

DJ Andy Archer on board the Ross Revenge, home of Radio Caroline in the 1980s.



PHOTO: DAVE KINDRED



The original Radio Caroline ship MV Caroline off Felixstowe in 1964



Keith Skues in the record library

Photo: Dave Kindred



Simon Dee makes his way through hundreds of fans to open a Tesco supermarket in St Matthews Street, Ipswich (opposite Lipton and not shown in this photo) in March 1969

Photo: Courtesy Dylis Calver



Photo: Dave Kindred

Tony Blackburn on board the
Radio Caroline ship Mi Amigo

Photo: Dave Kindred

Sweet Caroline

A pirate radio ship anchored off the Suffolk coast brought good times to the seaside town of Felixstowe in the 1960s. But it was shortlived. Mike Trippitt recalls a revolution in broadcasting that reverberates today

“MUM, there’s a pirate ship moored off Felixstowe!” Dilys Calver was surprised and intrigued by her teenage son’s remark when he returned home from his paper round. She wanted to learn more about the ship – a ship that would change the world.

“I went down, walked along the prom, and there was this ship in the background. I didn’t know what it was at first,” recalls the 89-year-old Felixstowe resident. “You could see her mast, but at first it didn’t register. I don’t think anyone was thinking radio ships. It was just a ship that was there.” Within hours of the vessel’s arrival, three and a half miles off Felixstowe on Good Friday 1964, word spread that it was a pirate radio ship. Her name was Caroline.

Back then, the BBC had a monopoly on radio broadcasting. An Irish music promoter and manager, Ronan O’Rahilly, realised that broadcasting to a new young audience from a radio ship anchored in international waters off the east coast would be an effective way to promote artists not contracted to the two dominant record labels. Backed by American financiers, O’Rahilly made his ship ready to begin transmissions at the little-used Irish port of Greenore. Just before Easter, in rough seas, the former Danish ferry MV Fredericia,

renamed MV Caroline, set sail from Ireland under the Panamanian flag with presenters Chris Moore and Simon Dee onboard.

Although her destination was kept secret, government officials monitored her progress. Australian-born music publisher Allan Crawford was also watching closely. His plans to launch a pirate station, Project Atlanta, had stalled whilst he found investors. His ship MV Mi Amigo would arrive off Frinton-on-Sea on April 27, 1964 to begin broadcasting the following month as Radio Atlanta. But Caroline won the race to be the first UK-based station to broadcast from international waters. At midday on Saturday April 28, 1964 Simon Dee made the announcement: “This is Radio Caroline on 199, your all-day music station.” The station came alive.

Reaction was huge. Advertisers bought airtime through a complex arrangement of companies based in London and the station’s presenters became celebrities, almost overnight. Dilys Calver was a listener of the BBC’s Light Programme. She soon found Caroline on her radio dial.

“I liked the station. I liked the music they played, so stayed there,” she says. “I think it was the fact that the DJs spoke to you, not at you. They were natural. They were different ▶

[to the BBC] and that's what attracted a lot of people to them." By the summer, tourism in the town, driven by Caroline's presence, was booming. Caroline's young fan base flocked to Felixstowe to see the ship anchored offshore. Some local fishermen used their boats to take visitors on trips out to the pirate ship. The Caroline Snack and Coffee Bar opened on the junction of Langer Road and Beach Station Road. The following year Caroline DJ Tony Blackburn travelled to Felixstowe to open The Saint Coffee Bar in Manning Road.

The pirates' arrival and success caught the BBC napping. Broadcast historian Andrew Crisell, Emeritus Professor of Media at Sunderland University, says that it had failed to identify the new teenage market.

"I don't think they had any conception of what young people wanted from radio and they were taken completely by surprise," he says. "Of course, a lot of cultural snobbery came in to play and the BBC rationalised its lack of response by claiming this sort of stuff was American and really beneath the interests of a serious cultural arbiter like the BBC."

Radio Caroline and Radio Atlanta aimed at the same audience and courted the same advertisers. They needed revenue to survive, but could not compete with each other. On July 2 1964 O'Rahilly and Crawford issued statements announcing that their organisations would merge. MV Mi Amigo would broadcast as Radio Caroline South from the Essex Coast and MV Caroline would sail to the Isle of Man to broadcast as Radio Caroline North.

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Two days later, at 12.30pm, Britain's first radio ship started her engines, raised her anchor and sailed off from Felixstowe heading for the Irish Sea. She continued to broadcast on her journey. The DJs announced her position regularly and were heartened by fans ashore flashing their car lights to wish them Godspeed.

Soon MV Galaxy, the home of Radio London, joined the Mi Amigo off Frinton. By 1967, nine pirate radio stations operated off the east coast, either from ships anchored in international waters, or from former World War II forts. Britain rocked to the sound of pirate radio. The stations played popular music all day long and embraced the spirit and cultural revolution of the sixties. Radio Caroline had an estimated 10 to 15 million listeners.

In June 1966, at the height of offshore radio's popularity, the stations' supply



Photo: Sarah Lucy Brown

Above: Dilys Calver at an exhibition celebrating Radio Caroline in Felixstowe. Dilys is next to her original t-shirt from the 1960s.

Above right: MV Ross Revenge on the River Blackwater. Radio Caroline first used the ship in 1983

and tendering services were moved to Felixstowe from Harwich. The tenders Offshore I and Offshore II, took DJs, supplies and visitors from the dock basin out to the ships. The Dutch vessels were operated from the Felixstowe office of the Harcourt Shipping Company Limited.

But the end came in the summer of 1967. Harold Wilson's Labour government had long-opposed the pirates. Postmaster General Tony Benn led an unpopular campaign against them. Parliament passed The Marine etc. Broadcasting (Offences) Act 1967.

The stations were outlawed on 14th August 1967. Whilst Radio Caroline continued to broadcast, leaving its DJs, its staff and its suppliers at risk of prosecution, the remaining stations closed. A tender arrived at Felixstowe returning the last Radio London DJs and crew to dry land. They were greeted as heroes by fans awaiting them at the quayside. Those fans, and those fearful of the consequences of continuing to listen to Caroline, pondered what the future held.

"The pirates were closed down and all their audience, which was a sizeable percentage of the total listenership, was just given to the BBC on a plate. It wasn't exactly the operations of the free-market economy," says Andrew Crisell. But he believes "the pirates did radically alter the



PHOTO: DAVE KINDRED

The Mi Amigo, home of Radio Caroline sank in a storm in March 1980



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KEEP ON ROCKIN’

The Spa Pavilion, Felixstowe hosts a celebration of the music of the pirate era called ‘The Music from the Boats that Rocked’ on Saturday August 12. Johnnie Walker appears at the Mercury Theatre, Clacton on Friday August 11 with his talk show ‘The Story of Pirate Radio and the Summer of Love 1967’.

Photographer David Kindred covered the story of pirate radio during a long career with the East Anglian Daily Times. Some of his shots are used with this article. He collaborated with veteran DJ Keith Skues in an excellent book, *Pirate Radio: An Illustrated History*, with contributions by Tony Blackburn, Hans Knot and Peter Moore, and a foreword by Johnny Beerling.

Available from Amazon. For more information <http://kindred-spirit.co.uk>

course of radio” and left a lasting legacy.

Not only did the banning of pirate radio lead to the creation of Radio One, (pirates Ed Stewart, John Peel, Tony Blackburn and others joined the BBC), it also hastened the arrival of Independent Local Radio. Edward Heath’s 1970 Conservative government, broke the BBC’s monopoly when the first legal, independent station LBC began transmissions in October 1973.

Radio Caroline continues to this day, broadcasting legally both daily on the Internet from studios in Kent and monthly from the radio ship MV Ross Revenge now anchored on the River Backwater in Essex. On May 19 Ofcom awarded Caroline a licence to broadcast on the AM medium waveband to an audience in Suffolk and North Essex.

KEEPING THE SPIRIT ALIVE

THE pirate radio heyday continues to attract interest, especially along the east coast. In 2014, Felixstowe residents Brian Nichols and Charles Wright formed Felixstowe and Offshore Radio Group, with the aim of celebrating Felixstowe’s part in the pirate radio story.

Brian says most associate Caroline with the Essex coast because that’s where they were for the vast majority of the time.

“And that was partly why I wanted to do what I did, because this was a part of the town’s history that I felt was in danger of being forgotten.”

Brian and Charles ran an exhibition at the Felixstowe Society’s Heritage Weekend that year and the idea of a stone being laid to commemorate the town’s link to Radio Caroline’s first broadcast was born. Promoted with the help of local councillors, and financially supported by the East Of England Co-op, a stone will be laid in Wolsey Gardens, Felixstowe on September 9 this year.

Looking ahead, Brian says: “We will carry on doing talks for as long as we get requests and we’ll carry on taking part in Heritage Weekends to keep the name, and what was going on, alive. With the stone in the ground, we will have a permanent memorial.” Brian is delighted that Radio Caroline’s application for a new licence was successful.

“How appropriate it is, 50 years after they were outlawed, that Caroline can legitimately broadcast on medium wave to listeners along the east coast and beyond.”

Many ex-pirates, their original audience and a new generation of fans will agree with that. ♦