



Sounds legal

Radio Jackie was one of local radio's pirate pioneers. Now it's celebrating five licensed years as the Sound of South West London. **Tanya Reed** meets station owner Tony Collis



Pirate radio stations will be flavour of the month next spring, when a multimillion pound blockbuster from the writer of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* floats into view.

Richard Curtis filmed *The Boat That Rocks*, with Kenneth Branagh and Rhys Ifans, off Weymouth harbour. Perhaps, however, he should have stopped off in Tolworth Broadway for advice. For Tony Collis, owner of local legend *Radio Jackie*, has helped to steer his station through some of the choppiest waters around.

On October 19, *Jackie* celebrates the fifth anniversary of its successful relaunch as a fully licensed station for North Surrey and South-West London. But its spiritual and cultural roots lie deep in the soil of illegal transmission, and next February marks 40 years since its first tentative session on air. The area's original pirate station – named after Jackie Kennedy, widow of JFK and mother of Caroline of *Radio Caroline* fame – is the ship that refused to sink.

Early pirate radio days provided good copy for journalists, with DJs and their equipment constantly on the move so as to outwit *Post Office* (now BT) officials. *Radio Jackie*'s Nick Catford, still on board today with his Sunday show, became the first British DJ to be sent to prison for operating a private service.

"It was like Renaissance times, when the rulers smashed the printing presses," says Tony Collis, one of many to be chased across fields and through woods, pursued by PO engineers. *"With pirate radio they were frightened of uncontrolled media."*

"Radio has always had to be dragged forward slowly because of the legal constraints. It should be allowed to mushroom freely like other businesses, with no controls over content."

"Nor should licences be transferable, as they are at present. If you stopped that, it would make radio so much more dynamic. Stations would either sink or swim on their own merits. It would put an end to stale radio once and for all."

And Tony should know. Even at the tender age of 12, Collis was building radio transmitters in his Leatherhead bedroom, whilst listening to the BBC's *Light Programme* and *Radio Caroline* offshore. Ironically, his father was a PO phone engineer who, unaware of the direction his son would later take, provided him with both the encouragement and the parts.

"I'd always loved radio," reflects Tony. *"It really is the theatre of the mind. You can paint all the pictures you want and people believe them."*

At 17, Tony began studying electronics at college to *"please his parents"*, but left as soon as possible to join *Radio Caroline*.

Here he “polished the transmitter”, before moving on to help launch a radio station off the coast of Spain.

In 1969 a group of fellow enthusiasts launched *Radio Jackie* with a 30-minute broadcast from Sutton. Over the years the station remained true to the ideals of local radio, with charity fundraising and community events. Paul McKenna, now arguably the most famous hypnotist in the world, had a breakfast show. And in 1972, a recording of *Jackie* was played in Parliament during the committee stage of the Sound Broadcasting Bill, as an example of what local radio could be like.

“Everything we did was above board,” insists Tony, who joined as an engineer in 1971, 11 years before *Jackie* began 24-hour broadcasting from a studio in Worcester Park. “We had a proper structure and could show that small-scale local radio really worked. We even had an entry in the phone book.”

Except, of course, that it was all illegal. Despite support from Kingston Council and local MPs – including the future Deputy Chair of the Conservative Party, Angela Rumbold – *Jackie* was forced to close in February 1985, following a series of raids by the regulatory authorities. The ship, it seemed, had hit the rocks.

“Thousands jammed the streets,” recalls Tony. “It was really sad. I knew it would

be back, but I didn’t know if I’d enjoy it again. Fortunately, I did.”

Not until 1996, however, did the opportunity to return legally arise. Yet these hopes were dashed when the new FM licence for South-West London was awarded to *Thames Radio* instead.

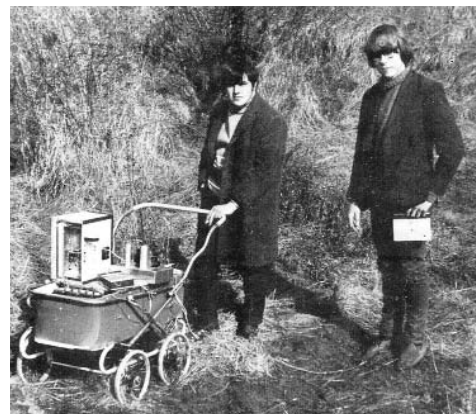
Then, in February 2003, *Thames 107.8* was put up for sale. Having gathered together the original *Jackie* management team, Tony moved to purchase the loss-making station. On Sunday October 19, 2003, *Radio Jackie – the Sound of South West London* was reborn.

“Our big draw has always been our local profile. We’re local radio and we’re in your face on Tolworth Broadway – ironically in what used to be a post office! Local MPs come in here for interview, as well as Olympic medallists like Andy Hodge, who trained with Molesey Rowing Club, and all sorts of other local people.”

What about those stations that are still unlicensed? What is the future for them?

“The amount of talent spun off from unlicensed radio is vast, yet government meddling means that radio can’t evolve. It’s stifling music and young people.

“Ofcom’s ‘Illegal Broadcasting’ report last year claimed that 16% of adults were listening to illegal broadcasts – 6% to one particular broadcaster. That’s a huge percentage – if we got 10% of listeners,



Above: Jackie pioneers Mike Hayes and Dave Owen in 1970. Facing page (anticlockwise from top right): the old Worcester Park studio; Tony Collis (right) and colleague getting technical in 1975; presenter Kate Davies; a floral plea for the salvation of the original Radio Jackie; current presenters Lucy Maher (left) and Nicky Patrick; the present studios in Tolworth. Photos courtesy of Trevor Brook, Editor radiojackie.com

we’d think it was phenomenal. For most stations 4% is the ceiling.

“Even the police use unlicensed stations to communicate with young people, speaking on air to discuss issues such as the folly of carrying knives. Without doubt the future of radio is with the young and encouraging them to enjoy it. Right now they run their stations unlicensed – it’s time they had licences instead.”

And if they ever make a film about *Jackie*, every aspiring DJ should watch it.

■ 107.8 Radio Jackie. Visit: www.radiojackie.com

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