

Radio Sharing

The Felicity Wells Memorial Independent Local Radio Archive offers hundreds of radio broadcasts, including drama, music and news from commercial radio around Britain. **Professor Seán Street** and **Matt Holland** of Bournemouth University provide an overview of this newly-launched online resource.

Between 1973, when it first came on air, until 1990, when the Broadcasting Act of that year eased its regulation, UK Independent Local Radio (ILR) struggled to survive under severe and financially restrictive rules laid down by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. (IBA) It is a wonder that, during this period, only one radio station went out of business, such was the regulatory framework and the financial climate of the times.

In the beginning, the term, 'Commercial Radio' was frowned on; the new wave of stations, beginning with the London Broadcasting Company (LBC) and Capital Radio, and soon spreading to all parts of Britain, was perceived as essentially a public service. This was before the time of consolidation, the forming of groups with responsibility first to shareholders and second to the community. For thirteen years, Independent Local Radio was required to create programming which contained prescribed percentages of material deemed by the regulator to be of social gain to the local community it served. One part of this requirement was to spend on live music within a station's catchment area; another was to generate what became known as 'meaningful speech', content which addressed the cultural, pastoral and intellectual interests of that area. This material was inevitably often the part of a station's output which attracted the least advertising. At the same time it was seen as work of lasting quality which demonstrated that the new raft of stations provided material which was more than that of a juke box; early commercial radio in Britain had a lot to prove, and a tide of establishment suspicion to overcome.



(Duchessa/SXC)

These were hard times in which to start any business; governments came and went, the Conservatives supporting the private enterprise represented by the new stations, the Labour Party threatening to close them down at the first opportunity. Advertisers were less than convinced by radio as a means to sell, and Britain was lurching through industrial upheaval, a three-day week and continuing financial uncertainty. As if this did not make launching a new commercial enterprise difficult enough, the fledgling stations saw a percentage of any profits they might make creamed off by the IBA, under the term 'secondary rental'. The fund accrued from this went towards establishing two major developments, seen at the time as an investment in quality for the future of Independent Radio. One of these, the National Broadcasting School, lasted only a relatively short time. The other, the ILR Programme Sharing Scheme, was to generate material and production experience which, for about 12 years, became a platform for the dissemination of quality programmes that would be unimaginable in the commercial radio world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Begun by the IBA, and later taken over by the Association of Independent Radio Contractors (AIRC), the Programme Sharing Scheme operated in a near Utopian spirit of free programme exchange, apparently at odds with the

capitalist motive behind privately funded radio companies. The premise was simple; a producer at local level would submit any programme he or she had made which might be considered as having interest beyond their own station's catchment area. This would be added to a list, circulated among member stations, who selected material which could then be broadcast to their audience. No money exchanged hands: the AIRC programme sharing unit copied the tape and circulated it as requested. The result was a sense of aspiration among producers which in turn produced some excellent programmes, many of which remain significant, both for their production values and for their historical content. The work is also interesting in that it represents a style of programme making completely different from commercial radio output today. This material has been preserved and digitised through an AHRC-funded joint project between the British Library Sound Archive and the Centre for Broadcasting History Research in the Media School of Bournemouth University, and can now be accessed online through a continuing partnership between Bournemouth University and the BUFVC. The collection is named in memory of Felicity Wells, Programming Executive for the AIRC, who co-ordinated the Sharing Scheme during its most significant period between 1980 and 1990. Felicity died a few years after the scheme ended, and all agreed that it would be appropriate to honour her part in its existence.

The origins of the scheme were in 1978; at that time, Ralph Bernard, later to be a giant of radio consolidation in Britain, but then working at Radio Hallam in Sheffield, produced a series of documentaries on alcoholism called DYING FOR A DRINK. So important were the issues raised in the series that the programmes were circulated across many other stations in the ILR 'family'. From this it was perceived that some sort of formalised system of distribution for some of the quality programmes being made around Britain by the new stations would share good practice, and at the same time enable some of the smaller, poorer companies to maintain high quality output. It soon became clear that stations around the country held specific

areas of expertise; writing in the IBA's quarterly journal, *Independent Broadcasting*, Felicity Wells drew attention to this:

Certain stations have a reputation for specialising in the production of high-quality programmes of particular kinds, and it makes sense for this output to be made available to the rest of the ILR network. Examples include BRMB's expertise in documentary making; Capital Radio's commitment, access and financial resources for recording or staging major music events (both popular and classical); and Radio Clyde's first-class drama productions. (IBA 1984, pp. 3-5)

It is extraordinary that such a range of programmes was ever produced by a broadcasting system under such danger of extinction; it is nevertheless a fact that the very existence of the Programme Sharing Scheme meant that material which might otherwise have been lost forever, was preserved in a central location for distribution. The survival of this material, stored by the British Library, led to the initiative to share it once again, this time to a new generation of students and scholars, who can now avail themselves of work which is an invaluable testament to the evolution of a new kind of radio broadcasting, as well as programmes which are significant witnesses to history in their own right – the Falklands War, the Thatcher years, and the personalities from those times from John Gielgud to Michael Hutchence.

The range of programmes contained in the AIRC Programme Sharing Scheme is remarkable, as is the geographical spread of contributing stations. Celebrity interviews form roughly a tenth of the archive. There are 141 interviews conducted by Bob Holness with actors, writers, musicians and others for the LBC in a series titled appropriately *Celebrity Interviews*. Radio Clyde delivered a similar format – 14 programmes in the archive - hosted by Sheila Duffy.

There are over 200 drama productions and readings, including:

- Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, read by Hamish Wilson for Radio Clyde (Glasgow)
- Three original plays for radio from Capital Radio (London)
- A drama series from Radio City (Liverpool) about Bessie Braddock

Documentaries and factual programmes form another 20 percent of the collection. Among the topics are:

- Albert Pierrepoint, the famous executioner from Red Rose Radio (Preston)
- A two part documentary about J.R.R. Tolkien from 2CR (Bournemouth)
- D-DAY REMEMBERED – from Metro Radio (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne)
- Two documentaries about AIDS from LBC and Capital Radio (London)

Around 300 programmes relate to music, live recordings and documentaries about performers and groups, from folk to classical recitals. The archive includes items from stations all over Britain. Some stations with greater resources dominate: Radio City (38 programmes), Metro Radio (56), Capital Radio (166), Radio Clyde (239) and LBC (224).

The ILR Programme Sharing Felicity Wells Memorial Archive is the first section of a three-part project led by the Centre for Broadcasting History Research at Bournemouth University, which will ultimately see the largest collection of non-BBC UK radio programmes ever available to the academic community via BUFVC's online resources. With further AHRC funding, the Centre has recently completed a partnership with Hampshire Record Office's Wessex Film and Sound Archive to digitise ILR programmes dating from the same time as the Programme Sharing Archive, focusing on the work of radio stations in the South Central area of Britain – Radio Victory, 2CR, Ocean Sound and 210, Reading. It is planned that this material will become available from the autumn of this year, to be joined in the summer of 2009 by the giant LBC/IRN audio archive, currently the subject of a major digitisation project funded by the JISC. Together the three archives, available via one site, will provide nearly 10,000 hours of commercial radio output from the 1970s to the 1990s – material which has been silent and unavailable for too long, but which now through this initiative can play its part as a major 21st century educational resource, bringing a new perspective to the history of the late 20th century.

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