

AUDIO BOOK

Few if, any people, anywhere in the world, are alive now who can remember a time without radio. **Adam Christie** talks to presenter and academic Martin Cooper about the medium's impact in the UK over the last 102 years.

HE now has such a place in history that most people know only his family name, but Guglielmo Marconi was just 23 when, on May 13, 1897, he sent the first radio signals across the Bristol Channel from Somerset to South Wales.

Thirteen years then passed before Canadian Reginald Fessenden, working in the United States, had refined a way of transmitting other sounds, including music and the human voice – rather than Morse code. As producer and presenter, he chose Christmas Eve 1906 for the world's first radio broadcast.

Radio broadcasts didn't start in the UK until June 15, 1920. The BBC came into existence two years later, on November 14, 1922 and had a legal monopoly in the UK – despite pirates and stations overseas – until the arrival of “independent local radio” in October 1973.

LBC was first on the air, on October 8, with Capital next, eight days later. Radio Hallam, the seventh station, was the first in Yorkshire, starting broadcasting on October 1, 1974, with Pennine Radio in Bradford, the country's 13th, opening on September 16, 1975.

It's not, however, just the “legitimate” stations that have contributed to popular culture, but all of them, including hospital and community stations. That was the starting point for branch member Martin Cooper, who teaches radio theory and practice at Huddersfield University, to expand on his research as an academic.

“The switch from radio journalist to academic author was not an easy one,” Martin told *News Leeds*. “My initial attempts to move back to life in a university were met with comments from my tutor that my first essay read like a news bulletin: short sentences, and all done within the space of three minutes.

“Writing for an academic readership is a skill I developed, but I hope that I've

102 years of bringing the world to our ears

not left my lightness of touch behind in the telling of this aspect of radio's development.”

The book emanating from that latest research – *Radio's Legacy in Popular Culture; The Sounds of British Broadcasting over the Decades* – appeared in 2022 and in paperback last year.

‘We have a lot of mixed emotions when it comes to listening to the radio’

“It started,” he said, “as an after-dinner game, getting people to name as many songs as they can that refer to ‘radio’ or ‘wireless’. The answers usually included *Radio Ga Ga*, *Panic (Hang the DJ)*, *I Can't Live Without My Radio*, and *Radio Song*; Queen, of course – from 1984 – then The Smiths, LL Cool J, and REM.

“It quickly evolved when I realised that hundreds of creatives had used the idea of tuning in to the wireless as inspiration for novels, movies, hit TV series, pop songs and much more. From sources ranging from *The King's Speech* to *Bob the Builder* and *Hey Duggee*; from novelist James Joyce to comedian Arthur Askey, I feel I've achieved something different by using such a wide and eclectic choice of material.

“My conclusion that we all have a lot

of mixed emotions when it comes to listening to the radio was reinforced last year when Ronnie Wood of the Stones supported the protests against changes to BBC local radio, set to hugely diminish output.

“Elsewhere some – like The Clash – thought Capital Radio of the 1970s was akin to a fascist propaganda machine because it refused to play punk and reggae. Stars such as Van Morrison, Roxy Music and The Who each sang songs that harked back to the days of listening to the transistor radio and recalled the teenage years of freedom and young romance.

“The 2009 Richard Curtis movie *The Boat That Rocked* was a wistful remembrance of the swinging 60s, whilst a 1934 British B-movie, *Death at Broadcasting House*, had an actor murdered live on air. As if today's controversies were not enough for the Corporation, that particular movie was from a novel written by its then head of drama Val Gielgud, brother of the famous actor Sir John.”

Martin had spent 20 years working for BBC radio himself – as a reporter, presenter and news editor – before returning to studying, first with a PhD based on research into the cultural history of Brazil's railways.

He returned to broadcasting as a freelance, radio trainer and academic after that, going back to BBC Radios York and Leeds as well as having his own chat show on Dewsbury's Branch FM.

Radio's Legacy is accessible, an aspect of academic publishing that is all-too-rare. Martin said he had battled with Bloomsbury's editors – based in New York – to have footnotes rather than their customary endnotes. It's a pity that this triumph is undermined by its academic rather than consumer cover price, reminding us that libraries are important.

Anyone with a love of radio should find something in it that will spark memories or curiosity about what we consider to be “culture” generally and “popular culture” more specifically. Every radio nerd is likely to have their own opinion. It was, said Martin, deliberately vague.

For me, popular radio culture means remembering that Dave Lee Travis (ask your grandparents or Google if necessary) was known as the Hairy Cornflake, because of his fertile beard and morning airtime or how Radio 1 DJs inspired *The Fast Show's* Smashy and Nicey caricatures on TV. I was sad that Roy Plumley and his much-imitated Desert Island inspiration was also absent.

Radio has hugely influenced political culture, especially at the moment when “the BBC” is so much a part of all our lives – but which part of the BBC and its output influences each of us is very personal and individual, a factor that is easy to overlook.

‘... live linear radio has the great advantage of covering life as it happens ...’

In a move that probably still appeals to the political right, Winston Churchill attempted to take over the BBC during the General Strike of 1926 – claiming that it should be a government mouthpiece. He failed and had to edit a short-lived newspaper instead. The dangers of state broadcasting, either on radio or TV, have since become all too apparent.

For those “of a generation”, the appearance of Julian and Sandy on the BBC Light Programme comedy *Round the Horne* in the mid-1960s as exceedingly

camp “business associates” speaking *polari* – the gay argot of the time – coincided with 1967 legislation that allowed sex between two gay men, in private, as long as both were over 21.

The law change came 10 years after the Wolfenden Inquiry – commissioned after John Gielgud and several other notable figures were convicted of homosexual offences – recommended the change.

Although the stereotypes created by Barry Took and Marty Feldman seem dated now, the presence of Julian and Sandy with their “Bona” enterprises, luscious innuendo and so much written between the lines, significantly influenced the nascent gay culture of the time. Even for those for whom camp was anathema, Jules and Sand provided reassurance they weren't alone.

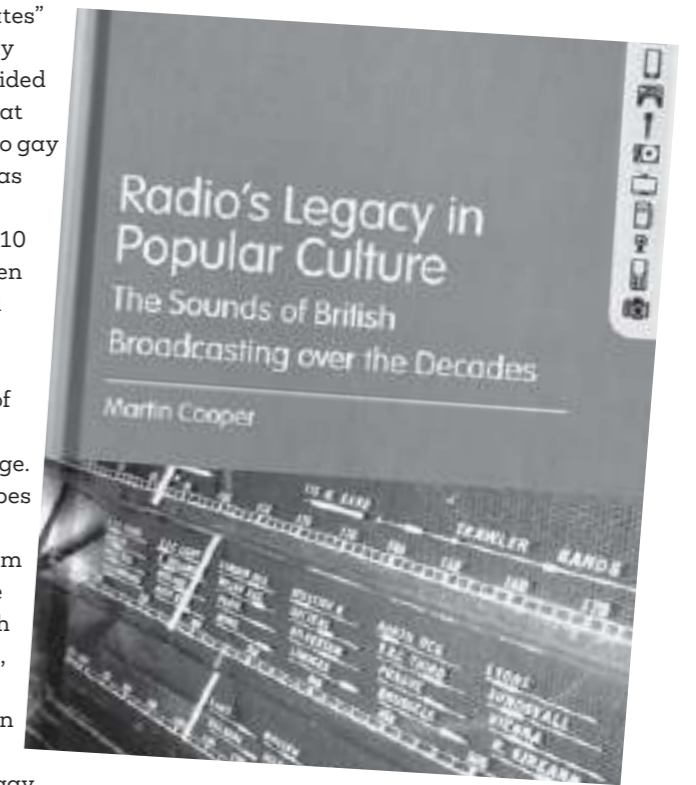
Geographically, the UK outside London didn't recognise Capital Radio or its portrayal as “Happening Radio 242”, another London station, in the London Weekend Television sitcom *Agony* a few years later.

Maureen Lipmann starred – as the Anna Raeburn-inspired agony aunt Jane Lucas – but the inclusion of a happily cohabiting gay couple as her next door neighbours had a far wider cultural impact than Raeburn's Capital phone-ins; it was writing *Agony* with “out” American writer and dramatist Len Richmond that extended her cultural impact and gay icon status to the nation.

As far as social culture is concerned, Martin suspects that podcasting is a trend that will run its course, a bubble that will burst.

Whether delivered by FM, DAB or the internet, live linear radio has the great advantage of covering life as it happens. Podcasts will always have a place, Martin says, but they can never totally replace the importance of knowing what is happening around us, especially when our lives are being directly affected.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE



Live radio also lets us talk to one another, in a context that demands greater civility than much social media.

For those starting their careers, *Radio's Legacy* provides context about aspects of the industry they are entering. For others, it is an opportunity to reflect and remember.

Radio nerds may well think that Martin's publishers – Bloomsbury Academic – may have missed a good business opportunity by limiting the book's potential readerships and market.

Perhaps parent company Bloomsbury could rework and expand much of the material? They have plenty of time to produce a coffee table celebration in time for 2026 and the 120th anniversary of Reginald Fessenden's first broadcast, reminding us of great radio broadcasters of the past and present as well as programmes that have been and gone or are still here.

“There's not much money to be made in academic writing. Not for the authors, at least,” Martin cautions.

Another version may correct that. ■ *Radio's Legacy in Popular Culture; The Sounds of British Broadcasting over the Decades*, Martin Cooper, Bloomsbury Academic, RRP £28, 2022. <https://rb.gy/wrjcc>