

Islands of Resistance Pirate Radio in Canada

Edited by Andrea Langlois, Ron Sakolsky & Marian van der Zon (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010)

Reviewed by Heikki Uimonen

The back text of *Islands of Resistance* promises that the anthology is “giving you a collection on inside views” on pirate radio in Canada. It certainly does. The articles of various lengths range from academic contributions to pirate radio manifestos, from auto-ethnographic descriptions about experiences to legal and illegal radio activities to radio art and “squatting the airwaves” (Sakolsky, 12). The overlapping and recurring themes of the book are political activism, giving voice to marginalized groups and challenging the conventional ways of radio broadcasting.

Islands of Resistance restricts itself geographically not only to Canada but discusses piracy in Mexico (Dunifer) and the United States (Nopper) as well. *Rip Roaring Radical Radio Resource* at the end of the book introduces Pirate Radio DIY guides, films about pirate radios and Internet resources for transmitters and antennas. The book is supported by a website including audio clips (<http://islandsofresistance.ca/>).

According to the list of contributors, the writers represent radio founders, writers, sound and radio artists, installation and performance artists, curators, academics, journalists, community radio DJs, and of course radio pirates. They are as follows: Stephen Dunifer, Roger Farr, Anna Friz, Stephen Kelly, Kathy Kennedy, Gretchen King, Eleanor King, Bobbi Kozinuk, André Éric Létourneau, Anne MacLennan, Neskia Manuel, Christof Migone, Charles Mostoller, Sheila Nopper, Kristen Roos, Andrea Langlois, Ron Sakolsky, and Maria van der Zon.

The volume consists of written descriptions of diverse electro-acoustic communities (see Truax 2001) with the exception that the listeners represent not only the audience but the programme makers as well. Or to paraphrase Anna Friz’s article on “micro-radio party”: it is not about “diffusion but communication [...] adding new layers of sociality” (171). If one wants to use a buzzword “social media” here, pirate radios certainly are the ones: only they do not necessitate computer and Internet access. Instead, their easy usability makes programmes accessible for anyone with a radio receiver

in the vicinity, and who is perhaps willing to participate in programme production. The low price of radio transmitting equipment as well as the activist’s workshops and Internet resources has made unlicensed broadcasting quite comfortable: you can purchase a radio transmitter the size of a cigarette box with practically no cost at all – unless you decide to build one yourself.

Setting sail: Navigating Pirate Radio Waves in Canada is serving as an introduction to the subject (Sakolsky, van der Zon & Langlois). The editors use the expression pirate radio to refer to “unlicensed form of radio broadcasting that relies on the airwaves for transmission, rather than the internet-based mechanisms of podcasting or web radio” (3). A common denominator for the articles is that the radio projects presented can be “placed on a spectrum of illegality” resisting CBC’s “nationalist agenda” and corporate “free market seductions” (4–8). The editors link the roots of Canadian pirate radio to direct action of indigenous people and refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power in regard of pirates’ meaning-making and defining reality.

Stephen Dunifer’s work meets these standards well. He states in *Latitudes of Rebellion: Free Radio in an International Context* that free radio rebels against control of airwaves regulated by licensing and against neo-liberal paradigms. Historically this rejection of state and corporate control has been manifested in countries such as Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador and Indonesia and lately in Mexico, where Dunifer has conducted transmitter building workshops. In the world of vulnerable and easily monitored digital networks uncontrolled free radio proves to be an essential medium for free communication.

Anne F. MacLennan provides a historical background on piracy in *Resistance to Regulation Among Early Canadian Broadcasters and Listeners*. The article tackles the limited regulation of the early days of radio and how developing regulation was tested by the broadcasters not only in Canada but internationally as well. The pirates of the 1920s and 1930s included high-powered American stations not respecting the boundary of Canada and the United States, and vice versa. For example, during the American prohibition (1919 to 1933), a distillery-owned CKGW radio station in Toronto was advertising illegal substances to the south of the border.

Sheila Nopper offers an insider’s view of campus and pirate radios in *Freedom Soundz: A Programmer’s Journey Beyond*



Licensed Community Radio. The text deals with the changes in radio culture starting at CIUT campus radio in Toronto and how the multicultural city manifested itself aurally in campus radios.

The Canadian Content requirements of the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), which supervises the music policies of licensed radios, is discussed as well. The “well intentioned guidelines” to preserve Canadian culture with Canadian Content regulation were re-evaluated by the writer after some experience on pirate radio, especially in trailblazing Tree Frog Radio in British Columbia.

Charles Mostoller tells in *Awakening the Voice of the Forest: Radio Barriere Lake* how he got involved in helping an Algonquin community to found a station broadcasting from the Rapid Lake reserve northwest of Montreal. One of the objectives was to maintain the community’s way of life and language. He also makes clear why they took the piracy road instead of the legal one, which would have meant applying for a radio transmission permit: the process takes time, it is expensive and designed for radios with large amounts of funding.

Amplifying resistance: Pirate Radio as Protest Tactic by Andrea Langlois & Gretchen King takes the activism to cities. The writer brings forth the importance of pirate radio during the World Trade Organization’s mini-meeting protests in Montreal. *Rock the WTO Radio* was broadcasting police action live and “aired many songs that spoke to police brutality, further highlight-

ing the feelings of rage felt by those on both sides of the police line" (110). In Vancouver, during media activists project protesting 2010 Olympic Games, the radio was shut down within 24 hour by Industry Canada officers. Quite interestingly, they were wearing Olympic-branded clothes.

Radio art is dealt with in Christof Migone's *Touch that Dial: Creating Radio Transcending the Regulatory*. Migone introduces deejays' worst nightmares such as a skipping record, the wrong turntable speed and dead air as the most common compositional tools for radio artists. His somewhat Cagean attitude is revealed more clearly in his lecture performance *Radio Naked: Tactics Towards Radio without Programming*. The list starts with the statement "Always give the wrong time, date, weather and news report" (164).

Cage's *Imaginary Landscapes 4*, composed for 12 radios is presented in more detail in Kristen Roos' *Repurposed and Reassembled: Waking up the Radio* along with the description of creating radio art. Anna Friz's *The Art of Unstable Radio* is tackling the same issue while paying homage to Bertolt Brecht, by creating a charming radio character called Pirate Jenny, who ventures into "realms of sibilance and hiss" (172). Readers of *Soundscape* might find Kathy Kennedy's article *The Power of Small: Integrating Low-Power Radio and Sound Art* rewarding. She heightens the listening experience during soundwalks with the help of transmitted soundtrack and radio receivers.

Several writers are acknowledging the fact that pirates are playing cat and mouse with the CRTC and Industry Canada. The former deals with content and formatting whereas the latter oversees the technical requirements of the stations. Industry Canada also acts as an enforcement agency. Although unlicensed broadcasting is illegal, its control is not extensive. Short-staffed Industry Canada relies mostly on complaints from the individuals offended by the content, or from commercial stations complaining about interferences to their programming (Sakolsky, van der Zon & Langlois).

Being such a critical volume, one cannot but notice the absence of criticism or questioning of piracy itself. Perhaps a somewhat heretic suggestion would have been – and this is definitely against piracy

ethic – to also give a voice to the "establishment". A commentary chapter from CRTC or Industry Canada about the status of the pirates would have placed the book in a wider context in regards to the current and past situation. After reading the book, I began to ponder on the main reasons for closing down the stations and, perhaps more interestingly: have these reasons changed over time? A subject for future radio scholars, perhaps? Also dividing a book into thematic sections would have helped a potential reader to get a general overview of the book.

Regrettably there is not enough space to describe all the articles here in detail, but they are all worth reading. *Islands of Resistance* in an excellent compilation, especially in its ability to document contemporary alternative media, thus serving future radio scholars or anyone interested in the subject. This is emphasized by the fact that radio contents or the actual work of the radio stations are seldom documented.

Islands of Resistance is a good companion and a thought-provoking book for anyone thinking about radio only as a publicly funded medium for enlightening citizens or else as a commercial playlist-generator offering music suitable for background listening. It gives inspiration to anyone interested in subversive action, radio politics, radio music and soundscape. The book serves also as a healthy reminder that discussions about changes in media is generally North American and European-centric, and often-times Internet-biased. Terrestrial radio is a perfectly legitimate tool in changing society not only in Canada, but in other countries as well.

Reference

Truax, Barry. 2001. *Acoustic Communication*. Second edition. Westport: Ablex Publishing.

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International Association for the Study of Popular Music Canada Conference

Schulich School of Music, McGill University, Montreal, Canada: June 16–19, 2011

Music and Environment: Place, Context, Conjecture

Music functions as an agent for different types of environmental transformations whether they be social, economic or technological, with the reverse also being true: environmental changes can be heard in the music and sounds of our day. In recent academic discourse we have observed a turn towards the ecology of sound, which can imply political advocacy of the preservation of an environment's sonority. In a parallel gesture, use has been made of the environment in many artistic forums, such as sound sculptures and installations. This recent turn has opened up new areas of exploration for popular music as well, with the notion of place being of particular interest.

We may consider, for example, the way in which specific places have an impact on the cultural meaning of music. Furthermore, popular music creates labels such as the "Liverpool" or "Montreal" sound which function as genre-like distinctions. But what does it mean to attribute such a label? Popular music also embraces musical and social hybridity via techniques such as sampling, quotation or imitation, influenced by factors such as travel, immigration and the recent virtual proximity of the Internet. The inter-relationship of these musical, social, and technological elements is in turn affected by the economic environment, shaped by both changes in the cultural industries, such as the record industry meltdown, and the current global financial crisis. Our understanding of space and environment is neither simple nor static, and the relationship of these to music is extensive and complex.

For questions about the conference, contact the conference Chair, Will Straw, at william.straw@mcgill.ca

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