

BBC's secret war with the pirates

They are now fondly remembered for helping kickstart the swinging Sixties and revolutionising the airwaves forever.



Rhys Ifans in the *The Boat That Rocked*, a new film about 1960s pirate radio

By Chris Hastings, Public Affairs Editor

9:00PM GMT 21 Feb 2009

But the fear that the arrival of offshore pirate radio stations drove into the broadcasting establishment has only now become clear.

Previously unseen documents from the BBC archives disclose how the corporation was so alarmed at the rise of the stations that it launched a secret “dirty tricks” campaign to have them shut down.

The files show the extraordinary lengths to which the corporation went to undermine their new rivals, which operated without restriction from ships or wartime forts outside British territorial waters.

Measures included lobbying acts such as The Beatles, Cliff Richard and Ken Dodd to ban their records from being played by the stations and blacklisting pirate DJs such as Tony Blackburn and Simon Dee. The BBC banned its own presenters from broadcasting any reference to Radio Caroline, the most popular of the pirates, and suppressed audience research on the stations’ popularity. Bosses also put pressure on the Conservative Party not to support the pirates.

The public broadcaster, which had a monopoly of the radio waves at the time, even complained about an episode of the ITV spy thriller *Danger Man* which was set aboard one of the ships, claiming that the show gave pirate stations undue publicity. It was also upset by a review in *The Sunday Telegraph* of one pirate programme which, although critical, would have “drawn attention” to the station.

This newspaper has obtained the documents ahead of the release of a new British comedy film, *The Boat That Rocked*, by the makers of *Notting Hill*. It stars Kenneth Branagh, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Rhys Ifans and Bill Nighy in a story of the often farcical attempts to close down a fictional pirate radio ship inspired by Radio Caroline.

However, the official papers suggest that the on-screen events are not far removed from reality. They disclose how the BBC routinely taped Radio Caroline's output, in the hope that its DJs would say something derogatory about Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, which they could pass on to Downing Street.

Nonetheless, a report of Caroline's coverage of Winston Churchill's funeral in 1965 concluded: "They proceeded to play music of such a funereal character that it made our own solemn music sound like a wedding march".

In 1964, the BBC introduced a ban on employing anyone involved with the pirate stations. A list of names included Tony Blackburn, Simon Dee, Tom Lodge, Doug Kerr, Chris Moon, Gerry Duncan, Terry Withers, Errol Bruce and Bobby Brown, all pirate DJs.

When Dee quit Radio Caroline in 1965 so he could work at the BBC, some managers argued for the ban to remain. However, he was eventually allowed to join the corporation and other former pirates would follow.

The BBC believed that the pirates were part of attempts to break up its monopoly via the backdoor. Its dirty tricks campaign was prompted by the reluctance of politicians to take action against the stations, for fear of alienating young voters. The BBC conducted extensive research into Radio Caroline, which had ships off Felixstowe, Suffolk, and the Isle of Man, including finding out how many of its listeners were under 21 – the voting age, at the time – so it could prove to MPs that a ban on the pirates would not damage their election prospects.

However, the corporation decided not to release its research because "the potential disadvantages to the BBC outweighed the potential advantage... some aspects of the report could be interpreted in such a way as to be favourable publicity for Caroline".

The BBC's campaign did nothing to dent the success of the pirates which, by the mid-1960s, had audiences in excess of 20 million. The campaign ended in 1967 with the introduction of the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act, which made it illegal to work for, advertise on or supply pirate stations. They all closed with the exception of Caroline.

A month later the BBC launched Radio 1, its first pop music station. Commercial radio was not introduced until 1973.