

REBEL RADIO GAPS IN THE DIAL PODCAST

Episode 2



barbican

Tayo Popoola: Hello and welcome to Gaps in the Dial, a podcast series consisting of selected stories about pirate radio pioneers in London. It's commissioned by The Barbican as part of their Rebel Radio season, which is an exploration and celebration of pirate radio

in London. My name is Tayo Popoola. I'm a DJ, audio producer and presenter. Radio is a passion of mine and so is music. I grew up glued to the radio and it's the sounds I heard on pirate radio as a teenager that ignited my passion for music. Collecting it, selling it in record shops, playing it in clubs across the world, making programmes about it and talking about it on the radio. So, sit back, press play and record on your cassette deck. And enjoy. So stay tuned... Even if you hear silence.

[DBC Station ID/Jingle plays]

Charlie Night Doctor: hi, I'm Charlie Night Doctor.

Mike Williams: And I'm Mike the Bike. Mike Williams.

Well, we're standing in the top end of Portobello Road, just beyond the flyover, right outside 286 Portobello Road, which was the home of Better Badges, and also DBC, we also held our postbox here. And really, the station started inside that building.

Tayo Popoola: The Dread Broadcasting Corporation - A sharp brand, an even sharper name, and a home for black music on the pirate airwaves. In fact, the station lays claim to being the very first black-owned radio in the UK.

Charlie Night Doctor: We've been in the same place nearly 50 years now, so 76 I've moved there. Just before all this started, the DBC and Better Badges, and my kitchen was HQ for a good few years, while it was being established. So every morning, there'd be Mike and Lepke sitting in my kitchen, scheming the next move.

Tayo Popoola: Lepke was Leroy Anderson, the founder of Dread Broadcasting Corporation. You'll be hearing a lot more about him.

Mike Williams: Over the road, on the corner, we set a studio up in there for a carnival transmission. The studio had relays, and we

broadcast links between the stage, which is just down there, out to the world.

Tayo Popoola: I'm in Notting Hill, on Portobello Road, just by the flyover where I used to rave hard every carnival when I was younger, to Westwood under the Westway. I'm with Mike Williams, who ran the station with the founder, Lepke. He's with his friend Charlie, an integral member of the station, and a member of the 70s UK reggae band, The Night Doctors.

Charlie Night Doctor: Lepke used to set up a stall every Saturday, and would sell cassettes, T-shirts. T-shirts were a big seller. And also, he'd have DJs out on the street on... Four or five, maybe, sometimes, and get a bit of a crowd going in front of the shop.

Mike Williams: This whole area, this little block, was full of history for DBC, this little section of Portobello Road, for sure.

And we set up, before DBC actually started, Lepke had a sound system he set up outside Honest Jon's when he was working there, and it was fantastic. And he was taking Super 8 film of people, and there was one point when the police made everyone shut down, he would carry on very quietly and just slowly increase the volume. And he had one instance where there was a line of policemen, all with their thumbs under their pockets on their coats, and they were bouncing up and down to the music. It was magical.

Tayo Popoola: Mike and Charlie carry on their tour of the local area, pointing out a spot where a few local heroes have been honoured as murals.

Charlie Night Doctor: Did you see when you came up on the canopy, round the market now., there's a few characters, one of them being Lepke.

Tayo Popoola: Because Leroy Anderson was a local hero, a West London radio pioneer who helped put his area and his people on the map.

This is a story about the Dread Broadcasting Corporation, told by people who were there. Tune in if you're ranking.

DBC Audio Clip: Friday night over London, people preparing themselves for this station.

Andi Oliver: Lepke was cool. Lepke was just vibes. The whole thing back in those days was about connection.

Tayo Popoola: That's chef and TV presenter Andi Oliver, who was a resident of Ladbroke Grove around the mid-80s.

Andi Oliver: You either liked people or you didn't like people. There wasn't really an overt notion of what one should do or what one shouldn't do. At least I didn't recognise that in my life anyway. You just either liked people or you didn't like people.

And Lepke was a little bit older than us. And he spoke quite quietly. And he just had a way of appearing at your shoulder. He'd be there, you'd turn around and and Lepke'd be like, right? He just would appear out of the blue.

And also, he was Ranking Miss P's brother. And Miss P was like, she was just everything to us. I was like, oh, my God. If Miss P said... Margaret... if Miss P said hi to you in the street, you felt blessed. Those guys were Grove, born and bred. And we came in later, younger and a little bit excited. And from the punk scene. But they were really at where... the apex where punk and reggae and culture, and all of those things, ska and everything, connected and met.

And really, at the heart of DBC was that energy. That's what made DBC very special, actually. Because it really reflected Grove culture from that time, in that moment. And that culture was an

extraordinary culture. You had lords and ladies, and people who were the dustbin collectors, all hanging out together in all the pubs. Genuinely, that's not even an exaggeration. Genuinely, all of those people, and everything in between, all piling on top of each other, to do whatever they wanted, and create whatever they wanted, out of whatever they wanted, with whomsoever they wanted to do it with.

So, DBC not only reflected the sound system culture, it reflected our day-to-day life. It was for us, by us, in its most original outing.

Norman Jay: Joey was always on the radar of DBC. I think it was him that told me about it. He brought it to my attention. His ears were always on the ground whenever there was any sort of movement in black reggae circles. Yeah, Joe was always on point.

Tayo Popoola: West Londoner Norman Jay, MBE, who was turned on to the station by his reggae-loving brother Joey Jay, remembers the importance of DBC, and its place in the local community.

Norman Jay: Lepke and DBC was really important, because the only time they really surfaced... or come on my radar, was the week before Carnival. Everyone's got a red, green and gold T-shirt. DBC.

Pyers Easton: Hi, I'm Pyers Easton. I was a pirate radio engineer from the late 70s through to the late 80s.

Tayo Popoola: Pyers Easton was the premier transmitter builder for many of London's pirate radio stations. The kind of radio geek genius you need to get yourself on the air, and crucially, to stay on the air.

Pyers Easton: I wanted to be a pirate radio person myself. I wanted to be the DJ, not the engineer, but I've ended up being the engineer. It feels like I've known Leroy forever, Lepke. I'm trying to remember how I actually met him. We just hit it off, and I think he and I had a very mischievous spirit, I'd like to think. He just surrounded himself with very interesting people.

I remember going round to this flat he had in Neasden, a little tiny flat upstairs, and I walked up and I heard this voice, and smelt this smell. A very strong smell of something that was being smoked. And there was Lee Scratch Perry, sat on Lepke's sofa, dictating a letter to the Pope, because he was on his way to Rome. I mean, you could not make that up.

Lloyd Bradley: I was one of the early, not the original, but one of the early DJs on Dread Broadcast Corporation. This would have been the first couple of years of the 80s, I'd say like 81, 82, beginning of 83.

Tayo Popoola: Lloyd Bradley is an author and music and culture historian. He had a show on DBC in what he himself describes as the second phase of the station's lifespan.

Lloyd Bradley: There was a lot of us buying those records, there was a lot of us grooving to those records, lots of us loving them. Nothing on the radio. Leroy, he recognised this. I knew him through working in a record shop. He worked in Honest Jon's, the record shop in Portobello Road, that's now in Portobello Road, had a shop in Goldbourne Road. They were the first shop to start selling punk and reggae in the same thing. And a lot of the punks used to buy their reggae in there. They opened a specialist reggae shop in Soho called Maroon's Tunes. Leroy worked for them, that's where I met him.

He saw, and I thought this was something that everybody I knew was aware of, almost subconsciously, that black music, in London anyway, didn't differentiate. We liked music. I had some African music, I had some soul and funk. I had a lot of reggae. And there was more than one sort of black music. And Leroy's vision with DBC, although it started off as a reggae station, because that was his, I say, weapon of choice, if you like, he wanted to expand it.

DBC Audio Clip: Prince Alladin, tune called Lady Deceiver. That's up on pre on the Freedom Sounds label. We're going to change things a little bit now. Time for some Lover's Rock.

Lloyd Bradley: The radio coverage of reggae music was very minimal in those days. There was only really the Tony Williams, David Rodigan Sunday show, which was for two hours, I think. It was just two hours. And then David Rodigan left and got a job at Capital.

David Rodigan Audio Clip: ... with a donkey jawbone. Got tell you Rodigan, come fe mash it and go home. Capital Radio Stereo 194. Murder! Murder! Well, I want you to listen to this and tell me how much version you think. Version! Version!

Mike Williams: If you were putting out music in those times, getting airplay, which is essential for sales, was actually nigh on impossible to get. So that was one of the first priorities of DBC, was to give airtime to people producing music.

Tayo Popoola: Lepke, real name Leroy Anderson, was the son [ed-note: half-brother] of Rita Marley. He'd spent much of his time in New York and was heavily influenced by the radio stations there, listening to a program in Spanish here or a music show straight out of Harlem further up the dial. Another huge influence was a show running fresh out of Jamaica, on the JBC, by a DJ and producer called Mike Campbell, a.k.a. Mikey Dread, a.k.a. the Dread at the Control.

Mikey Dread Audio Clip: Some fit sound and angels sing, The tidings of great joy I bring to you and all mankind. Dread of the Control. One, two, three, let it go Mikey Dread.

Tayo Popoola: Mike Williams explains the original line-up...

Mike Williams: The original format of DBC was a six-hour pre-recorded show. I mean, each DJ recorded their slot onto a cassette. And he used to start off with Chucky, who was a club DJ, and he used to be given the task of playing new releases and sort of softer reggae, tea-time show.

Chucky Audio Clip: Watcha, and in case you never know, [name] has got a new album on its way. And I'm going to run you a track from it. It's out and free. If you're lucky, you might hold a copy.

Mike Williams: And then it would go into Dr. Martin and Smiley. They'd do a jump-up rhythm and blues show, which was very short but very good. Miss P would do a show which was something for the girls, yeah.

Miss P Jingle: Listen to DBC On Friday

Mike Williams: Oh, no, before that, we'd have a funk show, which was Dark Star and Lady Di. And Dark Star... Right, we'll expose him now. It was Lloyd Bradley.

Lloyd Bradley: He asked me if I wanted to do a show. So, yeah, why not? I mean, the great thing about it was it wasn't... It wasn't totally transactional. It wasn't that thing where a lot of the later pirates, for instance, would... Essentially, they'd go on a pirate show, a pirate station, to publicise their raves. I'm not saying they don't do good shows, but that's the thinking behind it. I don't think any of us did anything like that. I did it because I thought it was a good idea, and it was something Londoners needed.

Miss P Audio Clip: [MUSIC PLAYS] Minibus Driver dub, from the Voice of Progress seven inch on Firehouse Records, and I'd just like to take this musical break to tell you you're in tune to the Ranking Miss P on DBC

Lloyd Bradley: Margaret, the Ranking Miss P, who was Leroy's sister, she... It was a late-night reggae show. She was brilliant. She was lovely. I was so pleased when the BBC decided to pick her up. And the great thing was, was she was... She was a bit of a star, actually, the Ranking Miss P, when she was on the BBC. And she never changed at all. She was absolutely wonderful. They were just lovely people.

Tayo Popoola: The Ranking Miss P was a massive part of my radio upbringing too. A bit later than this, mind. Like many on DBC, and pirate radio in general, they continued to influence for generations to come. About ten years later, especially, on this teenager in South London.

Mike Williams: Yeah, so at the time that I met Miss P, when we were just starting, I think she was at Teachers' Training College. She was a very clever lady. And she had two small children. And she got nagged into doing a show by Lepke. And Dr Watt built her a home studio, so she was able to be at home with her children, and do her shows. And they were fantastic.

We had a friend who... Gus Dada Africa, and he presented a really fantastic African music show. And then after that, it was Dr Watt who used to play revive music, before having a revive music show was the fashion. He would play oldies, real oldies, in his own inimitable style. He had his home studio with echo and everything, so it was a good show.

Dr Watt stepped away. He went back to work. And then Clive, Papa C, took over his slot.

Papa C Audio Clip: Got to be in tune to the right frequency. Proper station called DBC, into the brother called Papa C. Here to make you feel irie. Buss it, Papa T. Bwoy, Bwoy, Bwoy, Bwoy, Bwoy, Bwoy.

Mike Williams: So, that was the format. So, people used to know roughly what time to tune in. Because we were quite accurate at starting at six on the dot. The whole point of the station was, it was to play black music of multi-genres. And then it would go into Lepke.

Lepke Audio Clip: Tradition. Dem style. Solid Youth. Tribute to a King, from the album, Spirits of Ecstasy, brand new.

Mike Williams: And then of course Lepke's show, which was completely wild, self-produced show, with duck calls and space echo. And he was, he spent... he used to do it on a Thursday night, and he would spend all night doing it.

Mikey Dread's Dread at the Control shows, which were on, I think it was three cassettes. They were highly sought after. They still are. I wish I had mine. But then when you listen to them, he hardly spoke on the shows. It was, he played music and interlinked it with a few jingles. But he hardly spoke. He wasn't a presenter. But Lepke was very intent on having people present in their own natural voices.

Lloyd Bradley: This was the important thing.

I mean, this is how Leroy started the thing off, really. It was to duplicate, as authentically as possible, a sound system atmosphere on the airwaves. We weren't presenters. There was a bunch of pirate stations around at the same time, this is early 80s, who mostly seemed to be sort of suburban South London based, and they were essentially full of presenters who wanted to be Robbie Vincent.

And Leroy, and so many of us, coming from sound system backgrounds, we knew it had to be a bit chaotic. It had to be this bunged on top of that. It wasn't about people announcing records and that, in the between and whatever. It was like playing a sound system for an hour, and with the sound effects and this sort of stuff all brought in. We tried to create that... It's not quite chaos, but it's controlled chaos, if you like.

Tayo Popoola: The station also hosted guest shows from some global superstars who just happened to live locally.

Mike Williams: Joe Strummer. Lepke was good friends with Joe Strummer, from this area. Paul Simonon used to live in Cambridge Gardens as well. So, they were great supporters. They actually financially supported us at one time. And they did their fantastic

radio show, which people have misconstrued it as being a DBC show. It wasn't. They did it themselves.

Radio Clash audio clip: [Spaghetti western music]

Mike Williams: Because, at the time, before we had our own transmitter. We used to use a transmitter that was open access. And the deal was you picked the transmitter up from the people who had it, you were responsible for it until you returned it. And we turned Joe Strummer onto that.

Tayo Popoola: Dread Broadcasting Corporation also gave a radio debut to a young Neneh C, as she was known then, and her best pal, Andi Oliver.

Mike Williams: They were fantastic. We knew them. And it was a nebulous connection because I'd been on the road with Neneh. When The Slits were on tour, I was on tour with The Slits, creation Rebel and Don Cherry. And she was with her stepdad, Don Cherry.

Anyhow, she and Andi Oliver became sisters in crime, so to speak. Naughty but nice. They did a couple of funk shows, and they didn't need any instruction what to do. They just came into our studio in Goldbourne. One, two, three, four, and off they went. And they were kick arse. Real kick arse. And Andi to this day is still kick arse.

Andi Oliver: We were quite naughty, generally. But it wasn't like a hat we put on. We were just that. We were awake, so we were naughty. Do you know what I mean? We were literally teenagers. Neneh was 17, I was 18. We were actual teenagers still growing, really. And we were excited about everything all the time. And a little bit tipsy most of the time. I've got to say, to be honest, to be fair, Red Stripe was our beverage of choice.

I remember... Neneh called me, or I called her, or I went round there or something, and she said, Lepke wants us to do a show. And I was like, oh, fun. And at the time, Neneh and Bruce, Neneh's then husband, were going to New York and coming back with all these amazing mixtapes from like WBLS. All black. And so we had all these little cuts and off cuts all the time of tunes that had just come out. Bruce would go to New York and come back with white label, amazing shit all the time.

And remember, hip hop was being born.

Lloyd Bradley: So, what we tried to do was present a spectrum of black music for, essentially for black Londoners, for all of us.

And because he knew that I knew soul and funk, I knew how to do it, knew how it fitted into a reggae world, knew how the pieces of the jigsaw slotted together, if you like. That if you can create something like that, on the radio. I mean, what he did straight away was with the t-shirts and the funky dreads stuff, is everybody can take part in it. It's like, you might be too young. You're 13 years old. You can't go to a sound system, but you can listen to DBC. And so that was the idea, that we could build a community through the airwaves.

I mean, the weird thing about being on the radio is, you have no idea who's listening, or who they are, and how many of them there are. But Leroy's dedicated in this. He's quite visionary in as much as, because this was the old days, and we didn't have a sort of a live studio with a link and all of that. All our programs were pre-recorded on cassette, and we had to go up to the top of the tower blocks in Shepherd's Bush, and put the tape, change the tape, on the cassette on the roof.

And, but because of that, he exported them, if you like. They became a very valuable thing, like mixtapes, were tapes of DBC shows. So, Leroy would send tapes abroad, and had deals with shops abroad that would sell them, and we'd duplicate the tapes. And it was all

about spreading the word. He worked at it tirelessly. And, because of that, I have nothing but admiration for him.

Tayo Popoola: How far did the station reach? We can't be sure. Lloyd Bradley talks of the station being picked up by friends of his outside London in Reading, but not being able to get it himself in Kentish Town, North London. The reach and the enduring legacy of this station came down to the brilliant, recognizable branding. Something Mike Williams is very proud of.

Mike Williams: First of all, we had a very strong image. The graphic image, which was created by Megan Green, who is a friend of ours. Work of genius, because it's still highly sought after now. But we had a strong image. I mean, the pirate radio stations at the time, other ones, they were all aspiring soul stations, with smashy and nicey type attitudes, and they didn't have any image, whereas we had image.

And it was also picked up upon by the music press. So, a lot was written about us in Sounds and NME. So, people from all over the country were well aware of what DBC was about.

The branding, the actual design was... I had bought back from France. There was a label in France called Jah Live, which had the dreadhead, but the other way round, and I bought back copies of that and some other bits and pieces, and I gave it to Megan Green. And she just knocked it up. And it's, 50-odd years later, or nearly 50 years later, it's still a very powerful image. It'll never be beaten.

In fact, we used to have a collection of pictures of people wearing it. I think one of the Neville brothers wore it on stage one time. I think Ronnie Wood had one. And wore it one time. So it was that type of, it was like the reggae version of the Ramones T-shirt.

Tayo Popoola: Something that has always made pirate radio special for me is the quality of the adverts, and also the jingles. Another

enduring part of the DBC legacy were those incredible, unique dub play specials.

DBC Prince Lincoln Jingle: DBC has no beginning. DBC has no end. And when you tune in, you've got to tell your friends. On Friday night, the start of the weekend.

Mike Williams: Lepke used to produce a lot of jingles, and he used to have a home studio. And the manufacturing of the jingles was, if I sat in on a few of them, it was a complete laugh. When Devin and Miss P got together, God. They were just a barrel of laughs, because they didn't take it seriously, and he'd be like the producer, come on now, come on, concentrate, concentrate, and all that. But, yeah, our jingles were...

Charlie Night Doctor: Prince Lincoln.

Mike Williams: Oh, the Prince Lincoln one was a mind-blower.

DBC Prince Lincoln Jingle: On Friday night, the start of the weekend...

Mike Williams: The first time I heard it, it was a scorching hot day. Dr. Watt and myself went round to Miss P's. We went in and we went into her music room. She went and got a cold drink, put it on the table, and she said, help yourself. Switched on her open reel tape and out came this song. And he was one of the most beautiful people you could wish to meet, Prince Lincoln. And Lepke chopped it up into... making it into jingles, but it was a song of praise for DBC. And he never asked for a penny or anything. And the same with the fantastic Michael Prophet jingle. He made that out of love and respect for the station.

Michael Prophet Jingle: Oh, yeah, Yes, It's so nice, to be on your radio. It's so nice, to be on your radio, Yeah.

Lloyd Bradley: First of all, it's DIY culture. No one else is going to do it, so I'm going to do it myself. Like blues dance culture, or independent record distribution culture, or any of that. Well, yeah, we'll find a way to do it. And the other thing that I loved about Leroy was, if I don't do it, probably no one will. And he would take responsibility for it. People responded to his taking responsibility. Like I say, none of us made any money out of DBC, but we all did it.

He was an absolutely lovely guy. And what was so lovely about him was the work rate he'd put in to doing what he did. It's like what I try and do with my books was, reconnect the music with the culture that created it, acknowledge black music from a black perspective, which was a little bit of everything. The idea that it all came together and it should all be on the same station. We were a black music station. We weren't a soul station or a reggae station. We were a black music station. And he was determined to sort of create the best experience he could for his listeners.

Tayo Popoola: And so many years later, how does Mike Williams look back on that special time?

Mike Williams: Well, I take great pride in it, now. I mean, it's... I try to explain to some people what we were doing, and they just find it incredible. But, as I said, it was different times. Today people are spoiled with cable television, Internet radio stations, blah, blah, blah. You can Spotify and all this sort of nonsense. You can get anything you want with the touch of a button on the computer. But in those days, it was very difficult to get the information and entertainment.

Years... I don't know how many years ago it was, I gave a copy of the CD to someone I know, who was like a sister-in-law of someone I know, and she said, Oh, my husband and I, we used to listen to that religiously every Friday. I went, what? Yeah, it was fantastic. We'd just switch the radio on and that was it. We were entertained for six hours.

So I know that we had a profound effect upon the music industry. And the music industry loved us.

Lloyd Bradley: It was what we wanted. It wasn't someone else's idea of what we wanted. The radio shows on DBC weren't the product of a series of marketing meetings. Even if it didn't make sense to the mainstream, it made sense to us, and thus we supported it.

Charlie Night Doctor: I loved those years. And it's sad that it didn't really grow fully, but it was fantastic. It was a real achievement.

And Lepke should be really proud, who from years later in bands I've been in, and I tell him, yeah, I was part of the DBC scene that was going on at the time, they go, really? Wow. I used to listen to them. It was a good little thing to be involved with. Fantastic, in fact.

DBC Sign-off: If you hear silence, don't fret. Sister Miss P coming up. Tune in to Solid Groove Selection next week.

Closing Music: When it comes to loving, She know how to do it, Yeah, When it comes to, She know how to do it, Yeah.

Tayo Popoola: Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week. Welcome to Gaps in the Dial. If you've enjoyed this episode, and I hope you have, there's another five available for you to check out. Gaps in the Dial is written, produced and presented by me, Tayo Popoola. It's a Furious Styles production, commissioned by The Barbican as part of their Rebel Radio season, with thanks to Rich Attlee, Charlie Fracture and Jesse Howard.

Special thanks also to the interviewees for sharing their time and their tales and for letting me tell some stories.

DBC Sign-off: So stay tuned. Even if you hear silence.