

## PUBLIC CONSULTATION INTO THE BBC'S PROPOSED NEW DAB+ MUSIC STATIONS

My response to your Public Interest consultation will concentrate on BBC Radio 2 as I was a producer on that network in the 1980s and 90s.

Radio 2 in that era was a very different creature indeed. Its schedule included:

- \* A weekly operetta programme
- \* A weekly brass & military band programme
- \* A weekly theatre organ programme (1)
- \* A weekly dance band programme
- \* A weekly big band programme
- \* A six nights a week arts programme
- \* Invited audience concerts including *Friday Night Is Music Night* - more recently *Sunday Night Is Music Night* - which fortunately is to be relaunched on Radio 3
- \* Regular documentary series profiling popular (as opposed to pop) singers and entertainers as well as, from time to time, specialist areas such as French chanson – and note that these programmes did not go out at midnight or sometimes 3 a.m. as they do now, viz. the Diana Ross 80<sup>th</sup> birthday tributes this weekend.

Radio 2 also had a Light Music Unit (of which I was a member) which produced series like *Matinee Musicale* and *Let The Peoples Sing* for Radio 3 and *Jazz For The Asking* and *The Pleasure's Yours* (a listeners' classical request programme) for the World Service.

None of these genres can now be heard anywhere on the BBC, which I find pretty disgraceful.

I am particularly upset by the almost complete disappearance of operetta. By chance I heard Fritz Wunderlich singing *You Are My Heart's Delight* on Radio 3's Breakfast Show a couple of weeks ago, but that was a rare treat - in general the music of Franz Lehar, Emmerich Kalman, Robert Stolz or even Gilbert & Sullivan is nowhere to be found.

I see no evidence that any of these genres will be represented on the proposed new Radio 2 digital station.

To be fair the present Radio 2 does still embrace jazz, folk, country and soul plus ( to a limited extent), musical theatre (mainly on *Elaine Paige On Sunday*). Why these particular genres should have been singled out for survival is a mystery. (2)

A search of the BBC Genome Project, which contains all the Radio Times programme schedules from the 1930s onwards, reveals a totally different kind of "Light Programme" (as it was then called) schedule, though no-one is suggesting that this should have been preserved in aspic - but things have gone too far.

Even before I left Radio 2 in 1999 the then Controller had issued an edict that no records issued before 1958 were to be played (3) and cancelled the popular *Sounds Of The 50s* as well as Hubert Gregg's *Thanks For The Memory* and Desmond Carrington's *Radio 2 All Time Greats*. Her successor (she resigned after the Russell Brand/Jonathan Ross scandal) instituted a policy of what he called "evolution but not revolution" which further narrowed the range of music permitted on the network. With the passage of time the number of people reaching pensionable

age and beyond has greatly increased but the new elderly have not “grown out” of melodic music in the way that some younger folk graduate from Radio 1 to Radio 2; yet their kind of music has been increasingly denied them. More recently the BBC has rid itself of specialist music presenters – some of them long-serving - on its Local Radio stations, even though the savings achieved must be minimal.

Radio 2 has nothing to offer the hundreds of people who filled the St Albans Arena last weekend for a Talking Pictures TV Festival of Film which celebrated British Cinema and TV History. Or the members of the British Music Hall Society who gather in Eastbourne every summer to re-create the “Good Old Days” of Music Hall and Variety. Or those who belong to the Club For Acts & Actors in Covent Garden and meet in its comfortable surroundings to celebrate seaside concert parties, summer shows and pantomimes. Or the Cinema Theatre Association which organizes visits to historic venues for guided tours, screenings and occasional theatre organ recitals. Or the Cinema Museum which houses a vast collection of memorabilia in the Kennington district of London where Charlie Chaplin was born, and shows historic films.

Now the Corporation finally seems to have realized that it has completely disenfranchised the majority of its older listeners - all loyal licence-fee payers - and is proposing to launch what I have christened "Radio 2 Lite" to make up for it. From what I can tell, however, it will be more of the same, i.e. endless hours of "pop and prattle", as the late David Hatch, Managing Director of Network Radio for part of my time at the Corporation, once succinctly put it (3). The fact that the late Steve Wright was to have been one of the new stations' major contributors reveals what it is aiming at.

It is in effect setting itself up against the commercial pop stations (primarily owned by Global and Bauer) who have hoovered up former BBC presenters that were put out to grass or wooed away with inflated pay packets (see Greatest Hits Radio's daily schedule). They are understandably furious and I don't blame them.

[Redacted] I have carefully analysed the BBC's existing popular music radio networks and have come to the conclusion that Radios 1 and 2 can no longer be described as distinctive. 1 Xtra, the Asian channel, 6 Music and Radio 3, on the other hand, still qualify, as there are currently no commercial services that replicate their range of output.

Several older listeners have transferred their allegiance to Angel Radio ([www.angelradio.co.uk](http://www.angelradio.co.uk)), a community station broadcasting from Havant in West Sussex, which can be heard on FM in certain areas but mainly via DAB/DAB(X) digital or streaming services. Its reach even embraces Europe, the United States and Australia. Angel's daytime output consists mainly of listeners' request programmes but the evening and night-time schedules include all kinds of genres, including Light Music, brass, cinema organs and show tunes. Significantly its restricted licence prevents it from broadcasting any music recorded after 1969. Income is drawn from local advertising and regular “Pay To Play” days when listeners pledge money to hear their requested tracks.

The London Light Music Meetings Group ([www.londonlightmusic.org.uk](http://www.londonlightmusic.org.uk)) meets twice a year to celebrate the popular melodic music ditched by the BBC and includes interviews with leading composers and conductors, and presentations by specialists – including Yours Truly - on particular areas of relevance, such as arrangers and orchestrators of, for example,

Hollywood musicals. Its website also includes obituaries of significant performers and creators, some of whom have not been heard on the BBC for years.

The Light Music Society ([www.lightmusic.com](http://www.lightmusic.com)) holds a vast library of scores, arrangements and orchestral parts rescued from BBC skips when the Corporation decided to abandon that area of music. These can be hired for live concerts and recitals.

In the BBC's Press Release it says that the new stations will draw on the BBC's uniquely rich archive but I think you will find the cupboard pretty bare when it comes to Radio 2. In my time producers were regularly sent "Retention Lists" of our pre-recorded output and encouraged to surrender as many programmes as possible for wiping. Of course even in the early 2000s the whole of Radio 2's pre-recorded output was still on 15 ips tape, which took up a lot of space.

I speak with some authority as I was at one time commissioned to produce a weekly nostalgic series entitled *The Golden Days Of Radio* which was to feature a 30-minute light entertainment show followed by a 30-minute music programme. I had no problem with finding the comedy programmes as they had usually been pre-recorded on Sundays, when the artists had a day off from the summer shows or Christmas pantomimes in which they were appearing. The music strands were however a different kettle of fish, as they had often been broadcast "live" and not taped. When for example I searched the Archive for such long-runners as *Semprini Serenade* (25 years) or *Grand Hotel* (30 years) there were only a handful of surviving episodes and these tended to be "special" ones e.g. the 500<sup>th</sup> programme or a Christmas broadcast.

The Radio 1 and 6 Music archives, on the other hand, are extraordinarily rich and I can only assume that the hundreds of sessions recorded at the Maida Vale Studios and elsewhere by leading bands and pop groups from The Beatles onwards were copied at the time of recording, or retained by their producers and studio managers after broadcast and offered back to the BBC in return for appropriate payment.

I possess a personal archive of most of my "built" Radio 2 output (that is, scripted and pre-recorded as opposed to daytime sequence programmes) which I feel deserve further airings. Details can be supplied on request though I hasten to point out that they have in the past been offered to Radio 4 Extra, which showed absolutely no interest. I know for a fact that very few have been retained by the official BBC Sound Archive, so you have me to thank for their preservation! I have even gone to the trouble and expense of having them transferred to CD and digitally remastered.

I imagine that the current Radio 2 archive consists largely of more recent recordings such as the Radio 2 In The Park (Leicester) OBs or the recent *Live From The Maida Vale Piano Room* sessions featuring leading pop performers accompanied by the BBC Concert Orchestra and broadcast on the Ken Bruce/Vernon Kay morning shows. These will be of little value to a new station.

The BBC claims that the cost of running the new stations will be comparatively modest (although it admits that its published figures exclude Rights, which are commercially confidential). I suggest that additional PRS and MCPS payments, plus residual payments to talent and independent production companies, will be far from modest. In any case, as so many have already pointed out, what is the Corporation doing starting up additional networks when it is facing a financial crisis caused by a two year freeze in the licence fee followed by a below inflation Government-imposed settlement? Will this mean yet more repeats on the existing

networks, which you have only to examine the Radio Times to realize are already running at an unreasonably high level? And does it honestly think that placing a few advertisements on podcasts will solve its financial problems?

My final comment is that I find it nauseating that the thinking behind these proposals is based almost exclusively on Class. To introduce new stations because the “C2, D and E” classes are perceived to be underserved by the existing ones is patronising in the extreme. There are very large numbers of middle class people who feel culturally abandoned by the BBC that they once admired and whose services they still willingly pay for.

[Name withheld]

25<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

### Notes

- 1) A BBC spokesman said at the time that organ music would still be available as part of Radio 3’s *Choral Evensong*!
- 2) Jo Whiley occasionally plays a Frank Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald track.
- 3) Which technically meant that *Rock Around The Clock* was banned, though Buddy Holly was saved!
- 4) Hatch also advised presenters to “engage brain before opening mouth” – oh that that advice were followed today...