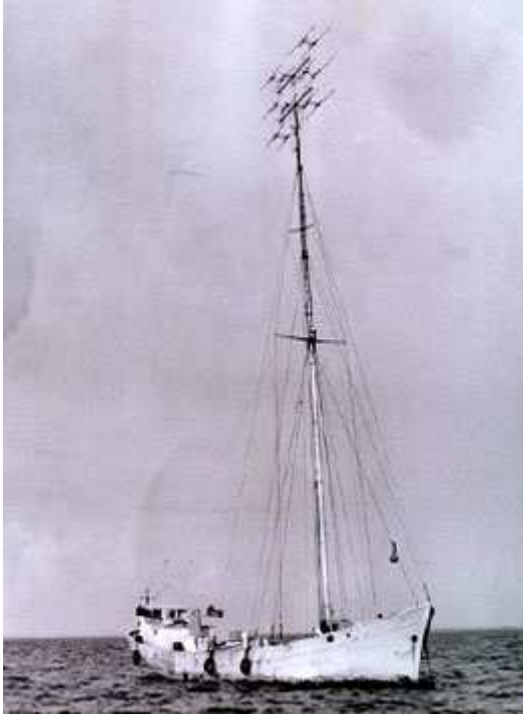


RADIO MERCUR

50th Anniversary of Europe's first offshore radio station

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the first broadcast by Radio Mercur – Europe's first "pirate" offshore radio station, anchored in international waters off Denmark. It started a revolution in European broadcasting, challenging the monopoly of state-broadcasters and would be copied by many others over the next decade, including Radio Veronica and Radio Caroline.



On 11th July 1958, a small German fishing boat, 'Cheeta I', was fitted out for broadcasting at sea and left port to anchor south-east of Copenhagen, where it started transmissions on 93.12 MHz FM with an ERP of around 20 kW. The station used a directional aerial, kept pointing in the right direction from the control room on board. The boat was registered in Panama, though after pressure from the Danish government, Panama withdrew registration at the end of August 1958. 'Cheeta 1' then claimed to be registered in Honduras, but was later discovered to be in fact stateless.

During the night of 17-18 July 1958, 'Cheeta I' lost her anchor and antenna and ran aground just outside the Swedish city of Malmö. After repairs, the ship returned to her former position, while the frequency was changed to 89.55 MHz and the transmission power was increased.

left: the quite small radio ship 'Cheeta I' with only 107 BRT capacity. (The 'Cheeta II' was 450 BRT)

As Danish law only prohibited broadcasting from land, the station could operate sales offices and studios on land, the latter were in a house in a high-class suburb of Copenhagen. Most programmes were taped on land and sent out to the ship. Programmes were mainly in Danish, though there were two weekly programmes in English. Swedish programmes were aired under the name of Skanes Radio Mercur from 14th December 1958. This would later evolve into the Swedish station Radio Syd when Mrs Britt Wadner bought the 'Cheeta 1' (& later the 'Cheeta II').



left: Skanes Radio Mercur QSL card. www.radio4all.se – where there are also more photos and clippings plus a sound archive from the Swedish Radio Mercur, later to become Radio Syd.

A second radio ship, 'Cheeta II', was rented and started transmitting on 88 MHz on 31 January 1961 from a location very close to 'Cheeta I'. Both ships broadcast the same programmes except

when Skanes Radio Mercur aired Swedish programmes from 'Cheeta II', while Radio Mercur kept to its Danish programmes on 'Cheeta I'. In early 1961 the station carried out Europe's first experiment with dual-channel stereo transmission, using both transmitters. For the reception the listener needed two receivers!

Competition arose when dissatisfied former Mercur employees started another pirate radio station, DCR/Denmark's Commercial Radio, on 15 September 1961. DCR used the ship 'Lucky Star', which was anchored in the Sound close to Radio Mercur ship. While Radio Mercur broadcast pop music and many advertisements, DCR broadcast lighter and classical music, talk programmes and fewer commercials. However, listeners who liked popular music stuck to Radio Mercur, while those who preferred the classical style disliked DCR's commercials. As a result, the two stations merged at the end of January 1962 and continued under the name Radio Mercur.

In September 1961, the Danish Post Office issued instructions that coastal radio stations were not to accept traffic from the radio ships unless it was a distress call. Radio Mercur had been using Lyngby Radio. This soon proved necessary - 'Cheeta I' stopped broadcasting on 12 February 1962 when it experienced trouble during a gale. After putting out a distress call, the vessel was towed by tug to Copenhagen, where she was impounded. DCR's 'Lucky Star' took over from 'Cheeta I' and broadcast Radio Mercur on 88 MHz.

By now, however, the days of the radio station were numbered. In June, the Danish Parliament adopted a law banning both unlicensed broadcasting and support services. Just a few days later, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden agreed to bring their anti-pirate laws into effect at midnight on 31 July 1962. That should have been the end of Radio Mercur, but some of the former broadcasting staff came back on air on 13 August 1962. Instead, the station finally went off the air on 15 August 1962, when a force of armed Danish police boarded 'Lucky Star'. It too was discovered to be stateless – the Lebanese flag flying on its stern was a fake. So ended four years of pioneering European broadcasting.

On 1st January 1963, Danmarks Radio, the state broadcaster, launched P3, aimed at a younger audience, with similar programmes to Radio Mercur and several employees from the pirate radio worked on the new legal station.

(compiled by Alan Pennington)



Sources: 'Offshore Radio' – Gerry Bishop, <http://www.radio-mercur.dk>, Danmarks Radio (DR) Kroeniken 1960-1973: <http://www.dr.dk/kroeniken/tiden/radio/radiomercur.asp> , www.radio4all.se Although these sites are in Danish or Swedish, there are fascinating photos and recordings there.

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