

OPENING UP THE AIRWAVES

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To those who don't listen to it, Radio Two is generally thought of as a wash of muzak. It's assumed that it consists of nothing but music and mindless connecting chat, and that it's the wrong sort of music to boot. The other radio stations have their champions. Radio Four and the World Service may be the voice of the establishment, but at least they're *serious* and even a bit pink round the edges; Radio Three may be elitist, but still it is making great music and deep thoughts available if not exactly accessible; local radio, commercial and BBC, is, well, local and at its best responsive to regional and grassroots interests; and Radio One is *young*, say no more. But Radio Two is just muzak, muzak, muzak . . .

The first misconception to scotch is the idea that there is nothing but music on R2. It certainly is the case that most of the programming is organised around music. The sprinkling of comedy and quiz shows doesn't amount to more than three or four hours a week, and though I'm happy that such categories of programme be there, I find most of those currently on offer pretty dreadful. These are not the strengths of R2's provision of talk - far more interesting are the nature and variety of the talk in the music programmes themselves.

In some cases the chat between the music is pretty much like that on Radio One - an enthusiastic babble, a seemingly indefatigable wittering on. While in some cases (those who are on through the night, for instance) the announcers are unexceptionably indistinguishable the one from the other, in a few cases they amount to

being 'personalities' in their own right. The egregiously-cute and drearily-sexist David Hamilton is one of these and the newly appointed Derek Jameson takes notions of personality to new levels of eccentricity.

Terry Wogan is of course the most celebrated example of the R2 personality-announcer, but Wogan was different, partly because he was wittier but also because he allowed the listeners in on the act, using their letters to him as the substance of his chat. Wogan and his listeners together specialised in a wonderfully funny mockery and self-mockery of both everyday life and the media, and were supremely witty about the media's own version of everyday life, namely soap opera.



Gloria Hunniford: her guests combine showbiz personalities and a shameless use of people selling their books.

Other R2 announcers have 'personality' too, but the main feature of their programmes is not their display of themselves but their guests. Gloria Hun-

niford's programme most nearly approximates to the tv idea of a chat show, with showbiz personalities and a shameless use of people selling their latest books or appearances. John Dunn also has something of this, but more appealingly also has a sort of 'general knowledge' remit - many of his guests are experts on the history of words, or folk customs, or the science of bee-keeping and so on. There is an air of 'fancy that' and 'well, I never' in these interviews and a love of facts for their own sake, an engaging if limited curiosity about the world.

Brian Matthew is more squarely in the world of entertainment, but with the definition stretched well beyond the usual chat show limits. He will have celebrity guests on, but he'll also have people from the company of a Terence Rattigan revival on a provincial tour *and* the author and producer of a fringe theatre production about black ghetto life *and* a baroque flautist *and* a has-been rock singer doing the rounds of the northern clubs.

g Jimmy Young is different from all I these. His programme specialises in a 'current affairs' topics, but with the notion of what affairs might be current in listeners' minds much wider than you get on the news. There will be coverage of the budget, or airline disasters, or political scandals, but the programme also draws on the kinds of topics dealt with by *Woman's Hour* and more recently *You and Yours*. If the news specialises in the public sphere, then this other strand of 'current affairs' is more conscious of the private sphere, and of the moral, social and political dimensions of that sphere. The *Jimmy Young Show* doesn't exactly operate with the notion of 'the personal is political', but it is aware of issues that are more ongoing and everyday than the news handles; issues that tend to come packaged as welfare, consumerism, health, and so on, and that touch on the political dimensions of the way we live our lives. The research is excellent, the interviewing technique clear, managing to be challenging without being aggressive. Above all the programme lacks that 'boys' club' atmosphere of virtually all other current affairs programmes.

Radio Two is then not all music. Nor is the music muzak. On weekdays and through the night Radio Two does draw broadly on what record shops label as 'easy listening', plus a sprinkling of current chart hits. Particularly in the evenings and at weekends however, Radio

Two specialises in providing something approaching the gamut of popular musical tastes - and this is something which the recent changes in programming have emphasised.

Radio Two has programmes devoted to string orchestras, brass bands, big bands, dance bands and the electric organ; to hymns, choral singalongs, and parlour balladry; to pre-50s 78s, 50s standards, and 60s pop; to folk, country, rhythm and blues and folk rock; to operetta, musical comedy, and film music; to jazz (all periods) and jazz funk. To outsiders some



Jimmy Young: his show touches on the political dimensions of the way we live our lives

of these distinctions may seem positively arcane - big bands as opposed to dance bands? folk *and* folk rock?

Radio Two does not of course play absolutely all kinds of music. You won't find the outer reaches of 'contemporary' music, whether it be 12-tone classical or avant-garde jazz, and it tends to borrow from the softer end of Radio One and Radio Three's spectra. More notably absent are non-Western popular music traditions, especially those from the Indian sub-continent. There is certainly a popular audience in this country for such music and it is probably rather larger than that for the electric organ or even rhythm and blues. It is surprising too that steel bands and gospel have not found a regular home on R2. The popular, but not rock-related, musics of British ethnic minorities are an obvious gap in what seems to be R2's project, namely, programming which does not so much maximise the number of people listening at any one time as maximise the range of audiences for popular music.

Radio Two is popular in a sense that sometimes gets forgotten about in discussions of popular culture. Frequently when we say that such-and-such is 'popular' we mean that it is what most people listen to.

In this sense Radio Two is not as popular as Radio One. But this is a mass market definition of popularity, concerned solely with numbers of people all buying the same thing. Another definition of 'popular' suggests things that are 'of the people' - in this sense, popular culture is what people themselves produce rather than what centralised media produce for them. Such culture can be romanticised or patronised - there is much to be said for the professionalism and material resources deployed by the mass media; and I am not in any case about to make the case that R2 is grassroots radio.

Nonetheless Radio Two does operate somewhere between these two ideas of the popular, recognising in effect that even if people do not necessarily produce music themselves they do select from what is available, do have particular enthusiasms and sensibilities that are not expressed in the mass hits. It's not that lovers of jazz, folk, show tunes, brass bands or whatever else do not also like the mass hits, it is just that there are different and particular communities of popular musical taste and it is these that Radio Two speaks to. I've already indicated the forms in which the range of such communities is circumscribed, in ways highly politically significant in multi-ethnic Britain. But the principle of going for the range and variety of popular taste should form part of socialist thinking about the shape and structure of *broadcasting*.

The fact is that we suffer the most extraordinarily restricted radio service in this country. In any of the large cities of the USA, you know which station to tune into, at any time of the day, for the kind of music you want. France since Mitterrand has an even more open radio system, with full-time ethnic and political minority stations. This opening up of the airwaves should be a central demand of a socialist media policy. Yet there is also something to learn from the example of Radio Two. You can get the music you want on US radio, provided the music you want is one of a much more limited number of options than R2 offers. Equally, it is unlikely that any radio station could survive providing only one of the enormous range of popular musics Radio Two makes available. Radio Two suggests the way that broadcasting within the public service model can protect popular cultures, provided that it operates with a concept of popular cultural communities rather than with the mass market definition of popularity.