM band) and when I got there, if we were lucky, it was a day on which the 'Programmes for Schools' were broadcast, and we were given the opportunity to listen to stories as well as sing and clap, along with New Zealand children all over the country, led by the radio presenters and guided by our 'Programmes for Schools' workbooks.

Each year, my family would go on holiday to a beach house at Stanmore Bay in Whangaparoa, and I'd always be secretly pleased when it was too wet to go to the seaside because, over the Christmas and New Year summer break, the National Programme on Radio 1YA would play old episodes of BBC radio comedies like *The Navy Lark*, *Dad's Army*, *Round the Horne*, *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again* and *The Goons*. I learned to play cribbage while laughing at Eccles and Bluebottle in a small, slopey-floored wooden house by the sea, as the rain came down outside. And at the end of our vacation, on the way home each year, we listened to Casey Kasem's syndicated American Top 40 year-end chart show on the car radio. I have a particularly strong memory of it having been a close-run thing, that one year, between Andy Gibb's 'Shadow Dancing' (which I loved) and Meco's disco version of the 'Star Wars Theme/Cantina Band' (which my 11-year-old tastes interpreted as innovative, engagingly derivative, but essentially problematic in terms of authenticity); and the revelation of the top spot on the US hit parade was a source of tremendous anticipation and excitement. Of course, now that I come to research and refresh these

memories, Google assures me that this never actually happened – and that those two songs weren't even in the charts in the same year. We should not perhaps be surprised by this, memory being a construction and a narrative that we use to make sense of our worlds. It's a 'truth' rather than something that is strictly factual. However, the fact that we do this is significant in the context of this book, and it's important to bear in mind right upfront that perception and understanding are malleable, mutable and contingent phenomena that may or may not be strictly related to the ontological reality of things.

Throughout the rest of the year, every Sunday morning, I'd listen as Don Linden played audio stories from a deep archive of primarily American children's records that included *Molly Whuppie*, *Gerald McBoingBoing*, *Sparky and the Talking Train*, *Flick the Fire Engine*, *Little Toot*, *Gossamer Wump* and (the British contribution) *Spike Milligan's Badjelly the Witch*, a musical story written and performed by Milligan, which – like the song 'Snoopy's Christmas', which has dominated the airwaves in December in New Zealand since the year I was born – is inexplicably little known in its UK home. It was engrossing, it fired the imagination – and the way I remember it, it was pretty much at the centre of my childhood. In fact, arguably, radio and music have been what I've hung most of my memories off – real or imagined. That makes it pretty powerful stuff, in my experience – which, let's not forget, is what this is.

And then, after a while, I discovered another setting on my grandparents' portable transistor radio receiver: shortwave. There, among all the static, if you held the aerial just right, were distant voices, strange music and people talking to each other in foreign languages. It's a cliché, of course, to say that I was 'transported', but I don't really know another way to describe that feeling, sitting on the front porch, hearing for the first time just how big the rest of the world was.

In my early teens I was a fan of rock music stations Radio Hauraki and 1251ZM (as it was known then) in equal measure. I knew the names of all of the presenters, and I even wrote a letter

once to Hauraki, offering ideas for competitions. The music was, of course, central to all this. Radio was my main source of music listening. My parents had records at home, but I was quick to figure out that Roger Whittaker, Andy Williams and Helen Reddy didn't speak to me or for me, and so radio provided access to what, I imagined, represented me and connected me to a set of likeminded peers.

My radio listening grew to levels of active fandom, to the extent that I believed that I had figured out the playlist rotates to a high degree of accuracy; and I believed that I could reasonably confidently predict when, for instance, the B52s song 'Rock Lobster' would turn up again. Of course, I didn't know they were called 'rotates', or even that there was such a thing as a playlist – but I could tell that the presenters obviously liked some of the same records that I liked, and they seemed to play those records with predictable regularity. And even if my predictions were off (and they often were), I was content that, given that we shared such a bond of musical tastes – with only a few inexplicable deviations here and there – they were bound to play my favourite songs sooner rather than later.

The first album I ever chose for myself in a record shop was paid for by a voucher won in a phone-in competition. I selected David Bowie's *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* album – but I must have spent a good half hour torn between that and Donna Summer's *The Wanderer*, while my father waited in the aisles of Jim's Record Spot in Panmure as I made what I knew to be a critical decision in my life of music fandom. Around that same time, there was a late (way past my bedtime) Sunday night programme on 1ZM, which, as I recall, was essentially about the apocalypse. It was part documentary, part speculative fiction, and partly an excuse to string a bunch of different songs together in an interesting way. The programme, the name of which is lost to memory, related all the ways in which we were likely to die imminently, collectively and absolutely as a species. Of course, I listened under the covers with a transistor radio and a terribly unreliable flashlight, as kids do. The programme featured all the

popular nuclear paranoia of the time, as well as a lot of terrifying scenarios from religion and mythology. I remember vividly that the development of barcodes as a techno-cultural phenomenon was cited as evidence of something in the Book of Revelations; the Cold War was at its height, a planet-obliterating World War 3 was an historical inevitability and we were only 'Minutes to Midnight' on the Doomsday clock. Moreover – if you counted the number of letters in Ronald Wilson Reagan's name, you got 666. These chilling facts and coincidences were presented in such a way as to provide a compelling reason to play the song 'Games without Frontiers' by Peter Gabriel to an already emotionally heightened teen audience. That series provided not only my first hearing of that and some other songs I love to this day, but also the occasion of starting to piece together the fact that songs could have meaning beyond 'Boy meets girl, and then they dance'. Songs conveyed meaning; they carried stories; referred to important issues; underlined emotional impact; soundtracked personal, emotional, political and symbolic worlds.

Meanwhile, Radio Hauraki released a compilation album called *Homegrown*, which celebrated new, independent local music. Local music on radio was, and remains, something of a contentious issue in broadcast music radio the world over, but it has a particular resonance in New Zealand because of some unique characteristics of the popular music industries and the dominance of Anglo-American popular music in a primarily English-speaking, post-colonial nation. Importantly, the radio station not only recorded and released independent local music, it actually playlisted those tracks on air, and (naturally) the more I heard them, the more of a fan I was of those artists and those songs. Partially as a result of that short and rather unusual episode in New Zealand radio history, it has always seemed to me self-evident that radio stations can play songs to make them popular – not simply because they're popular. Something that was great, influential and powerful about that *Homegrown* album, of course, was the idea that, in order to be a musician – or to put out a record – you didn't have to be as international and

enigmatic as David Bowie, nor as glamorous and funky as Donna Summer. Not that New Zealand records hadn't existed before 1980 – just that I'd never really noticed that they were New Zealand records. Jon Stevens, Mark Williams, Sharon O'Neill and Split Enz were just pop stars, and so separate from my reality that their New Zealandness pretty much entirely escaped me until my early teens. There was local music, of course – but then there was radio music. Music has always been centrally important to me, and radio was the method through which I arrived at my appreciation for music of all stripes. British listeners had John Peel. We had Barry Jenkin: Doctor Rock.

In 1981 – just a couple of years after it originally debuted on BBC radio in the UK – *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was broadcast on the National Programme via the YA stations around the country (1YA in Auckland). And my cassette recorder was put to good use making sure I didn't miss a moment of it. Not just for me, but for my generation of radio, storytelling and comedy enthusiasts, Douglas Adams had created a masterpiece of its medium. And, while the story is still broadly revered, it's often forgotten that this was a radio programme that only later became a series of books, a television series, and a feature film. For me, though, almost better than the radio series were the records that used essentially the same scripts, almost all of the same actors, most of the same sound effects, and (it seemed) just a little more care and attention when it came to the direction and sound design. *The Hitchhiker's Guide* was radio for the airwaves, and then it was radio for release on records. This slight mutation in mediation factored in the realities of its context. It was considered in terms of its medium-appropriateness and specificity, which, as will become apparent, is something I deem to be a tremendously important consideration, to the extent that the translation from one medium to another is something that I believe *The Hitchhiker's Guide* did more successfully than anything that came before it, and more than most of what has come since. Again, you'll bear in mind that this is an entirely personal perspective, and not in any way a statement of fact. I listened

to those records and my cassettes of the radio series so often, I can still, to this day, recite the first half-hour episode verbatim, from memory, start to finish. The theme tune to *The Hitchhiker's Guide* still sends shivers up my spine whenever I hear it.

I guess it was unsurprising, then, that I ended up in radio. In fact, long before radio initiated my academic career, it first ruined it. Rather than attend my undergraduate classes in English literature, art history and music theory at the University of Auckland, I went straight up to student radio station bFM and tried to find ways in which I could be involved. I could think of no finer reason to be in an institute of higher education than to sit in a studio, play records and talk into a microphone.

I will spare you the detail of my progression through student radio, to an unpaid apprenticeship in the studios at 91FM and Radio Hauraki; of my helping set up the short-lived (and almost comically doomed) Manukau City radio station Oasis 94FM; bluffing my way into a job making ads for Radio Pacific for about five years; researching, writing and producing my first radio documentary series in 1994 (a 26-part, 1-hour a week programme about the history of jazz that nearly killed me); setting up my own radio production company making radio drama series, jazz programmes and other syndicated shows; hosting a nationwide specialist music radio show; creating children's radio programmes; making documentaries; starting the NZ Radio email discussion list; instigating the Auckland Society of Low Power FM Broadcasters; and lobbying for a New Zealand children's radio station. But I'm not going to do that, because I'm not writing my memoirs here, and the point of this story has been made, I think.

And that point is this: I love radio. Radio is, in large measure, who I am.

It's important – both to me personally and, more significantly, for a proper understanding of this book – that you realise the full meaning of that fact, because without really understanding how significant radio is as a defining cultural force and as a central part of my life – not just of my career – I think what I have to

say would probably have a good deal less impact, and less significance. In fact there'd almost be very little point in me saying it, and almost nothing at stake.

But even more consequential than the enthusiasm I have for the medium and its legacy is the caveat I mentioned right at the outset: I am putting my hand up to admit to a degree of advocacy for radio, as well as to being immersed within both the fandom and the professional practice cultures of radio broadcasting. As a result, my understandings of the medium are coloured by an immersion that necessarily sets some factors as 'common sense' or as 'what is obvious', and, while I will endeavour to make strange some of these very familiar concepts and taken-for-granted premises so that we will be able to distance ourselves from them and critically observe them in as objective a manner as we can, there will, I expect, be some traces of essentialism, some residue of that immersion and some unavoidable perception bias within the work. My ambition, however, is to declare this potential problem upfront and to alert you to its possibility, so that you will be able to identify that phenomenon not only within this text, but also within other texts in the radio studies tradition.

Where to Start

One of the problems one often experiences with any analysis of radio as a broad subject area – and perhaps this problem can be said to exist across the entire body of academic work known as the field of radio studies – is an underlying assumption about an agreement concerning what is meant by the word 'radio' itself. If one looks through the literature of the field or peruses back issues of *The Radio Journal*, topics such as government broadcasting policy, industrial practice, documentary programme making, music programming, representation and identity, community and the public sphere, textual analysis and technical management of the electromagnetic spectrum all feature. While these topics may be broadly related and connected by the idea of