

SRE AND CHUCK BLAIR: MEMORIES

I was a very minor cog in the *Radio England/Britain Radio* machine and was based in the Curzon Street office, not on the ship. It was my first job in radio. I joined *Swinging Radio England* in the summer of 1966, and left in October, just before the station came to an end. A short career! As a British passport holder, I was very aware of the difficulties I would face working for *SRE* once the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act came into force in 1967 and thus decided to move on to establish my career elsewhere. Anyway, it was clear that our radio station was already in financial trouble and my job would be in jeopardy.

In 1966, I was an 18 year old student at a College in London and sharing a run-down flat with other students. I had always been fascinated by radio and was an avid listener to all the offshore stations, particularly *'Big L' Radio*, *London, Radio Caroline* and *Radio 390*. When *SRE* came on the scene, I was hooked on the incredible US sound of radio...fast moving, plenty of professional jingles, and the latest music. It was just so exciting.



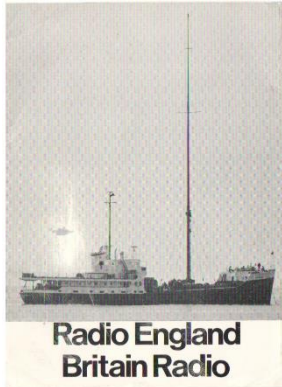
Of course, at the time London was *the* global 'happening' place to be, what with Carnaby Street, the Beatles, and the Marquee Club in Wardour Street, where *Radio London* held many concerts. The offshore (I dislike the word 'pirate') stations added hugely to the mix. What a place to be when you were young and fancy free!

I decided that my academic course was not for me and that radio was my future. So, I gathered up my school examination certificates and testimonials from my former Headmaster, put on a tie and jacket and went down to Curzon Street. I walked unannounced into the office of *SRE*, a hugely imposing and luxurious building (it seemed to me then) and told the receptionist that I would like to apply for a job. She called upstairs and, a few minutes later, I was taken up to see the person whom I presumed to be the General Manager. That was Chuck Blair.

Chuck occupied a large office at the front of the building. I had previously actually met very few Americans and his office and the huge desk, not to mention the large swivel chair he occupied, seemed like something out of a Hollywood movie. His rapid talking style, easy-going manner and lack of formality were very 'un-British' traits and had me confused. We chatted for a few minutes (I was as nervous as hell) and he looked at my testimonial letters and my secondary school certificates. Then, he said to me in an admonishing way and I remember it still: "Marty, you flunked French!" (Yes, it was true, I had failed French in the final exam at school.) I was taken aback to be called Marty (no-one had ever called me that before) and very embarrassed that he had picked up my failure at school. Before I had time to collect my thoughts, Chuck (referring to my school French exam) said "So did I. You're in!"

My heart was beating with excitement and I couldn't believe I was now working for *SRE*. I think my salary was about ten pounds a week and the role was to help out in the office. To be honest, I was merely a 'gofer'. I was given a desk and a chair and was at the beck and call of everyone. One of my jobs was to manage an aspect of the fallout from *SRE's Swinging '66* national concert tour which featured the Small Faces, Eden Kane and other big groups and artists of the time. As was common then, concert programmes (detailing the performers and their backgrounds) had been printed in advance for sale at each venue. Unfortunately, the tour had been something of a disaster, so we had, in the *SRE* building, a room full of boxes of unused programmes. We began selling these on-air at 2s/6d (half a crown) each. Letters began to pour into the office and one of my jobs was to collect the 2/6 postal order in each letter, give it to the finance person in the office and then send a programme (by mail) to the person concerned.

Another role was to answer letters from radio listeners seeking a QSL card. This was a postcard with a photo of our ship, the *Olga Patricia*, at sea. The card also gave details of our radio frequencies and transmitter power. Radio listeners (DXers and 'hams') valued receiving a card to recognize that they had actually heard our station and we received reception reports from listeners throughout the UK, Europe and well beyond.



While reception over a long-distance was valued by many, it was not the case in some European countries where the telecommunications authorities complained to *SRE* that our station was occupying a frequency allocated to their country. Thus, in the evening hours when the *SRE* signal was heard over a larger area, our station interfered with reception from theirs. This kind of issue became a key plank in the argument of the British authorities in 1967 to close-down the offshore stations through an Act of Parliament.

Chuck was not only running the station but was also voicing many of the on-air advertisements and promos. He would often rush from his office past my desk to the small recording 'studio' (basically a kind of cupboard with a microphone and tape recorders) carrying a pile of advertising copy. "How's it going, Marty?" he would call to me. By then, I was beginning to get used to the Marty title. When not recording commercials, he (and other senior people) were often on the phone to the USA, presumably to the boss in Texas. At the time, an overseas call had to be placed through a telephone operator and the cost per three minutes was astronomical. I didn't know anyone who had even made an overseas call (or could afford to make one) except in a family emergency, but at *SRE* it was quite normal for management to phone the States for long periods of time. The monthly bill must have been mindboggling, but I always had the impression that money was readily available. When I saw our advertising card showing that a 30 seconds commercial spot on *SRE* was around 60 pounds (six times my weekly salary) I began to understand that this was big business!

The DJs from the ship were occasionally in the office while on shore leave and I recall that they picked up their salaries and then went out to enjoy the delights of London. Being a 'gofer' and just the boy around the place, I can't say that I knew any of them personally, but I always remember 'Boom Boom' Brannigan because of his amazing (to me) on-air name and the fact that he seemed to be about my own age and yet was a big star on radio. I was envious. On another occasion, I remember a group of three gentlemen with very large haircuts slinking through the office to the 'studio' to record a promo. They clearly weren't from the ship, so I asked a fellow staffer who they might be. "Some new pop group called *The Cream*" I was told. Wow!

One of the great highlights of the job was carrying a suitcase full of the latest 45s (discs), recorded commercials and documentation (letters for the DJs etc.) to the ship. I was asked to undertake a rather urgent trip as I recall that we had to deliver to the DJs copies of The Roaring 60s record *We Love the Pirates* released on 45 and was being heavily as the name implies, a pro-offshore radio immediately became number one on the station.



which had just been promoted. This song was, propaganda exercise and Top 30 of, I think, every

My role involved going to Victoria Station the train to Felixstowe (via Harwich). Customs and Immigration and boarded a Dutch registered fishing boat. This took us out to our ship which was anchored about 3 ½ miles off the coast. There were three radio ships within sight of each other, *Radio Caroline*, *Radio London* and *Radio England/Britain Radio*. The Dutch fishing boat would pull alongside our ship and, if weather and sea conditions permitted,

with the suitcase and taking Then, one passed through

one would jump across onto the deck. After a couple of hours, the suitcase would be filled with out-going material and we would motor back to the harbor at Felixstowe, probably (I cannot recall exactly) with a couple of DJs on-board heading off to take their regular shore break.

What could be more exciting than a job, no matter how humble, at the centre of the offshore broadcasting industry in the UK? For a start, things looked promising and I had my eyes firmly fixed on trying to gain an on-air role on board the ship one day, probably with *Britain Radio*. However, it was not to be and both the financial situation of the company and the imminent introduction of Government legislation banning offshore radio brought my budding career to a halt. When I spoke to Chuck about leaving the station, he kindly offered me a pay increase and an upgraded role in the copywriting part of *SRE*'s activities. However, by then, many other staff were looking elsewhere for jobs, while some were contemplating changing to Irish passports to enable them to carry on working once the impending Government law change came into effect in 1967.

For me, it was all over. A very brief career with *SRE/BR*, but an exciting one. I have never forgotten the experience and am always thankful to Chuck Blair for giving me a chance to break into the radio field. I later went on to work in commercial and public service broadcasting in several countries, and then took up roles which enabled me to operate in development communication and free press fields worldwide.

Thanks again, Chuck. And, in retrospect, I'm glad we both flunked French at school.

Martin Hadlow