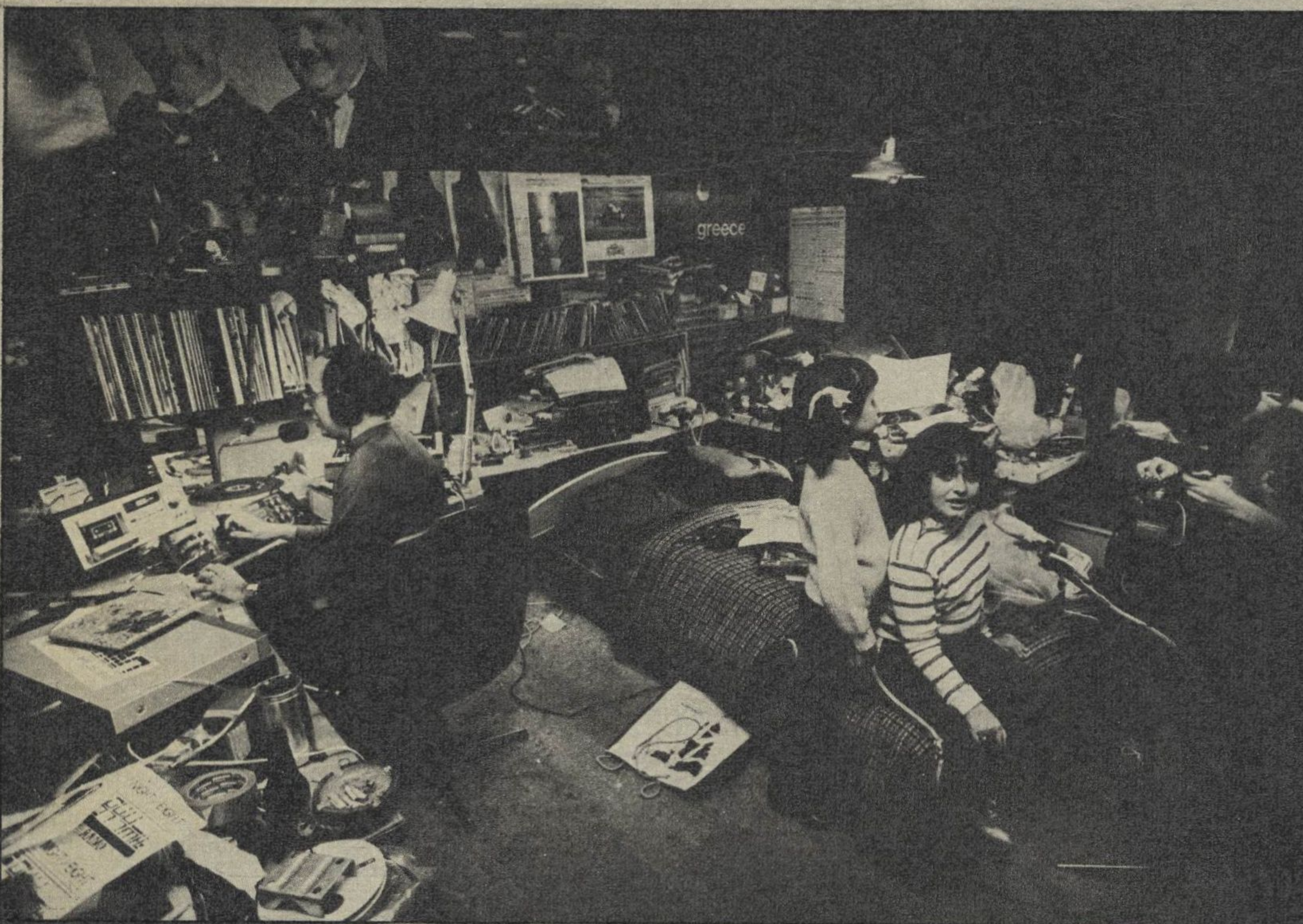


The war in the air

? Pirate radio did not sink with the ships of Radios Caroline and Victory back in the swinging '60s. Twiddle the dial on your set and you'll hear the babble of a whole new generation of outlaw broadcasters . . . who are in daily battle with the harassed, 300-strong force of the Radio Interference Service. Peter Martin reports



Above: Radio Star's Cecil Morris says the licensed stations ignore community needs. Left: Ricky Stevens of London Music Radio chats up listeners

It is Sunday afternoon, coming up to four on the studio clock. Radio Horizon, one of Britain's more brigandly pirates, is about to invade the airwaves with 'the very best in soul sounds', paid advertisements, listeners' dedications, feeble jokes, and the odd, sly reference to a certain 'Eric'.

Security at the Horizon transmitter, illegally installed atop a nearby South London tower block, is squeaky-tight. Down in the car park, Gary, one of the DJs, is doing a spell on watch, his walkie-talkie close up to his face and crackling, its wicked little black-rubber stub aerial looking all sorts of Bodie and Doyle. Up on the 19th floor, inside a deliberately darkened flat with a walkie-talkie close up to his face, Don is also on red-alert for any suspicious vehicles or persons remotely resembling the Home Office's Radio Interference Service.

'If Gary spots 'em first,' explains Don, not taking his eyes off the street below, 'he'll run in and get the lifts so that we can rip out the transmitter and have it safely away before Eric can reach this floor. We've timed it.'

The atmosphere here at Horizon is very tense, very serious, and the style of it all – a mix of the authoritarian and the deliciously renegade – is pure South London macho: leather bomber jackets, babysoft hair, pallid complexions, mum-washed jumpers, King-sized ciggies, up the clubs DJ-ing for 50, could be 75, notes a night cash in hand, tasty motors and neat, neat training shoes for non-skid agility when running like rabbits from the forces of the law.

The 300-strong Radio Interference Service, among its many other activities, last year made 45 raids on 30 different pirate stations, 18 of them in London. The Service, actually British Telecom's, is seconded to the Home Office and headed up by the aforementioned Eric – Mr Eric Arthur Gotts – for whom the pirate DJs now and then cheekily play unsolicited request records.

Many people seem to think that pirate radio went down along with the ships of Radios Caroline and Victory in 1967. ? But even as former naughty boys Tony

Blackburn and John Peel were being clasped to the BBC's forgiving bosom, the first land-based pirates, Radio Free London and Radio Jackie, were already on the air.

Fifteen years and many Home Office raids later, they are still operating, now alongside 30-odd more pirates in the London area, with others dotted at Cardiff, Birmingham, Liverpool and Stevenage New Town.

Not all pirates are motivated by the romance of their own roguishness. For Radio City's Luke the Duke, it's strictly the music. 'Obscure 1950s grassroots rockabilly is basically what I'm into,' he says. Other 'community of interest' pirate stations include Gaywaves, music and earnest discussions aimed at homosexual listeners: Our Radio, leftist politics: Dread Broadcasting, black music and ethnic news. Coventry's Radio Enoch, which preached expulsion of all non-whites from the UK, finally fell silent following prosecution for inciting racial hatred.

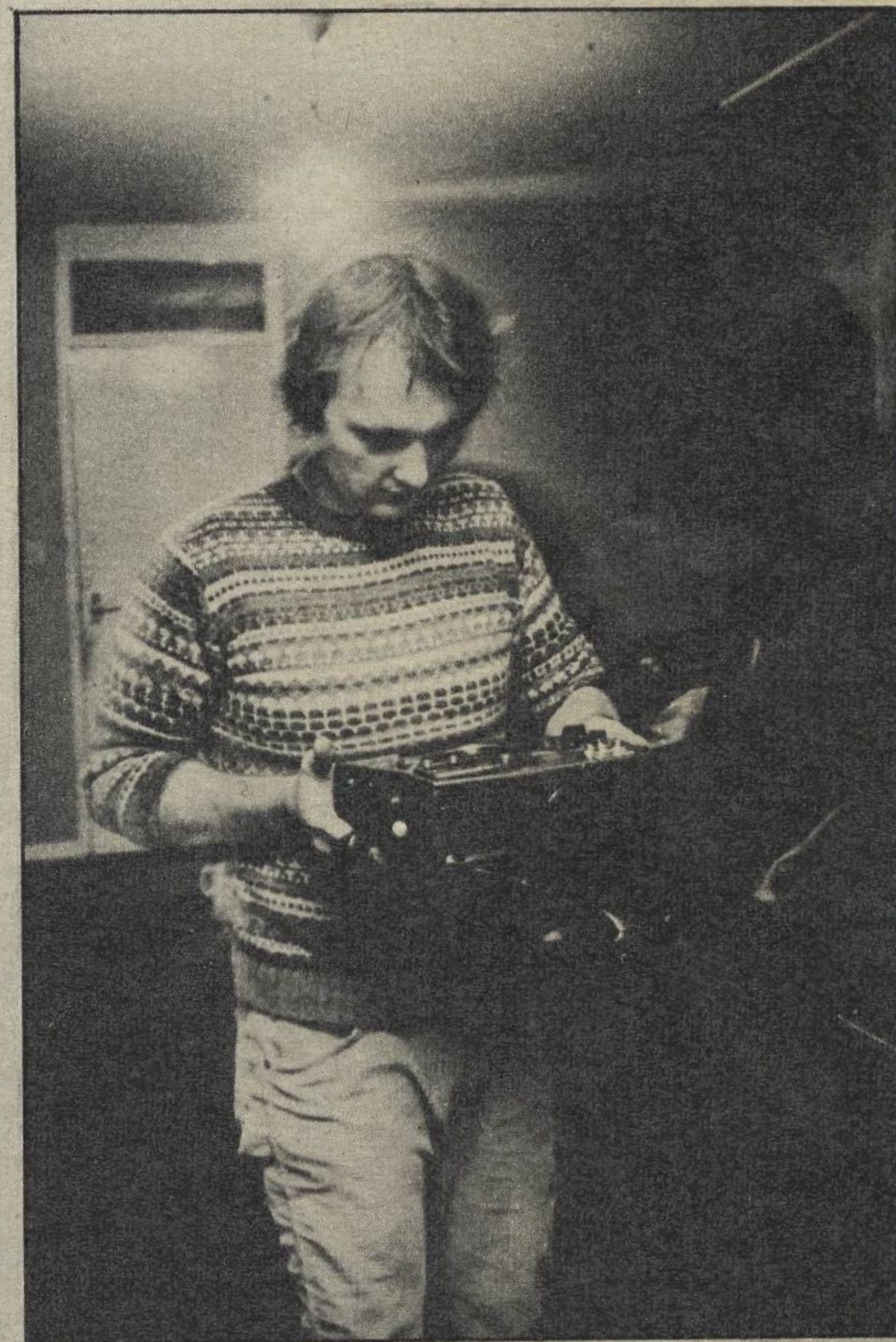
Of all the pirates, the most 'respectable' is Radio Jackie. Founded by Michael Knight, the station carries IRN newscasts, adverts, local news for the Richmond area of London and has raised money for charity with the likes of Harry Secombe presenting the cheques. Jackie was often raided in the early years. But after successfully taking Eric Arthur Gotts to court for assault following one such raid, the station has since enjoyed a unique immunity. 'For the past five and a half years the Home Office hasn't been near us,' says Knight.

'Cowboys' is how Knight regards most of the other pirates. They, in turn, hold him and Radio Jackie in high contempt.

'Vicious' is how Horizon's big bad boss, Chris Stewart, describes the rivalry between some of the broadcasting outlaws. Though it's simple enough for the Radio Interference Service to listen in and locate live transmitting equipment, which it is empowered to switch off and confiscate, bringing the offenders to court and making the charges stick is a

different matter. Most pirates, in order to evade capture, leave their transmission sites unmanned. 'But even when there's someone there,' explained a Home Office spokesman sighing, 'they give false names and addresses or they run away.'

The singular distinction of being the only pirate not to run away falls to Jamaican-born Cecil Morris. With a touching idealism and a thousand-signature petition, Morris tried throughout 1981 to persuade the licensed stations that they were ignoring the 'community needs' of Birmingham's large West Indian and Asian populations. 'But all we got in response to our demonstration was two, one-off programmes – one with music and a little discussion, the other with imported music.' ▸22



CHRIS MOYES

Left and above: DJs at Horizon have a battle plan to foil the Home Office squad. Meanwhile, DJ Debbie Gobbie keeps the turntables spinning





Chris Miles, acknowledged superbrat genius of rig-building, started London Music Radio when he was 18

19◁ Turning pirate in January last year, Morris and friends took to the airwaves as Radio Star – with gospel services and talks on the various minority religions; senior black citizens' requests; reports on local community projects; arts, health and beauty slots; discussions of the education problems and employment prospects of the ethnic minorities; all interspersed with soul, reggae, sock (pronounced 'soaker'), and calypso music, the emphasis on local talent.

'Singers and bands, sure,' says Morris. 'But we also get kids coming here saying, "Man, it's great to have a radio station we can identify with," and, "I always wanted to get into radio but I never studied because there was no chance of getting involved with these things before."

I'm talking black schoolkids and older ones with no jobs into seeing the opportunities that are

around – radio, electronics, music, journalism. Radio Star was first raided in March, then again in August. The second time, Morris had been listening at home when the radio went dead. Rushing to the transmitter at a nearby tower block, and in a lather of frustration and protest, he gave himself up to the Home Office team. Fighting his case on the point of community need, Morris lost and was fined £180 plus costs. He also had £2,000 worth of equipment confiscated.

Between times, Morris had applied to the IBA for a licence and was turned down. 'Birmingham already has its own local station serving the needs of the community, they say. *With two hours of reggae a week?*

'It has been a lot of tribulation and disappointment. Perhaps the IBA is scared we'd use a black radio station for political troublesomeness. But

we're not *against* society. We're *here*; we want to contribute, and a radio station could help us help ourselves.'

Now let us turn to the whole tricky matter of what the pirates call 'sprogs' and the Home Office terms 'spurious emissions'. These are rogue harmonics which can interfere with licensed transmissions and, more seriously, foul up emergency and aeronautical frequencies. Such interference, the Home Office insists, emanates from badly-designed or ill-tuned pirate equipment.

Such a general slur on their technical competence miffs the established pirates more than somewhat. Chris Miles, who at only 18 runs London Music Radio and is also the acknowledged superbrat genius of illicit rig-building, qualifies the slur like this: 'In court, of course, to get the magistrate going, they always stress interference to emergency services. But how often can it happen?

'The Christmas before last, for example, a station that was left unmanned – out of fear for Eric – developed a harmonic on the ambulance channel all over London. But the Home Office had that station off the air within the hour. When something like that happens, they're out immediately. So the fact that established pirate stations can transmit for months without a visit from Eric must say something about the sprog hazard.

Of badly-designed equipment which is hard to tune properly, Miles says: 'It would be against our interests to use it. Some people *do* use it, but they're the sort of wallies in anoraks who record themselves in their own bedrooms because they like the sound of their own voices.

'Of course, anyone with the know-how and £500 can set up his own radio station. A transmitter plus aerial costs about £130 and most people already have the making of a studio – records, something to play them on and a tape-recorder. Add a sound mixer and a mike and you're away. So there are *hundreds* of wallies coming on the air all the time . . . "Testing, testing; this is a record for my mum," and creating all sorts of interference, but you never hear from them again.'

Back up at the Horizon transmitter, the Sunday evening atmosphere is rigid with high-tension macho nonchalance. 'We're into hot time now,' mutters Chris Stewart. 'Between seven and nine is when Eric is most likely to pay us a call.'

'But there's no way Eric's getting our transmitter,' says Stewart. In profile, except for the babysoft hair, he looks like Jack Palance on a mean day. And he needs to talk.

'When we go out installing, for instance, we've got the GLC overalls, collar and ties, the fake IDs. Funny, we often get tenants getting us to do jobs for 'em. I mean, they say we're stealing council electricity – and fair's fair, we are, about one penny's worth a transmission – but it all evens out. I've unblocked tenants' sinks and changed lightbulbs for 'em.

'I mean, it's not as if we're doing any harm. And there's a bloody big audience out there. I can prove it. I've got petitions people have sent, and every week we get a letter saying, "I'm a blind person and I can't get out to the disco to hear these sounds," or, "I'm an invalid and I just wanna thank you for bringing this music to me."

'As well, this is Brixton, yeah? But because the kids have got something to stay in for with Horizon, I reckon the mischief's gone down. Mugging in this area's dropped right off.

'Could it be the music?'

YOU