

# Daredevils Of The Airwaves

By THOM CALANDRA

It's a snowbound Sunday morning, December 28, 1975, and you're lying in bed alone, nursing a bottle of Michelob and fiddling around with your Christmas-new Pioneer hi-fi receiver. Your antenna hook-up is no radio-sophisticate's dream, but the copper wire you have connected to the set and fastened T-fashion onto your bedroom wall enables you to receive early-morning broadcasts from as far away as Philadelphia.

You set the selection dial at AM and probe the airwaves for tonight's trotter action at Roosevelt Raceway. No luck. In a frustrated fit of desperation you briskly whirl the tuner dial until the red sliver of an indicator slides to 1600 kHz, close to the edge of electronic oblivion. Hearing nothing but the thick, crackling hiss that signifies the forlorn void of early morning radio static, you are about to give up the quest for racetrack results, a talk show—anything, when a youthful voice interrupts the AM disturbance with a cheery "Good morning, I'm John Doe, and this is pirate radio WPCR from New York City."

Contact established. You have arrived. As early as 1930, amateur radio had what was referred to as the "bootlegger" class of broadcasting license. These amateur operators, rather than securing a license, would use unlimited power and occupy as many frequency bands as they pleased.

With the ever-increasing accessibility of AM radio from 1940 to the present, more radio hobbyists bent on a broadcasting career of a more glamorous nature than that of ham radio opted for the wider communication spread of the AM frequency band. The stringent measures imposed on radio broadcasting by the Federal Communications Commission during the 1960's fueled the ire of radio hobbyists opposed to censorship. These frustrated broadcasters were the pioneers of American pirate radio.

Pirate radio, according to the FCC, is any broadcasting operation utilizing the AM or FM wavelengths without a proper FCC broadcasting license. This illegal operation is punishable by a \$10,000 fine and/or one year in jail.

Because of its popularity and clandestine mystique, pirate radio has many different names. Some of its more common euphemisms are: underground radio, guerilla radio, John Doe radio and non-radio.

The major portion of pirate activity in the United States falls into the category of hobby activity. These pirates, devoid of any political

commitments, broadcast for their own amusement.

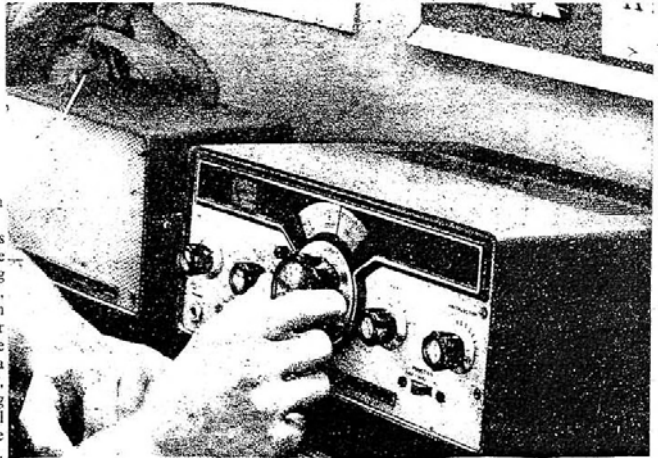
A prime example of this type of operation is WPCR, considered the powerhouse of pirate stations in the New York City broadcasting area. Operating out of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, WPCR began broadcasting on Saturday and Sunday mornings in December of 1975, and emanated from 1600 kHz on the AM dial. The program format, DJ'd by a young man who called himself John Doe, consisted of progressive rock music, rambling monologues on any of a number of topical issues, and telephone talk shows between the DJ and the station's early morning listeners. The station was heard throughout a good portion of the eastern half of the country, and achieved a considerable notoriety until the FCC closed down the operation on February 7, 1976.

If it had not been for the inadvertent action of a New York telephone operator, the station might still be broadcasting today. Apparently, WPCR, in order to remain undetected by the FCC during its telephone talk shows, made use of a telephone company exchange. The exchange number would be obtained by placing a call to the operator and requesting that an emergency call be allowed to be placed to a private exchange that had already been occupied by radio personnel. When the operator cut in on the busy line, she would routinely utter the telephone company exchange number that was assigned to the emergency caller. This was the number utilized by WPCR, and its designation as a telephone company number defied any tracing efforts by the FCC.

During such an operation on February 7, 1976, a telephone operator, probably thinking that the exchange was no longer being used, cut the station off from its listener-caller. WPCR, in a desperate attempt to continue the talk show, reverted to the use of its own listed telephone number. The FCC subsequently discovered the location of both transmitter and DJ, raided the place and confiscated the broadcasting equipment. John Doe, and some friends, were placed under arrest.

Although the FCC is certainly adverse to pirate radio, its role in monitoring unlicensed stations and apprehending their operators has not been clearly defined. According to an FCC spokesman in New York, federal investigators haven't been able to cover the myriad complaints filtering in from people complaining of television interference and local squabbles with ham radio operators. In addition to this, the flourishing ranks of CB operators have kept harried FCC investigators from achieving any semblance of order.

The FCC deals with complaints on a priority-based system. So, if an investigator



## John Doe Radio In NYC

A listing of present pirate radio stations in the New York City listening area:

### WEKG

Emanating from somewhere around Kennedy Airport — the droning of jet engines sometimes drowns out the announcer — this station can be heard on Saturday and Sunday nights, usually from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. Its call letters stand for electrocardiogram. 1650 kHz

### WPNJ

Run by three men in their late twenties who call themselves Paul, Nick and Joe, they're considered the new boys on the block because of their relatively recent appearance on the pirate radio scene. 1625 kHz

### WFAT

Known more commonly as "fat radio," this clandestine station features a regular program with Larry McRae and special guests. Airtime can be anytime from 1 to 4 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights. 1625 kHz

must decide to either go after the CB fiend who is disturbing TV reception for 10 square blocks of Canarsie, or the pirate radio station broadcasting on the obscure end of the AM dial, he will invariably go after the CBer. 1150 kHz location.

There is, aside from this enforcement aspect of pirate radio, much debate over how harmful these clandestine operations really are. A very few pirate radio stations, such as WPCR, air blatantly profane material. Most pirate radio stations, like WFAT (fat radio) — another New York based station that airs public-service information and community-centered commentary — operate on a pirate honor system, and refrain from on-the-air obscenity.

An organization formed sometime in the early 70's in Berkeley, California, to assist radio hobbyists in setting up their own pirate stations has demonstrated the positive side of pirate radio to the American radio-listening public. The organization, called the Falling Star Network, sends out blueprints for the building of effective transmitters, provides advice on program format, broadcasting times and frequencies, and recruits members to further the pirate cause. All of its original members had at one time operated pirate radio stations. In return for its assistance, pirate radio stations give the network free advertising time.

In Belgrade, Yugoslavia, the potential for advertising is a somewhat more sinister one. Many of the illegal shortrange stations in Yugoslavia broadcast anti-regime propaganda for a commission. Because of the great number of illegal stations across the countryside, there are frequently propaganda wars among the myriad stations. And even though there are more stations to track down, the police lack the sophisticated equipment required to locate the low output transmitters utilized by the pirates.

Time, rather than equipment, in America, is the crucial problem for federal authorities. Occasionally, the FCC may actually know the location of a pirate station, but won't have the time or men needed to successfully raid the operation. Other times, a pirate station may be broadcasting over free air space, and its operation will not be interfering with any legally licensed AM or FM stations. In these cases, the FCC usually adopts a "see-no-evil" policy, and allows the pirate station to continue its operation.

An exception to this unwritten rule of FCC enforcement policy occurred in the early Seventies off the coast of Cape May, New Jersey. Carl McIntyre, a right wing radio commentator/owner of WXIA in Media, Pennsylvania, had his station's license revoked by the FCC for refusing to allow listeners equal time during his broadcasts. When the FCC failed to renew his broadcasting license, McIntyre took to a submarine in international waters off the coast of Cape May and transmitted a show of the same

controversial nature that had gotten him into trouble. He was arrested after a short while for using American equipment and causing interference with the AM stations around his 1150 kHz location.

Another case that involved transmission from a source on the water involved a station which called itself "Radio Clandestine." The announcer gave his name as R.F. Burns, and claimed to be operating from a ship off the Atlantic coast. The program consisted of rock music and political jokes, and could be heard throughout the Northeast.

Of the many New York City based pirate radio stations, perhaps the most diversified and polished is WGOR (gorilla radio). Run by a college graduate calling himself Larry Wong (he's not Japanese), the station has a highly professional telephone format and augments its program with demo tapes made by musically-oriented listeners. The tapes are sent to a mysterious post office box somewhere in lower Manhattan, and are screened by the station's personnel before airtime.

A pirate station in the works interested in exploring the creative potential of pirate radio calls itself WLIMBO. Designed mainly by a radio enthusiast aliasing as Jim Morrison, in memory of the late rock star, the station will feature radio plays of a comedic nature, parodies of AM radio news formats, and good humored commentary on Brooklyn community problems.

Most pirate radio broadcasts occur on weekends in the early morning hours, transmitting over the 1600 to 1650 kHz AM band. But this is not a hard and fast rule. Recently, an underground station run by a man known only as Butch, broadcast on the 88 MHz segment of the FM band. The station's life was a short one, however, since Butch decided to get married. At least, that's what he said on the show. Neither he nor his wife have been heard from since.

For the most part, though, pirate stations on the FM band are the exception rather than the rule, since the equipment needed to broadcast is a bit more sophisticated. Most stations use no more than 25 to 50 watts of broadcasting power, enough to cover the entire borough of Brooklyn, and some parts of Queens and Manhattan.

As pirate radio becomes even more popular, a cluttered AM dial may force these playful subversives to form a network which would enable them to alternate their broadcasting times so as to avoid interference with one another. It can generally be expected the FCC, with this development, will expand its investigative force and seriously crack down on the pirates. If this happens, don't be surprised if, one early Sunday morning, you turn on your TV and are greeted by a hooded man with "Good morning, I'm John Doe and this is pirate TV WXYZ from New York City."

Contact established. They have arrived!

## WPCR: Pirate On Porno

The following is an excerpt from a tape made of pirate radio station WPCR, New York, on December 28, 1975, from 2:30 to 3:00 a.m.

Male caller: What do you think about Cable TV?

Male DJ: Well, the FCC, in its wonderful censoring way, is trying to crack down on Cable TV.

Caller: Yeah. Just between having a cable flick on TV or a very frank discussion on the radio, and having a porno theatre—a porno theatre will draw weirdos to the neighborhood.

DJ: What do you mean?

Caller: You know, you get your strange types and all — flashers, perverts, whatever, but if you have it (porno) on TV, it's going to draw people to the neighborhood.

DJ: What about the people who will argue about their rights of privacy? Most of the people who would complain about "porno theatres" in their neighborhood would also say they don't want porno on their TV, where their kids can see it.

Caller: Yeah, you have a point there, but then again, your station — it's the top of the AM dial. People who are going to listen to you know where you are and their kids aren't going to listen to it.

DJ: Umm...

Caller: And, uh, as long as no one listening to it, or watching (porno) on TV isn't foolish or something, it's their right to watch it, and it's their right not to watch it. You know, as far as the Cable TV program goes, between running a porno place...

DJ: Sure, sure. But then again, if someone owns a porno theatre, don't they have that right?

Caller: Oh no! I mean, yeah, they have the right, but as far as my neighborhood... I mean, I wouldn't want it there cause it would bring a lot of strange types.

DJ: What's wrong with strange types? As long as they don't bother anybody, that's the premise of this station, you know. We're all strange here.

Caller: Well...

DJ: You're probably ... (laughter) ... you're probably the ... no, I'm not going to say that. (More laughter.) As for strange types, I mean, you know, I'm out to pervert the morals of America.

Caller: It's the same thing about pot, you know. It's really the only...

DJ: Oh! Oh! You're attacking my pastime now.

Caller: What?

DJ: You're attacking my pastime.

Caller: I was saying, I was at a party

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