

The Boat That Rocked - April 1st 2009

'The Boat That Rocked' was exactly as I had expected - reasonably amusing fiction, based only loosely around a subject that I love and know well and starring cartoon versions of pirate DJs. From this, it can be correctly concluded that I did not go to see the film under any illusions. While I would not give it the sort of thrashing meted out by many critics, I feel a little more of the genuine story of the offshore radio pioneers plus a tad more Sixties reality wouldn't have gone amiss.

The film's main problem is its multiple personality. It can't decide whether to recreate the year 1966 and the genuine offshore stations or merely to be a humorous pastiche. Like Sixties duo Twice As Much, it's 'Sitting on a Fence'; that and a decidedly thin plot stretched to fill two hours, are its downfall.

What we have is a bunch of 21st century characters who have suddenly been transported back forty years. The Sixties were much more innocent times than the film depicts. London may have been swinging and dabbling in drugs, but there wasn't much of that going on outside the capital and such goings-on would have bypassed the average offshore listener. The real DJs perhaps got away with occasional innuendo, but overt sexual references and swearing on air were absolutely taboo to them. Look at the trouble Rosko had with his mouthy minah bird Alfie!

A significant part of most stations' revenue came from broadcasting chunks of paid-for religious propaganda, such as 'The World Tomorrow'. Confronted with Radio Rock and its output, the organisations behind such programmes would surely have withdrawn them, with major advertisers undoubtedly feeling equally nervous of offending their customers. I don't recall hearing a single commercial in 'The Boat That Rocked'.

Would the real Sixties stations have become so popular if the DJs had sounded like the film's fictional pirates? No. Outrageous behaviour might have appealed to a handful of rebels, but many teenagers of the time would have found it shocking - not to mention the housewives who made up such a huge proportion of the morning audiences. Unlike today's supposedly 'enlightened' times, expletives were not acceptable adjectives then. Nobody out shopping had their ears assaulted by a barrage of appalling bad language from groups of small children and even the mildest swear words were never uttered in mixed company.

Why was it necessary to include a female chef and belabour the point that she is a lesbian? Gay sex was not openly discussed in 1966 and was still illegal between men. It's no exaggeration to say that many offshore radio listeners would have been unaware that any sort of same-sex attraction existed.

Strangely, although caricatures, the film's staid politicians who are determined to rid the country of the outrageous renegades, are far closer to the real McCoy than the occupants of Radio Rock. Genuine Wets (i.e. the guys who were really on the stations in 1966) understandably feel they have been misrepresented as a bunch of foul-mouthed, drug-addicted sex maniacs. Tony Blackburn has gone as far as to record a piece to camera and post it on YouTube to make it clear that Richard Curtis's story is just that – a story.

In some areas, the film-makers have gone to a huge amount of trouble to get the details of the period right. The costumes, for instance, are great. Studio equipment is authentic, thanks to the meticulous attention to detail of Alan Beech, Caroline's engineer aboard the *Ross Revenge*. (Yes, that's right, mediafolk, Caroline is still broadcasting. But the ship is different from the one that Caroline South occupied in the Sixties. And yes, there was a Caroline North too – aboard yet another ship. And by the way, there were quite a few other stations.)

Listener fidelity and onboard loyalty, even between rival jocks, is well-captured, but where is the all-important interaction with the music industry? The excitement of getting an exclusive on a new release? The build-up to the next chart countdown? And most of all, where are the other stations? Their existence is barely mentioned, with the ministry's battle seemingly waged solely against Radio Rock.

Attention Alexis Petridis! On Radio 4's Front Row, Petridis claimed it was "ridiculous" that the film depicted people crying in the streets as the Marine Offences Act came into force. That was real, Alexis. Many a grown man has confessed to crying on August 14th 1967. Some people still shed tears on the anniversary of that day, when something we loved was taken away from us and we knew that life would never be the same again. The BBC may have snapped up a treasure chest of renegade talent, but the atmosphere couldn't be recreated in a stuffy Broadcasting House studio. Caroline soldiered on, but although everyone hoped their ships would weather the storm, the odds were stacked highly against them.

One last question for Richard Curtis. Was it not possible to stick for just two hours to a soundtrack of music released during 1966? That isn't much to ask. Showing the cast on the deck of Radio Rock grooving to David Bowie's 1983 hit, 'Let's Dance' immediately after we'd just seen the ship sink, ruined any pretence of 'The Boat That Rocked' being set in the Sixties. Allowing Duffy to duff-up Lorraine Ellison's heartfelt original rendition of 'Stay With Me Baby' over the end credits, was nothing short of a crime.

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