

Clandestine Radio: Dark Side Of The Dial

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By Ron Evans

When I rented the VHS of Pump Up The Volume in 1991 it forever changed me. This ‘perfectly frozen in the early 90s’ flick starred a young Christian Slater as an awkward anxiety-ridden high school student by day. Sexually ramped up, opinionated, loud mouth Shock Jock on his own pirate radio station by night. Upon watching it I knew my immediate future was clear. I was gonna run my own pirate radio station.

Now, unlike the bedazzling things you see in Top Gun, The Right Stuff, Star Wars or even The Karate Kid... this particular movie-inspired goal was actually rather easy to live out in real life. You just needed to know a few creepy nerds, have access to some underground literature and a Radio Shack (remember those?) in your town and you could fumble your way onto the airwaves. Illegally.

When I asked my dad to help me put up a 15’ antenna just outside my bedroom window I told him it was for CB radio use. And to be fair...I did use it for that as well. The early 1990s was a strange time. Grunge was just starting to break but it was also right when country music was having a massive resurgence with the fresh faces on the scene like Garth Brooks, George Strait and Trisha Yearwood. So overnight kids went from ripped jeans and Metallica t-shirts to turquoise Wranglers, ill fitted Stetsons and hors d'Oeuvres platter-sized belt buckles. It was weird. But directly tied to that scene was a renewed interest in CB radio which had pretty much died out for everyone but truckers and really lonely hill-folk after the Smokey And the Bandit era went 10-7. Look it up.

So for a very odd (and incredibly entertaining to pranksters like the kind I ran with) summer, all the “cool” kids were getting Bearcats installed in their run-down Subarus and Nissans. So yes...I was “using” the antenna setup to chat with - READ: bother - these fellow weirdos some evenings. But the real goal was to send my pirate radio station signals as far across town as I could. Now, sadly I had the personality of flat wall paint when my awkward ass got on the air so I was no “Happy Harry Hard-On”, Slater’s on-air persona in Pump Up The Volume. So I made these little mix tapes with punk and metal tunes occasionally interrupted with fake commercials for things like Funny Butt Cheerios. Yeah, well. It was all mostly harmless fun, and my friends would tell me they could hear my broadcasts from over a mile away. At some point though, I saw a news story about a kid who was arrested for running his own pirate station and the fines he had to cough up was reason enough for me to pull the plug on Radio WRON permanently.

Besides, much to my surprise - girls didn’t seem to find it terribly attractive that I was sitting in my bedroom for hours every night essentially farting into a microphone just for laughs.

But, the seed had been sown. I was hooked on radio as a hobby. Soon I had my first real shortwave receiver and was tuning in Tokyo proper. And while that was thrilling enough at first,

I had just heard an episode of Art Bell about pirate radio on shortwave. Somewhere in the discussion a phenomenon I'd never heard of before was brought up.

Numbers Stations.

These mysterious and eerie broadcasts have been beguiling hobbyists and governments alike since WWI. Typically they are simply a voice, usually female, reading off number groups. 1-7-9. 8-3-8. 2-2-1. 3-9-2. There are many languages used in numbers stations but the majority tend to be in English. The earlier days were likely read live by the broadcaster but that later gave way to pre-recorded numbers being assembled and played back over and over for a short period. And then...static. Catching one of these transmissions is sort of down to luck or an obsessive quest to monitor and scan the dial constantly. However, there are some well known stations that have broadcast for years on the same frequency. One of those is the long-running Lincolnshire Poacher. So called because of the spooky killer clown version of the old English folk tune that kicks off every broadcast. Give a listen.

Another numbers station named after its eerie rendition of a classic melody (think murderous ice cream truck driver) is The Swedish Rhapsody. The song is Swedish but the numbers are German.

Creeped out yet? Oh just you wait.

So, what the hay is going on here? Well the short answer is spies being spies. Since the birth of modern warfare (well, really since forever) all the world powers have been searching for the perfect means to encrypt their top secret communiques using new technology. And as the development of radio advanced, the clever scheme of numbers stations was devised. There's some debate about who actually came up with the idea but many nations have used them at some point. As far as something that literally gets broadcast, often around the entire globe, these transmissions are incredibly hard to decipher. It's a simple process really, using something called a one-time pad. This is your key or decoder, and once the transmission is complete - you destroy the pad. There are only two copies of this one-time pad. One at the transmitting post and one in the pocket of the recipient. It's a brilliant system as the agents out in the field need nothing more than a pen, the one-time pad and a portable radio that looked like any others you'd see at the time.

And while the Cold War era was the heyday of this type of espionage communication, numbers stations have been utilized all the way up until the 2000's for spy tomfoolery. The Cuban Five were using them well into the age of the cell phone to receive directive messages from Cuba while they spied on the U.S. Even more intriguing (and surprising) is that they are still being used to this day. Although now they are likely being utilized more often by drug smugglers, pirates (not the Harry Hard-On kind) and maybe even oddball hobbyists out to get people talking. It took four years of regular shortwave radio listening before I stumbled across my very first one and it made my heart race. I know. It's not sexy, but it really was a thrill for me. Since then I've heard maybe a dozen or so and it's always exciting. There's an incredible database of numbers stations recordings called The Conet Project which I highly recommend if you find this phenomenon intriguing. The entire collection can be heard [here](#).

Part of the fun in monitoring the ever-creepy static of the mysterious shortwave band was discovering little oddities here and there that seemed to make zero sense. For such a small slice of the radio spectrum, shortwave is incredibly dense and eclectic. You can hear networks from across the globe like the BBC, the Radio Havana and Radio Cairo. But you can also hear 747 pilots radioing positions to control towers while out in the middle of nowhere. There are satellite audio uplinks for TV broadcasts that let you hear what live event commentators are saying in between the commercials. HINT: It's good stuff. The ISS sometimes uses shortwave to chat with hobbyists from space. There are Morse code beacons chattering away from the foggy coastlines of the Arctic Ocean. Ship to shore communications for fishing vessels out too far for cell reception. And of course you also have the pirate stations in the mix, all on the same stretch of the dial.

Pirate Radio.

The pirates tend to come to life somewhere just below 7000 hz and while they have dropped off significantly in the age of YouTube, many still regularly fire up - especially around Halloween - to play records, talk smack about the government, perform sketch comedy, beat poetry, conspiracy theories, tech talk and just about anything else you can imagine.

When radio (called 'wireless' originally) was new, there were no regulations, licenses or limitations really. If you had the equipment, you could use it to send out whatever you wanted. Of course at this stage it was really only inventors and well-to-do hobbyists tinkering on the airwaves. By 1912 things were getting a bit crowded so President Taft ushered in the Act to Regulate Radio Communication. This allowed hobbyists and amateurs to continue broadcasting but it forced them to stay within certain frequency ranges to allow networks and emergency services a clean and reliable space to exist. About a decade later the FCC was born to further regulate the airwaves as equipment became more powerful, more prevalent and more affordable. Almost immediately broadcasters were breaking the rules and the age of radio piracy was born.

Again, in the beginning many of these 'pirates' were inventors who simply wanted to perform their experiments all across the radio spectrum. But interference over the networks caused many of them to be fined and shut down. As the years went by, radio became sort of a homogenized grid of networks, unions and federal and commercial guidelines which of course left many a young enterprising soul feeling left out and jaded.

In the 1960s the free love movement in San Francisco had splintered off into the free press/free radio movement and people began to take the airwaves back, so to speak. Most of the commercially licensed stations would play a very limited list of tunes and stayed politically neutral, so pirate stations popped up to further the hippie counterculture movement as well as pushing music that you couldn't hear anywhere else. In some cases, likely forcing the mainstream stations to start playing some of these bands in an attempt to remain relevant.

This sparked a storm of 'free radio' stations all across the country and many of these stations would remain active for decades in spite of constant FCC raids, jail time, equipment confiscation and too many fines to count. Most however, shut down upon the first intimidating visit from the feds. For the most part the world of pirate radio consisted of folks that simply wanted a stage to

air their grievances, play the tunes they wanted and maybe give the finger to “the man” along the way. Some were straight up propaganda beacons or anti-military ‘jamming’ stations meant to mess about with official wartime operations. I have heard a few live broadcasts from pirates and these days, it’s oddly like “regular” radio for the most part. With maybe the comedic occasional break for station identification and a quick mic fart.

Years ago I started making it a regular practice to scan for pirates along the range they were most likely to be transmitting on. As Halloween 2013 was approaching, I was monitoring these very frequencies for any wackiness that may pop up. What I got instead...is one of the creepiest things I’ve ever heard in my entire life.

9779779

So as I went about my day I would occasionally stop at the radio and shift the dial back and forth looking for any breaks in the static. Suddenly I’d heard what I thought was coughing or maybe laughing somewhere in the ether so I left it where it was. Around 6777 hz. The sounds faded and I went back to cleaning the litter box. At some point I heard voices eeking back into the forefront so I set my pooper scooper down and turned it up just in time to hear somebody crying for help and repeating the number 9779779. It made my stomach knot up. I grabbed my phone and recorded it. Below is the full transmission. And be warned, it’s troubling.

Now...first off it’s key to remind you this was just a couple weeks before Halloween and it was on a frequency often used by pirates and pranksters so it could have been just some kid fooling around. Right? I’ll keep telling myself that. If it really *was* someone calling for help they could have provided at least a bit more information. 9779779. What did it mean? When I played this clip on my podcast, Tales From The Spacepod, listeners began searching the web (as had I) for what those numbers could mean. They weren’t a complete phone number. They didn’t make sense as coordinates or some sort of radio call sign. A military number of some type, maybe but again...nothing solid in the searches. At all.

So it remains a bit of a spooky mystery. Bear in mind that even though I heard this in Wenatchee, it could have come from anywhere in the world. And as to the somewhat demonic tone to the voice...likely an effect from single sideband radio propagation that can bend pitch up or down depending on a few factors. Likely not a voice coming from the depths of hell.

Likely...