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Radiofax W54: [Documentary - Caroline into the 90s](#) 30 minutes. Produced and presented by Jill Moss.

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[Caroline bell and theme]

Radio Caroline is part of Britain's broadcasting history. The station began in 1964 and is known as the pioneer of Radio One, launching many household names such as Tony Blackburn, Kenny Everett, Dave Lee Travis and Johnnie Walker. Caroline was soon followed by a number of other offshore stations, including Radio London, 270, Radio City and many more. Radio Caroline has suffered a lot more rock and rolls and ups and downs than most other ships at sea.

Founder Ronan O'Rahilly started the station to fulfil his dream of free radio:

"It is probably the only free radio station that exists on the planet. The freedom thing is very important. Very, very, I mean to me, it's very important and obviously there's less and less and less freedom.

[Jingle] Loving awareness is free, is free, is free.

[Broadcast] This is the story of man's fight for freedom. The beginning is in the past. The middle is now. The end is in the future. It is a story of sadness and of triumph. August 14th, as disc jockeys Robbie Dale, Johnnie Walker and Ross Brown leave Liverpool Street, London..."

BBC presenter Johnnie Walker, who was on Caroline at the time, risked imprisonment by staying on board:

"Tony Blackburn, Dave Cash, Ed Stewart, Kenny Everett, John Peel were all making plans to go and launch Radio One, which seemed to me, although it might be sensible from a career point of view, seemed to me to just turn their back on what pirate radio was trying to achieve and when Ronan said that somehow, some way, we'll keep Radio Caroline on the air, I just thought: 'well, I'm gonna be a part of that effort' because Caroline had something that none of the other stations had.

"There was a certain element to it that touched people in a way that I don't think the other radio stations did and so we were like family to the listeners and that final day of, if you like legality, on August 14th the Bill came in at one minute past midnight that night, we were greeted by thousands of people at Liverpool Street Station in London and again at Ipswich and then again at Felixstowe Harbour and there was old ladies of 80 years old giving me winter socks and biscuit tins with cakes in and things and willing us to go on, willing us to keep going because you knew that their lives would be emptier if Caroline disappeared and it's very hard to put into today's terms, you know, to young people listening to this today what it was like.

"You couldn't hear this music anywhere else, there were no ILR stations, no Capital Radio in London, there's no BRMB in Birmingham, there's no Piccadilly in Manchester. There was no Radio One. There's only the Light Programme. The only place you heard all this great music was on the pirate radio stations and there were marches on 10 Downing Street, there were marches on the House of Commons. There was debates on TV about it, I mean, it was a huge youth movement protesting against the government turning off the pirate stations and

so if Caroline was gonna try, try and keep going, then to me there was just no doubt in my mind that that's what I would do. I would stay with it."

Caroline has been broadcasting on and off over the years, surviving many disasters along the way. The original ship, the Mi Amigo, sank in 1980 and was replaced by the Ross Revenge three years later.

Today, Radio Caroline is at a crossroads. New broadcasting legislation has narrowed her options for the future. Whilst governments have tried to end her with legislation, the forces of nature have driven her into the arms of her deadliest enemy, the British government.

[Lyrics: My ship is coming in]

In a recent storm, the Ross Revenge broke her anchor chain and drifted seventeen and a half miles from her moorings off the Kent coast. She then ran aground onto the Goodwin Sands and was eventually towed into Dover Harbour.

I went on board to meet the crew who were still living on the ship. Station controller Steve Conway recalls the events of that night:

"The boat started rolling heavily from side to side. Various pieces of equipment were moving around and getting damaged and it was all we could do, all day long, to just run round and pick things up and make sure that we didn't get too much damage. Sometime during the evening, the anchor chain which holds us in place broke underneath the water line where we couldn't see it and the ship started drifting slowly towards the Goodwin Sands. Now, because of the big waves and the spray, the visibility was so bad we couldn't see any landmarks so we were completely oblivious to this. As far as we were concerned, it was just another big, rather unnecessary storm, quite a nuisance, but nothing too serious. We had various people on watch during the night, but as they couldn't see anything, there wasn't a lot they could do.

Around ten to four in the morning things got very bad. All of a sudden, there was a tremendous jolt, which shook the boat from end to end. People actually were lifted out of their seats by this impact and flung across the room. The boat went right over on one side and almost completely down in the water, and we took about a foot of water into the main accommodation within ten seconds. We knew something was obviously wrong. Everybody from the various parts of the ship all ran up to the bridge and we called the Coast Guard. They told us we'd actually drifted seventeen and a half miles and we were now aground on the Goodwin Sands. We were determined to stay on board and try and save the ship if we could so we ordered a tug from Dover to come out and help us."

How did you actually get rescued?

"Well, they sent a helicopter out for us because at twenty five past six, the tide was changing and the boat started leaning further and further over on one side and it looked as if we were about to capsize. So, we requested help in abandoning ship and they sent a helicopter out. Meanwhile Dover Coastguard, over the ship to shore radio, told other ships to be prepared to scoop bodies out of the water. Well, of course, the six of us who were still alive and well on the bridge, although a little bit shaken up, were horrified to hear this, we could just picture ourselves being hurled into the water and losing contact with each other and being frozen to death and drowned in about three or four minutes. So we all started, started saying our goodbyes to each other. We said a few prayers and then the helicopter arrived. We had to make our way from the, sort of, cosy warm bridge, where we were all standing, out across the back deck of the boat where we were being, like, just dashed with spray and waves

every few seconds. The wind was so strong it made conversation impossible. We had to make a journey of about twenty or thirty yards to the back of the boat where we were rescued. We were hauled up in the air by the helicopter. Not a moment too soon. I think we would have gone to pieces if we stayed here much longer.

Captain White from the Dover Harbour board has been involved in negotiations over the salvage deal. He admits he's had some unusual problems:

"Well the ownership of the vessel has been something that we've had a little difficulty with but we are now dealing with an organisation which we believe to represent the owners. It's been interesting, it's been a problem. It's not necessarily been as financially rewarding as we would have liked. But at the end of the day we went out there, the lads on the tugs and all the others involved did a first class job and I don't think we regret it. We would have preferred it to have been to have been a different set of circumstances, perhaps, but no, we don't regret it.

"The current position is that the vessel is detained by Her Majesty's government, Department of Transport, until such time as it is given a clean bill of health, if you wish to put it that way, and then it is free to go and carry out any legal business that the owners wish it to do. There may be other restrictions on it that I am not aware of but as far as the Port Authority are concerned we are purely, in a sense, gaolers."

Two and a half years ago, on August 23rd 1989, British and Dutch officials boarded Radio Caroline, removing studios and destroying equipment worth over five hundred thousand pounds:

[Broadcast] This is a special announcement from the Radio Caroline ship, Ross Revenge. At the moment, we have a large Dutch tug, the Volans, whose intentions are not clear but which seem to be, they seem to have the intention of taking this ship from the high seas. I'm speaking on behalf of the crew and the broadcasters on the vessel Ross Revenge. We've had previous warnings earlier on that some kind of action was contemplated.

[Broadcast] We are being boarded by a Dutch tug. We hope to continue broadcasting for as long as humanly possible.

[Broadcast] Representatives of the Dutch government have just boarded the Ross Revenge. At the moment one of the people, that are still aboard, has been violent towards our engineer. We haven't a clue what's going on at the moment.

[Broadcast] All we can say, is these guys are definitely not here to take photographs.

[Broadcast] No. At the moment we have the DTI standing by at the rear of the ship. They are not, at this stage, appearing to do anything.

[Broadcast] Right. In the meantime, let's send these people a message from us. Here are the Beatles and Caroline and: 'All you need is love'.

[Lyrics: Love, love, love...]

[Broadcast] Love is all you need. We've got Nigel Harris with us. Nigel:

[Broadcast] We have been boarded by the Dutch authorities. We are in desperate need of help and they are to shut the station down and take us all off.

[Broadcast] Right.

[Broadcast] We are in international waters. It is a breach of this vessel's right to be here and I desperately plead for help. We need help now.

[Broadcast] So please anybody who is listening, anybody who is in authority, anybody who thinks they can do anything at all, please help us. This is Radio Caroline, anchored in the international waters of the North Sea. We are currently being boarded."

[Lyrics: Save me...]

Barry Maxwell, head of the Radio Investigations Agency at the Department of Trade and Industry denies the DTI's involvement in any violent action:

"It was a Dutch led action and it was the Dutch that seized the equipment under their own powers. What we did in the Radio Investigation Service was to simply interview the British subjects who were on board the Ross Revenge and we haven't got any of the equipment that was seized at that time because that is held by the Dutch. But I don't feel I have to say much more than that because it's possible that there might be litigation about this action, and I hope you understand."

Peter Chicago, chief engineer on Caroline, tried to prevent officials boarding the ship:

"British authorities have denied taking any real part in the raid and I believe Mr Maxwell has pointed out that the equipment taken from the ship is being held in Holland. Well, all that is true, but it was British officials who assisted the Dutch people to dismantle the equipment in the transmitter room. There were several British officials working alongside the Dutch, dismantling equipment and, in fact, the more aggressive action in terms of cutting of cables and even some physical damage to one of the generators was actually carried out by the British people who came on board. So they did take an active part in the raid and the part they played went far beyond just questioning the British people on board the ship."

Peter Moore is the director of operations for Radio Caroline:

"None of the DTI officials actually took any equipment or damaged any equipment. But the point we take is that they were there, in collusion with the Dutch, and the only parallel I can give is if I encourage you to go and rob a bank, but I don't actually go there myself, I'm as guilty as you are. The DTI were happy to take part in the raid. The fact that they weren't actually wielding the sledgehammers I think is not relevant."

Lawyer Mairead Fleming represents Radio Caroline's interests in this case:

"The question whether the boat was a licenced and registered vessel is important in international law. Most international law on shipping is basically decided by nations and they tend to follow the same basic principles and it was decided in, funnily enough, a British court in Palestine in 1947 that a vessel which is not registered, not flying the flag of any nation, is deprived of all protection before the courts. So if the vessel was not registered, then it wouldn't be possible for the owners and master to complain in an English court or a Dutch court or any other court about the conduct of the authorities and it's perhaps the case that the British and Dutch authorities who decided to take this action decided to do it on the basis that, believing the vessel was unregistered, they felt that they could do it with impunity."

(Peter Moore) "What we would have liked to have done would be to charge the government, the two governments, English and Dutch governments, with piracy. But although, what they committed was in fact piracy, in law it wasn't. But we are hoping to prosecute them for the damage that they caused the ship and the fact they boarded the ship illegally, for false

imprisonment of the crew and for loss of earnings ever since, because effectively they put us out of business."

(Mairead Fleming) "The situation is that a number of members of the crew have complained and feel aggrieved. They have come to us for advice. We are considering the position, in particular whether it is better for them to sue in England or to sue in Holland or possibly both. One of the problems, of course, is that a sovereign state and the organs of a sovereign state can usually only be sued successfully before the courts of their own country."

Lord Annan views the actions of the government as extremely dangerous:

"Now, supposing Radio Caroline transferred its assets to an American holding company. The company would then become an American company and supposing then this action was taken by the authorities, this could lead us into an international incident with the United States government."

The government justify their actions by claiming that Radio Caroline causes interference with emergency services, posing a threat to human life:

(Barry Maxwell) "In the past, Caroline has caused interference, particularly at the time when there were two vessels out in the North Sea. I'm talking about the time when Caroline and Laser were together and their signals mixed and, without getting too technical, that caused interference by mixing and there was quite a serious threat to safety of life because the people receiving interference were North Sea helicopters."

Trevor Brook, broadcast equipment designer, believes the DTI claims of interference with helicopter beacons to be incorrect.

"It will be true to say that every single radio transmission does cause some sort of interference. Most people have experienced breakthrough on their radios from the police radio when there's been a police car parked near them. So, it's not surprising when the DTI, through perversity, or incompetence, uses the Medium Wave band, which is, after all, a broadcast band and then allocates aeronautical beacons, I have a list here of these things, and then when a broadcast station starts operating, it will, of course, be on the same frequency. But does it really cause any problem? The operators of these beacons are all on North Sea oil rigs very much to the north. They are listed for a service area of five nautical miles only, the intention being for helicopters to find their way to the platforms in adverse weather conditions and, even if a broadcast station was operating on the same frequency, there wouldn't be a practical problem of interference within the service area of the beacon."

(Peter Chicago) "The only time that I can remember on official complaint being made it was when Radio Caroline and Laser 558 were broadcasting and we were asked by the Coast Guard to switch the transmitters off. Both Laser and Caroline switched their transmitters off and the interference that the Coast Guards were complaining about was actually proved to be coming from the BBC World Service transmitters."

(Barry Maxwell) "The vessel, the Ross Revenge, had other broadcasting stations on it besides Caroline, and they were causing interference quite some way away, right into Eastern Europe. We received complaints of interference from there, and subsequently this department allocated the frequency that Caroline were operating on, 558kHz, to a multi ethnic station, Spectrum Radio."

(Trevor Brook) "On the question of Spectrum Radio, the DTI was responsible for deliberately allocating this station in the centre of London the same frequency that the Caroline vessel

has been using for many years. It's by no means the only frequency available in London, as was subsequently shown when the DTI provided a second frequency for Spectrum Radio to operate on. They continued to leave the original transmitter on the air, and it then became an overt jamming operation. The fact that the IBA, as the transmission engineering organisation, was prepared to go along with this plan brought the whole profession of broadcast engineering into disrepute."

(Steve Conway) "We recently had an Air Sea rescue helicopter come out over the ship, and they called us up on the ship to shore radio and said: 'Could we please close down our transmitter?' because they were suffering heavy interference. What they didn't appreciate is that we'd been off the air for a year, and the interference they were getting was actually coming from Spectrum Radio in the middle of town."

(Barry Maxwell) "Radio regulation is not just done for the hell of it, and we're not killjoys sitting here at the Department of Trade and Industry. We have to regulate the spectrum so that people get the best benefit from it."

[Lyrics: But it's too late to say you're sorry...]

The 1967 Marine Offences Act failed to stop Caroline Broadcasting. By introducing amendments to the 1990 Broadcasting Act the government hoped that this time they would succeed in silencing offshore stations:

"We've taken new powers in the Department under the 1990 Broadcasting Act to extend our jurisdiction beyond the territorial limits, and we've done this simply because we believe that unlicensed broadcasting is a serious threat to safety of life services.

(Mairead Fleming) "The United Kingdom Government is the only government which has taken so extensive powers to deal with foreign flag vessels on the high seas. All countries who are signatories to the UN convention subscribe to the possibility of being able to take action against vessels flying their own flag and the possibility of being able to take action against nationals of their country within their jurisdiction supporting unlicensed broadcasting.

"The British government is the only one which claims the jurisdiction outside the territorial waters of the UK to take action against a foreign vessel and to that extent it's perhaps remarkable that the legislation was passed in the House of Commons without any debate at all because the new amendments were produced as a schedule to the Broadcasting Bill at a very late stage of the report stage so that they were only debated at all in the House of Lords and during the debate Lord Wilberforce, who is one of this country's most eminent judges, said that he felt the legislation created a most dangerous precedent in international law. It's perhaps surprising, or will be surprising to most people, to think that the British government now has more power to deal with a pirate radio vessel than it does to deal with a cocaine smuggler."

Caroline was the only station in international waters broadcasting to England at the time this new law was introduced. Lord Annan, who was involved in the debate, believes that this is a direct attack by the government on Caroline:

"Oh, I don't think there's any doubt about it. I regard it as taking an enormous sledgehammer to crack a nut."

It seems rather extreme to bring in a new law to end Caroline when, in a sense, I mean financially, they would have been struggling to continue:

"Well, that is a very good point and one which I don't think I made it the time but I do think that with the extension of commercial radio in this country and indeed on the continent, the length of time that a pirate ship like Caroline can go on broadcasting seems to me to be problematical. Mind you, it has a very loyal audience, which rather enjoys listening to a pirate station."

Caroline stands for freedom. Does radio regulation mean we lose our freedom to choose?

(Barry Maxwell) "Broadcasting on the high seas is not permitted by international law, but that doesn't mean to say that we're opposed to pirate radio stations getting licences. Quite the reverse, in fact, there's far more opportunity now in this country for pirates to go legal and indeed on the airwaves at the moment there are a number of pirates who have gone legal and Kiss FM is just one example of that."

(Johnny Walker) "Nowadays, in 1992, there are so many different styles of music. There are lots of different radio stations, still not enough, from my point of view. We need the sort of freedom for radio and TV that press enjoys and the moment anybody tries to curtail the press and they've committed, let's face it, some pretty outrageous things in the last few years, everybody suddenly jumps up and says: 'Oh, attacking democracy, got to have press freedom, it's what democracy is built on', but that doesn't extend to radio. You cannot make comment on the news, all sorts of petty regulations and with the light of the way people have taken hold of a situation in Eastern Europe and demanded a greater freedom and demanded a democracy I think we're looking very old fashioned and very antiquated and if we do live in a democratic society that supports the whole notion of freedom of speech, why on Earth don't they let people have it?"

"In America, basically, the rules are you're given a frequency, you're given a maximum power of your transmitter and there are seven words which are not allowed to broadcast and you can't incite riots or anything like that. But apart from that, they leave you completely alone to do whatever it is you want to do because they believe, if with enough stations, all shades of opinion and styles of music will be covered and if they're not covered, somebody will find a little niche in the marketplace and deliver this kind of radio that's not being served. So they leave it, if you like, to the free market system. In this country we haven't got to that and there still seems to be no signs, although they're doing their best to try and open radio up, it's still very limited and still very controlled and I just wonder what they're worried about?"

[Lyrics: All we hear is Radio Gaga... radio someone still loves you...]

The way forward for Radio Caroline as an offshore station is severely limited. The preferred option is to obtain a licence from a Third World government, which would allow the station to broadcast legally. But station manager Peter Moore is faced with more immediate problems:

"We have to assume that eventually we will be successful with the Third World licence because that's what we ultimately want to do. But in the short term, as I have said before, like it or not, the boat's in Dover. Now, the marine crew, rather like Ronan, are idealists and they want to go back to sea. They spent the last eight years at sea and the ship is their little kingdom. But one has to be practical, just standing alongside a quayside, it's costing money and they have to eat and we have to carry out certain repairs and maintenance. So, although it's not our ideal path, we have applied for a couple of special event licences for different towns in Kent, in the hope that we can make a profit on that. We are looking at satellite as being the closest thing to a free radio station which currently exists."

When the boat came into Dover it was, of course, inspected by the Board of Trade and they insist that before we go to sea again we have a hull survey. The only way to do that is in a dry dock. Now, in the normal course of events, there's no way we could afford a dry dock. So we have to find, as Caroline always does, the cheap way of getting a result and that seems to be to take the boat to Chatham and put it in the Historic Dockyard where they happen to have a dry dock and the trade-off is that they'll give us the dry dock for nothing if we encourage people to come into their, into their dockyard; A, to see the boat, B, have a look around it and, C, to listen to it broadcasting on a low power special event licence."

(Barry Maxwell) "Some parts of the Caroline movement want to put in for a licence, may even indeed have put in for a licence, and I can say to you that as far as the Radio Investigation Service is concerned we will be one of the first people to go along there and wish them well in their new venture."

[Lyrics: Don't stop me now, having a good time...]

(Johnny Walker) "All the time Caroline was there I liked the idea that I could wake up in the morning or be driving my car and tune in and Caroline was still there. The fact it had managed to keep going, with interruptions, since the beginning on Easter Sunday 1964, that they'd, sort of, defied the government. I think that was good for, sort of, the freedom of the individual, of people trying to be themselves, people trying to express themselves in whatever way, that there was this little sort of anarchic boat, you know, still waving two fingers up to the establishment of government because I think that's a good thing for democracy. So I really miss it now that it's not there."

[Lyrics: ...Don't want to stop at all...]

Caroline has survived many disasters over the years. Is she going to continue broadcasting? Will she be back on our airwaves very soon?

(Steve Conway) "Absolutely. I can guarantee that one hundred percent, because if the Goodwin Sands and the British government couldn't finish her off, what could?"

It was not until 2017 that Radio Caroline did receive a licence,
for low power medium wave 648kHz, covering Essex and Suffolk.

Postscript, 2019

When the Ross Revenge foundered on the Goodwin Sands, Radio Caroline engineer Mike Watts was ashore. He recalls there was a cellphone on the bridge at that time:

"The storm was nasty even in my part of the world and I was coming back from London on a late train. The train got halted just outside Brighton Station as part of the glass roof had been

blown off and crashed onto the platform my train was due into. The stationary train was being noticeably buffeted by the wind, and I decided to ring the ship.

"I spoke to Steve [Conway] and asked how things were. As I recall he said "Mike, this feels worse than the Hurricane", then said there had been a big bang or hard thump a little bit earlier and they were really rolling about.

"I asked if he'd checked if they were drifting or dragging. He thought not! At that time the rudder was not locked or damped, as the hydraulic ram seals leaked and had no oil and had become divorced from the rudder, so we put the noise down to the rudder banging about, which it had been for a while in very heavy weather.

"My guess now is that the thump had been as they just touched a bank near or at the edge of the Goodwin Sands."