

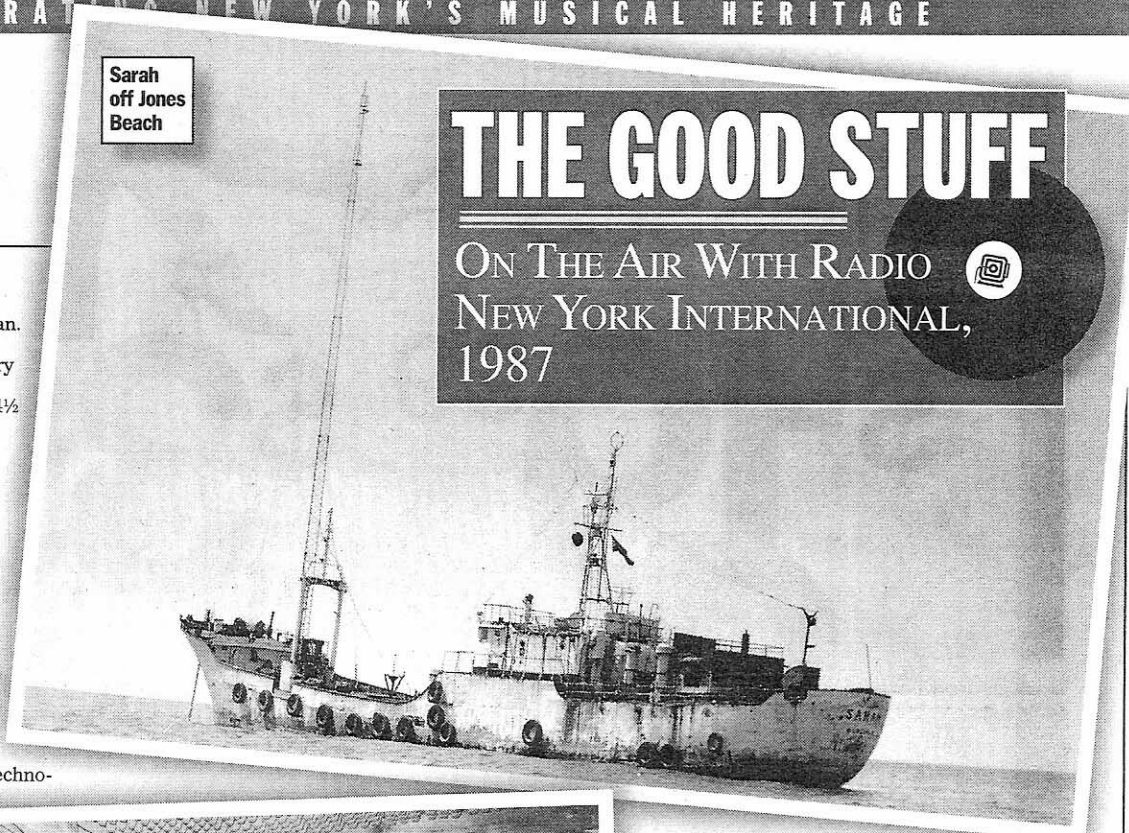
BIG TOWN SONGBOOK

CELEBRATING NEW YORK'S MUSICAL HERITAGE

Sarah
off Jones
Beach

THE GOOD STUFF

ON THE AIR WITH RADIO
NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL,
1987



BY DAVID HINCKLEY

FOR FOUR days they took it to the man. From July 24 to July 28, 1987, they cracked the microphones of their very own pirate radio station, which blasted rock music from a dingy ship anchored 4½ miles off Jones Beach.

And that meant real rock 'n' roll, the good stuff, not the tepid, diluted mix that New York's long-established "rock" stations played. You'd hear the Beatles, Iron Maiden, Rare Earth, Mitch Ryder. Or an obscurity like "Come On Down to My Boat" by Every Mother's Son. There were no ads, of course, but there was chatter. Some of it related to the music. Some of it sounded suspiciously like a bunch of young guys with a case of beer on their day off.

For four days, this was Radio New York International.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT mundane radio programming go back to the first techno-geeks who hooked up a crystal radio receiver to the metal rail on the fire escape. Over the years, some of these folks were bound to take their complaint to the next level and start stations of their own.

Putting a radio station on the air is relatively easy and inexpensive. What gets expensive is 1) buying a large-enough transmitter so the signal reaches the next block, and 2) obtaining the Federal Communication Commission license that makes the station legal.

The FCC must approve all radio stations largely as a way of ensuring they don't get in each other's way and turn each other's broadcast into sonic hash. Because this limits the number of stations, densely populated areas like New York reached the point many years ago where the demand for stations exceeded the supply of frequencies.

Therefore, many people who would love to have a radio station never will.

And it was one such group of people who, in 1987, decided that rather than starting more illegal 10-watt stations in their basements, they would pool their resources and try to slip through what they saw as a loophole in FCC regulations.

If they broadcast from international waters, they decided, the FCC had no jurisdiction.

THE RNI group included Randi Steele, Ivan Rothstein, Allen Weiner and Hank Hayes, a Brooklyn-born kid who grew up on WMCA, WABC and 99X and felt everything he liked about radio collapsed when the sound changed to disco in the mid-'70s.

Hayes had ran pirate stations for years, shrugging



Rothstein
and Steele

off several FCC busts, before he teamed up with the others to spend \$50,000 on a beat-up old radio ship they rechristened "Sarah," after songs by Bob Dylan and Fleetwood Mac. They registered it in Honduras, then spent another \$20,000 or so on equipment and five transmitters. They sailed Sarah out past the 3-mile limit and dropped a heavy anchor with no winch, so it couldn't be yanked out of the water.

They transmitted on two frequencies, 1620 AM and 103.1 FM, because no other area station used 1620 and 103.1 was a "repeater" frequency with no original content.

Because RNI was both more elaborate and more public than the usual unlicensed broadcast, the FCC pretty quickly caught word it was out there.

AND ON Saturday, July 25, the feds visited the ship, looked around and handed over two "notices of apparent liability," meaning the recipients will face formal charges unless they do some very fast talking.

The broadcasts then continued through the weekend, during which time the pirates became

renegade heroes to everyone who thought the system needed to be beaten once in a while.

The cheers lasted until the predawn hours of Tuesday the 28th, when a Coast Guard team boarded the Sarah and disabled the equipment. The RNI crew said they did this by chopping it all up with hacksaws. The Coast Guard said it wasn't quite that dramatic.

They did arrest Weiner, Rothstein and a Village Voice reporter, R.J. Smith, slapping them all in cuffs for the ride back to dry land.

Smith was released while Weiner and Rothstein were charged with conspiracy to impede the FCC, a felony, and operating a broadcast station off the shore, a misdemeanor.

To the FCC, it turned out, the "international waters" argument didn't wash because international treaties prohibit offshore broadcasts. The Honduras registry also didn't work as a dodge because the Honduran government told the U.S. it was perfectly okay to nail the renegades.

The RNI crew got a few more days of admiring publicity, during which they vowed to go back on the air if they could raise the money to replace their broken equipment.

They also continued to insist they had broken no laws, and they claimed that argument was validated when the feds announced on Aug. 27 that they were "deferring" charges, meaning they would not prosecute the RNI crew.

The FCC defended the charges while explaining it had met the only goal that mattered by shutting the station down. It warned that if broadcasts resumed, those responsible would be "prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

The Sarah never went back into operation, though its crew didn't all leave the radio field. Hank Hayes, for instance, started a weekly show on shortwave radio.

THESE DAYS, it's unofficially estimated that two or three dozen unlicensed radio stations might be on the air in New York at any given time.

None, however, are believed to be broadcasting from ships.