

THIS IS FREEDOM RADIO (again and again and again...)

By Charles Riddle.

Clandestine radio has a particular image for many: a sort of Hollywood/French Resistance scenario of raincoated "enemies of the state" bent over a suitcase transmitter while comrades keep watch for patrolling fascist police.

When transferred to South Africa this image is almost invariably connected to the ANC's well-known clandestine station, Radio Freedom, which for a time broadcast from a Rivonia farmhouse in the early 1960s.

But the ANC's Radio Freedom is only part of the story of clandestine radio in this country. South Africa has a long, largely untold, experience of illegal political broadcasting. The country can lay claim to no fewer than five "freedom radios", all of which have transmitted illegally, mostly against the government of the day.

The original Freedom Radio (thought to be staffed by SABC English-speaking employees) briefly went on air in 1942 attacking Afrikaners opposed to this country's participation in the Second World War.

The second station, also called Freedom Radio (and the focus of this article) operated out of Natal in 1956 and, like its predecessor, was never traced by the authorities. It had a spin-off station, run by two brothers called Lang, who broadcast in the Pretoria area the following year and who were subsequently caught. The fourth station is the ANC's, which began broadcasting after the party was banned (they also got caught). More recently the political scene has been enlivened by Radio Vryheid, a right-wing station supporting the "Boer cause".

But to return to Natal. Freedom Radio broadcast weekly during the first six months of 1956. The station had an immediate political effect, stinging the Nationalists who had just succeeded in placing the SABC under effective party control and, so they thought, thereby gaining total control of the airwaves. In the words of the then Minister of Justice, C R Swart, Freedom Radio "broadcast shocking slanders against the people, against prominent people, in the dark of night. They have broadcast untruths and incited the people to violence...they have said 'Get going and destroy the government by any means, including revolution'."

Astutely, Freedom Radio broadcast on Sunday evenings just before, and in a waveband just next to, the very popular Lourenquo Marques (LM) radio programme "Hits of the Week". Young people tuning in to the LM programme (the prime audience for a clandestine station) often connected with the Freedom Radio broadcast.



The station was an initiative of members of the Federal Party, shocked by an increasingly good performance by the National Party at the polls. The party was quite strong at the time, having swept up jingoistic members of the ex-servicemen's organisation, the Torch Commando. It was some of these men, incensed by the National Party putsch against English-speakers in the military and the civil service and shocked by the inroads that the harder face of Apartheid was beginning to make on South Africa, who formed the coterie of resistance that was to provide the technical know-how for Freedom Radio. The station itself, however, was never a party initiative.

Announcer Jolyon Nuttall (nowadays communications director for the Independent Development Trust) recalls being contacted by Professor Geoff

Durrant, then head of the Department of English at Natal, and Peter Francis, a Pietermaritzburg lawyer. "I was approached because Professor Durrant had broadcast one of my short stories on a programme of his called Young Writers. They wanted someone who wasn't well-known — who wasn't a public figure obviously — and whose voice couldn't be recognised.

"I was a supporter of the Liberal Party in those days and equally incensed by what the government was doing so I didn't have any difficulty in agreeing from a political context.

"I remember it as being exciting, surreptitious, the recordings were done in different places, we kept moving all the time. One realised one should not get caught. The opening bars were the DaDaDaDaaaa of Beethoven's Fifth

Symphony and then we had the sound of an army on the march. We got that effect by filling sacks with gravel and then walking over them. We used very simple, but effective techniques to create the right climate for Freedom Radio. It wasn't just a bland talkshop, it was structured in quite a convincing and magnetic way. Then the voice came in. The scripts were brilliant, Professor Durrant was a superb linguist, they were passionate in nature, full of ringing calls for action, very critical of the government.

"Being a reporter on the Sunday Tribune at the time I could write previews about Freedom Radio for the paper which was delighted to publish stories along the lines of 'Will Freedom Radio Broadcast Again Tonight?' I would recap what had been said in previous broadcasts and give the frequency and time of transmission. Of course, this titillated the listenership quite a lot."

The Nationalists were duly incensed and changed the Radio Act, increasing the penalties for illegal broadcasting. "The court," thundered the Minister of Justice, "should be in a position to impose heavy penalties on people who abuse the modern inventions of our times and broadcast these shocking statements."

The parallel between clandestine radio stations and political developments sketched above will not have escaped the reader. And the IBA should take note. The State will always legislate broadcasting — to prevent chaos on the airwaves it needs to — but equally there always will be someone in a raincoat bent over an illegal transmitter, telling the politicians of the day where to get off.

We've grown big by staying small.



To measure the greatness of a university, some would count the students. We'd rather make sure the students count. This is exactly why, at Rhodes, you won't find yourself one of tens of thousands, but one of three and a half thousand. A number with numerous advantages. Such as a ratio of one lecturer to twelve students ... residences a few minutes' walk from lectures ... the privacy of single rooms ... and easy access to all 32 sports, from surfing to skydiving.

Inevitably, all this, and more, has given Rhodes a great name. Which is why you might wish to write it after yours.

For full details, write to the Registrar, Rhodes University, 6140 Grahamstown

Rhodes University

