



Radio Seren Pirate Radio Ship to Shore stamps **ROCAROL**



For those of you too young to remember, or live in most exotic parts of the world, the pop music pirate radio stations were part of British youth culture in the middle of the 1960s. At the time the BBC had a monopoly on music broadcasting in the UK, but lacked the 'oomph' demanded by a young audience and the music at the time. So in stepped offshore broadcasters, based just outside British territorial waters, and therefore immune from legal action, either on anchored ships or the rusting forts in the Thames estuary. Radio Caroline was amongst the first and remains the most famous, but Radio Seren, aimed at a Welsh audience was up and running three years previously and provided the prototype for many others. It was the brainchild of Maldwyn Mwrcwry, nightclub owner and raconteur of Cardiff.

Radio Seren broadcast from a ship anchored close to St Pinga in the Bristol Channel. Whilst The island is usually considered UK territory because of conflicting claims by the Irish Republic, the Welsh Government in Exile, Argentina and North Korea, international court rulings had placed this rock outside UK waters until all disputes were settled. The ship was an old tramp steamer, registered in Patagonia, called G.S. Venus, and Seren began broadcasting as soon as they were sailing down the Irish Sea on 12th April 1962. After a near disaster even before they reached St Pinga (see later) they didn't give up, laid anchor and continued 24 hour pop music broadcasting until late 1967. The policy was originally to focus on chart hits by Welsh artists, but it soon became apparent that lack of any chart success by such artistes would limit this ambition. However whilst playing the Welsh top 20, compiled from sales in record shops across Wales, they also tried to break new Welsh acts and were instrumental in fathering the Merthyr Beat in 1963, with groups like Y Chwilod and Y Cerrig Treigl making the big time and playing gigs in places like the Tivoli Ballroom in Buckley, North Wales. Seren didn't limit its playlist to Welsh acts. It was one of the first to play Bob Dylan's early work this side of the Atlantic (though it transpires that they thought that with the name Dylan he was Welsh). It was something that Dylan never forgot. You may be familiar with the photo of Dylan standing by a car on the pier waiting for the Aust Ferry near Bristol (it was used to publicise Scorese's biopic No Direction Home). Everyone assumes that he was waiting to cross the Bristol Channel, but he was in fact waiting to be ferried off the Venus for an in depth interview. Sadly no tapes or transcripts of this exist now.

Like many other radio stations the DJs were names as big as the recordings they played. Anyone over 60 in Wales will remember Siôn the Sheep, with his outrageous curly white wigs, and Meici Midnight who kept us all awake through the early hours of the morning. The DJs soon built up a fan base and had letters flowing in with requests mainly for signed photos, but also even proposals of marriage and some more explicit and of questionable legality. A motor launch was in constant use ferrying people and goods between the ship and jetty at Blue anchor near Milford

Haven, so it was also acting as a mail boat. Mwrwry had the idea of fixing 'Ship to Shore' stamps to outgoing mail, hoping that fans would write in more than once so they could collect them, and so continue listening to the station. Some of the more famous DJs appeared on the stamps, while other stamps just showed the ship afloat. But the latter were also inscribed with big events during the life of the radio station. There was no cost associated with the stamps, so they are best considered as collector's labels. There was one problem however. The ship was there in all weathers and not all the hatches battened down well. During the rainy season (Feb to Nov in Wales) storing the stamps in a dry place was quite a task, and it is estimated that more stamps stuck to each other than were stuck on letters.

The stamps included in this distribution are only a selection of those actually printed. The stamps featuring a picture of the Venus with some of the more memorable events during the lifetime of the station including:

New Frequency on 1st Jan 1963. For technical reasons Radio switched to a new frequency on New Years Day. They chose to use MW 246.8 which lent itself to some of the most annoyingly addictive jingles yet heard on the British airwaves.

The Whale 15th September 1964. Just after dawn the Venus was rocked repeated and loud banging noises were heard against the hull. Those awake rushed onto deck and saw a grey whale seemingly trying to mate with the ship. They were soon joined by the red faced Captain A. Habbe wielding a samurai sword cursing the whale as it has caused him to spill a cup of hot tea in his lap. He ordered the crew to lower the launch and he set about the whale with his sword, swearing he would catch the whale or die in the process. They were last seen heading out into the Atlantic.

The Typhoon of November 17-18th 1964, the only typhoon recorded in the seas off Britain, which literally span the ship around and around till the anchor broke and everyone was too dizzy to stand up. Ironically the record playing as the storm broke was Dylan's Blowing in the Wind.

The Mutiny of 28th April 1965 started when the captain refused the DJ's requests for more of their favourite chocolate bar on the motor launch trip. He was thrown overboard, with an inflatable dinghy, and was told he would only be allowed back on the ship when they had been restocked. That is occurred when a journalist from Melody Maker onboard suggests it may have been little more than a publicity stunt. If it was it worked.

The Albatross Incident, of September 1965, when a freak accident involving the ship's cook, the seabird in question, a Frisbee and some rigging led to the cook having to be taken ashore and have the unconscious bird and the rigging surgically removed from his person. Freak accident was how he described it anyway. He will still relate the story to anyone for the price of a pint and an oggy pie.

The Dysentery Outbreak of June 1966 when no-one was permitted ashore for 4 weeks should it spread. Even St Pinga was off-limits, though plans to re-commission the plague pits there were drawn up. The station found it wise to play albums during the outbreak. The blame was eventually laid on a batch of oysters that someone bought cheap. Seren was proud of the fact that it managed to keep broadcasting despite the conditions on board.

The Boarding Party of 29th August 1966 when the crew successfully defended the ship against a group of mercenaries allegedly hired by the Labour government who were intent on closing down the pirate radio stations. This was achieved largely by skimming LPs of the Llandaff Cathedral Castrato Choir (several hundred copies had

been donated by the choirmaster after their disbandment following certain unproven allegations) at the boarders.

Old Bailey trial of March 1967. The British government had tried various means to close the pop pirates down, but even they could not have engineered the case of *Regina v Midnight, Sheep, Jones, Jones, Jones and others*. Briefly the story was that during a week of bad weather when the motor launch couldn't restock the Venus and food had run out, DJ Furry Bob Kat went missing and was never seen again. The police seized on the fact that within hours of his last broadcast the rest of those on board stopped radioing in for food to be sent out. And the straws in the common room, one of which was shorter than the rest. And that all the plates, pots, pans and cutlery were not only washed but scrupulously clean. This was all circumstantial but arrests were made and charges brought before the whole case was abandoned when a great white shark was washed up on the beach near Tenby with human bones in its stomach.

5th Anniversary of The Iceberg, April 1967. This is the near disaster referred to earlier. The Venus had set sail from Mostyn Docks on the 12th April 1962, but incredibly, just two days later at around 11pm, whilst still en route to St Pinga it hit a small iceberg. Fearing the worst the lifeboat (note the singular) was launched, but then confusion reigned. The captain instinctively ordered 'Women and children first'. The crew and station staff then spent a fruitless two hours looking for a woman or a child so that the men on board could follow. Meici Midnight declared live on air that he would continue broadcasting till the ship went down, while Joci Jones for some reason decided to rearrange the chairs on the upper deck. The ship's engineer, Jack Dawson, was heard to say "Oh no! Not again!" The delay though was fortuitous, because the iceberg caused only a bit of paint (and rust, well mainly rust) to be scraped off the side and the panic was over before a lifeboat arrived.

The DJs featured on their own stamps include Siôn the Sheep, Meici Midnight, Daffy Davies and Joci Jones. They were allowed some input into the designs though Meici's original suggestion of an all black stamp was rejected.

There was one other stamp of note, because Dylan wasn't the only superstar to recognise Radio Seren. During 1966 Meici Midnight championed New York band The Velvet Underground partly because John Cale, the viola and bass player, hailed from Swansea. While he never visited the Venus, Andy Warhol showed his appreciation for the support of his 'house band' by preparing a special Welsh version of one of his most well known prints. This appeared as a ship-to-shore stamp in the latter half of 1967, and became the most collectable of all. And for those who don't know, cawl is a Welsh dish somewhere between soup and stew with lamb and cheese.

Radio Seren came to an end when the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act 1967 became law on 14th August, but broadcast periodically until BBC Radio One came on air at the end of September. Unfortunately none of the DJs were taken on by the BBC as was the case with those who worked for Radio Caroline and Radio London, the big hitters of pirate radio. However when commercial radio broke in the UK some did reappear. Meici Midnight still can be heard on various South Wales community radio stations even now, doing his gardening tips and traffic reports. And he still opens supermarkets, though it's only Aldi these days. Siôn the Sheep was last seen at The Show, being held down by a man with clippers. He still sends Christmas cards to die hard fans and claims to be having a good life on his

adoptive farm in the Brecon Beacons. Joci Jones has made his name as a link man on daytime Welsh TV station S4C. He has volunteered to appear on Celebrity Big Brother several times. Each time he was turned down with the reply "Joci who?"

G.S. Venus was sold and there was an attempt to convert it to an offshore casino, but was mistaken for a target ship by the Royal Navy having drifted into a controlled zone. She sank within minutes. A buoy now marks the spot. It flashes 45 times a minute and a loudspeaker plays a Tom Jones Greatest Hits tape non-stop.