

British Ocean Radio by David McVey

Before they found themselves reading excerpts from *Macbeth* in a deep swell with a force nine gale battering the boat, the thespians had been safely in rep in the nearby seaside town of Grimtoft. Robert had persuaded them to come aboard and broadcast some culture to our expanding audience and their theatre wages must have been pitiful since they agreed right away, for the widow's mite that Robert offered them.

'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,' one of them recited, tremulously, 'Creeps in this petty pace from day to day...' and then he paused, clapping a hand to his mouth and breathing deeply, trying to fight back the rising bile.

'You're doing fine,' Robert mimed, encouragingly.

Then another blast of wind and wave slammed into the vessel which shuddered and shook, the actors lost all interest in *Macbeth* and two of them fought pathetically for the door handle of the one toilet on board.

Robert's success in persuading the thespians to give this performance on the boat from which we broadcast to the east coast shouldn't surprise anyone. Robert had confidence and enthusiasm; they were often misplaced, but they were infectious.

He had been a respected engineer at the BBC in London and had graduated through to production. He earned a reputation for work that was innovative and intelligent even when addressing popular topics such as dance band music or sport. But he chafed at the confines of the BBC. 'They don't understand radio,' he once told me, 'which is unfortunate since only *they* are allowed to broadcast on it.'

Then, early in 1953, he took the bold step of resigning from the corporation. Bold, but not risky; he was able to find plenty of work as an engineer and even worked in the film industry from time to time. Yet he still wasn't entirely happy. 'Films – they're all spectacle and colour and showing off,' he once told me, 'they don't know how to make the most of sound. They're just *empty*.' He was a radio man to his bootlaces.

And then he went on holiday in August to Grimtoft, a bustling seaside resort on the east coast. It wasn't the sun, sea and sand that he sought, but rather the freedom of the waves. Old friends of Robert and his wife had moved to the town and they owned a small boat with an outboard. The two couples enjoyed several sun-warmed trips along the coast to quiet bays and arcing shingly beaches, and then on another day, Robert and his friend Jim went further out for a spot of sea angling. As they relaxed amidst the gentle slapping of waves on the hull, Robert pointed to the dashboard of the little craft. 'You've got a radio transmitter?'

'Try to switch off, Robert. You're on holiday.'

'Could you transmit all the way to the shore from here?'

'Not much point in having it if not, eh? The wife insists. In case I hit an iceberg or something.'

The sea. Supposing you put out to sea in a boat with all the necessary equipment and you broadcast radio programmes - illegally, of course. If the BBC squealed, and the authorities tried to stop you, you simply struck anchor and headed off into international waters where they couldn't touch you, guv. Could there be greater freedom than sharing your art beyond reach of the law?

A few months later, Robert hired a small vessel (a former Fife fishing vessel - it had a Gaelic name that Robert could never pronounce or remember) crewed by a pair of surly old sea dogs. He enthused a bunch of embittered old radio hacks who were no longer able to work at the BBC owing to age, ineptitude or intrusive alcoholism. 'This will be a revolution!' he told them at a preliminary meeting onshore, 'Any questions?'

'Is there a bar on the boat, old boy?' asked Dempster Pontefract, a former BBC newsreader.

At first, broadcasts went out for just a couple of hours a day, Monday to Friday over lunchtime; 'Get the housewives when they're putting their feet up,' Robert said. Dempster

Pontefract was the first voice to be heard on British Ocean Radio (BOR), announcing 'Welcome to a new world of wireless!' to an audience that probably, at first, numbered a few dozen, all of them by accident as they twiddled the knob looking for the BBC's Home Service.

Robert had hundreds of fliers distributed, explaining how to find the signal on the radio dial and giving a general guide to programmes. Advertising and sponsorship income was slow to develop, but Robert patiently targeted companies in the small area we broadcast to and the funds started, slowly, to come in.

It was a new listening experience for those who got in there early; advertising was a complete novelty in British broadcasting, even when it lacked anything in the way of slickness and wit;

Good afternoon. My name is Dempster Pontefract, and this is my Classical Selections programme. If you like any of the records we play, be sure to pop along to Mr Samuel Marling's Music and Furniture Shop in Castle Street, Grimtoft where they will be available for sale.

In fact, Dempster Pontefract's Classical Selection had the same problem as all the music programmes on the station. Even a slight swell or a little gale caused the former ferry to rock and bob and the record player moved with it and the needle made a sprightly leap and scraped across the playing surface of the 78 with a 'Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzppppp!' that resembled a ray gun in one of the American science fiction films playing at the Grimtoft Roxy. Recorded music was only an option, then, in settled weather and when the seas were choppy Robert shipped in some real musicians to play live. They usually arrived in the launch a sickly green and then rarely performed to the best of their ability. Like the Macbeth thespians, most musicians refused to be tempted back for a second stint on board.

It was a local crooner called Boothby Skuldale ('The Grimtoft Crosby') who became the first person to be heard vomiting on live radio in the United Kingdom. He was performing relaxed, slow-tempo selections from *On the Town* accompanied by a chain-smoking trio who

looked no healthier than him. Then, near the end of his set he informed the audience that the Bronx was up but was unable to proceed to explain that the Battery was down; instead, a long, throaty, guttural vowel sound followed by the slapping of sick on the floor resonated in the studio and in the listeners' homes. Robert had equipped the boat on the cheap but he was canny and the equipment was good. The audience could hear everything.

Audience figures could only be boosted by the enticing prospect of a singer or presenter or newsreader throwing up live and so advertising income grew. Robert was able to employ more powerful transmitters and expand the area to which we broadcast. More people heard more people being sick and more companies clamoured to pay for advertisements.

Good afternoon. My name is Boothby Skuldale and before I come to perform for you on British Ocean Radio, I make sure I visit Wilson's Pharmacy in St Michael's Lane, Grimtoft, where they have everything you need for your health. And with a choice of three different seasickness pills, I can sing for you in complete safety!

But what really brought British Ocean Radio to public fame and increased its audience and income were the official attempts to close it down. The BBC first became aware of the station after Skuldale's vomiting episode made some of the London papers and a number of MPs and councillors and aldermen were outraged that an unlicensed radio station was broadcasting - with *advertisements* - to a vulnerable listenership. Police launches were despatched to the place from which the boat was broadcasting and Robert's salty old captain, Seadale, upped anchor and the boat bobbed off into open waters. The station necessarily went off the air for a few hours, but when broadcasting returned ('This is Dempster Pontefract, speaking to you from British Ocean Radio, the station they can't close down!') news coverage on BBC radio and television, and some dramatic front page pictures in the papers, ensured that the audience had doubled.

Advertisers were now clamouring to be a part of British Ocean Radio, but dealings with them still had to be discreet. At first, Robert had opened an office in a run-down corner of Grimtoft but he eventually had to close that and operate instead through a network of shadowy 'reps' who visited companies, sold advertising, collected fees and even worked

with the customers to draft the advertising copy. The authorities knew who the advertisers were, of course, and so traps were sprung for the reps but only one of them was ever apprehended and that was because he was suspected of being a Soviet spy.

The station's broadcasting hours increased - they had to, to include all the advertising that was being paid for - and so the talent began to be spread somewhat thinly. The launch, used generally to ferry out guest musicians and singers to the boat, began to ship out guest presenters as well. In poor conditions, though, the launch was not an option and programmes had to be presented by whoever happened to be marooned out there on the boat. Dempster Pontefract's drinking was difficult to prevent, especially when he was stuck on the boat for several storm-wracked weeks. But the thing that killed British Ocean Radio was Pontefract's growing friendship with Captain Seadale. The two had begun to get on so famously that Pontefract had even shared with Seadale the secret of his on-board stash of alcohol.

BOR didn't broadcast at weekends and, on one calm Friday, when programmes finished at 8pm, everyone except Captain Seadale piled into the launch and fled for the fleshpots of Grimtoft. Temptation on this rare quiet weekend on board was too much for the lonely seaman. He saw his way through a couple of bottles of spirits and at some point afterwards, as the wind rose, he raised the anchor. When asked about it later, he merely said, 'I don't remember nothing. I only remember going to the toilet. That's all.'

The ship drifted slowly and gently and grounded, at high tide, on a notorious reef and was left high and dry and hanging at an awkward angle when the tide dropped away. Most of the radio equipment was smashed into uselessness when the ship keeled over. When the news reached the BOR community, most were stunned into silence. Only Pontefract found his tongue; 'This is serious; I had a bottle of Laphroig on the boat, you know.'

The boat was refloated and towed back to harbour. It was sold for scrap not long afterwards. Robert later explained that none of the equipment could be saved. BOR was finished. 'It was fun while it lasted,' he told me, 'but this idea of running illegal stations from a ship - it's daft. I blame myself. It'll never catch on. We're not *pirates*.'

Robert got a job in his brother's hardware shop in Edinburgh and never worked in broadcasting again. Dempster Pontefract became the wine correspondent for a provincial newspaper. The real winner was Boothby Skuldale. To be The Singer Who Puked Live on the Wireless was to be stamped indelibly in the public consciousness. He became the British representative in the first Eurovision Song Contest and as late as 1963 he was headlining a tour, with The Beatles third on the bill. He slipped from public view after that but by then he had a hefty shareholding in a pharmaceutical company that specialised in anti-nausea tablets. He was set up for life.