

International Radio (and Audio) Festival in Malta

Chrissy Brand's latest assignment took her to an island in the sun. She finds that the music radio industry is still alive and kicking and turns her attention to 'psychedelic-noir audio drama' and other intriguing podcasts.

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I'm writing this month's column while attending the International Radio Festival (IRF) in Valletta, Malta, which took place from October 29th to November 4th. Valletta was the 2018 European Capital of Culture, and its Fort St. Elmo, built in the sixteenth century, was the impressive venue for the festival. This event commenced in 2010, under the stewardship of Darryl von Daniken, the festival's director. It is aimed at music radio professionals: on-air hosts, producers, programmers and the music industry.

I attended the week-long radio festival and the one-day audio conference (Fig. 1). There was a prevailing confidence and excitement emanating from the presenters who broadcast at the festival. This is despite the challenges and competition faced by the music radio industry, in the shape of the many streaming music services, the key ones being *Pandora*, *Vevo*, *Apple Music*, *Soundcloud*, *Mixcloud*, *Spotify* and *YouTube*. This surge of optimism was typified by what Darryl wrote in the festival brochure, "Radio is experiencing a tremendous resurgence fitting in perfectly with today's ear-phone generation and feeding our need for authenticity and 'time away' from today's ever-increasing impersonal over-digitised and over-engaged one-dimensional 'fake' world, where superficial surfing represents the order of the day. Media channels, brands and services are rediscovering the unique qualities of radio and curated audio, recognising radio as the most sociable medium. No wonder radio is returning the fastest-growing advertising revenues across commercial channels these past few years!"

The Festival

Around thirty stations broadcast their programmes live from the IRF in Valletta.



Proceedings kicked off with Maltese station Bay Radio's morning programme. The station has been the most popular in Malta for the past decade, with a market share of 22.31%, or a daily audience of 50,000 people. Aired in Maltese and English, the four-hour daily morning show is presented by Daniel Testa and Ylenia Spiteri (Fig. 2). The show seemed typical of its kind, with competitions, light-hearted banter and hit music.

Although popular, can such shows afford to rest on their laurels in the radio and audio world of fresh innovations? The flipside of that is that the drivetime slots always command huge audiences. Commercial radio stations around the world do a similar job in getting the city, region or, in Bay's case, even the nation, to work and school every weekday.

Drivers automatically turn the radio on when they get in the car, which isn't the case when they enter the kitchen or sitting room. I predict that live drivetime radio will outlive



the rest of the daytime and evening music radio schedules, which can be pre-recorded or used on an automated playlist.

One programme that did seem to be pushing the boundaries was *Flying Carpet*, presented by a team based in Zürich and called *Kasheme*. *Kasheme* invites DJs and musicians from around the world to play their own choice of records. This might not sound very inspired or original, but you have to listen to fully appreciate the quality and diversity of the music. DJs perform



in a relaxed atmosphere at the *Kasheme* bar, which is akin to a living room, with sofas and rugs.

The *Kasheme* concept combines a studio, bar, club and an experience where the music is played. You can read more and listen to programmes from their *Soundcloud* channel on their website. www.kasheme.com

The fact that they were invited to a radio festival illustrates today's almost seamless crossover between music, DJs and radio

(Fig. 3). It's all about the audio, streamed and consumed in whatever way is best for the presenters. Today's audiences adapt and have become used to listening through any number of apps as much as – and increasingly more so than – by traditional, linear, radio.

While most of the stations and broadcasters on the festival schedule were directly invited by IRF, the representation from India came by a more circuitous route. The *Sound of India* contest asked Indian FM radio stations to upload samples of shows onto *Mixcloud*. A jury chose RJ Devaki, from Red FM 93.5 Ahmedabad, as the winner (Fig. 4). Her regular show is also a platform for the local authorities, such as the mayor and police commissioner who have used it to get their messages across.

All the festival programmes went out online and were disseminated on the local DAB+ multiplex in Malta, as well as being broadcast to each station's regular audience back home. I heard one presenter

state that the festival had a global audience of 100 million listeners. Taking all the shows' regular audiences into account, that could well be true.

It is a massive figure in these days of fragmented audiences, where small-scale radio stations, podcasts and other streams can be heard by just a few dozen loyal listeners. A listenership totalling 100 million is usually achieved only by the biggest broadcasters in the world, like the Voice of America, China Radio International and the BBC World Service.

In addition to the station programmes at the festival, there were also some one-off

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programmes. I particularly enjoyed an interview with the current owner of *D'Amato Records*. *D'Amato* lays claim to be the oldest record store in the world. It is still in the same building in Valletta as when it started off, as a family furniture store, over 130 years ago, in 1885. It still stocks vinyl, along with CDs and DVDs (Fig. 5), and is a testament to the fact that – even in this fast-changing technological world – there are always some music formats and businesses that can adapt, evolve and succeed. A fact that deserves mention because we can sometimes turn to the new developments and forget the relevance that the past can deliver. The *D'Amato Records Malta* programme was one of many aired at the festival that were uploaded to the International Radio Festival *Mixcloud* channel to be heard at your leisure.

www.mixcloud.com/IRF

The Audio Conference

In a clear acknowledgement of the changing landscape of radio, the conference-element of the festival embraced the tag of audio, a point not lost on both the speakers and the audience. The setting was in one of the splendid halls of the *Mediterranean Conference Centre*, built by the Order of St. John as a hospital in the sixteenth century. I couldn't help but wonder what the patients of the past would make of the debates that echoed around the hall, as radio presenters, producers and audio professionals from the Channel Islands to Shanghai and Moscow to Munch gathered.

Music business executive Scott Cohen was one of those insisting that 'radio' is 'dead'. He suggested that automated playlists are the way forward. But Paul Sylvester of Absolute Radio vehemently disagreed, leading to Scott challenging Paul to spot the difference between an automated playlist and one compiled by a DJ.

Nicky Birch (BBC, *Somethin' Else Productions* and *Rosina Sound*) took the words out of my mouth when she stated that radio is not just about automated music. Even on music radio, listeners want presenters, entertainment, news and (a vital point) *companionship* too.

Mixcloud's Head of Community, Xanthe Fuller, added that *Mixcloud's* strength and popularity have been growing from the fact that it hosts thousands of complete radio shows with mixes, entertainment and personalities. She stated that this was one reason why radio would remain a key medium around the world (Fig. 6).

Podcasts Present

While in Malta I spoke with Jackie Stevens, producer and co-host of *The Big Time with Whitney Allen*. This is a syndicated country music show that has been running for over 15 years. Unlike most country music, the show is produced and aired from Los Angeles, rather than Nashville.

www.thebigtimeonline.com

Moving away from all that music radio – wonderful though it was – how about the soothing, amusing or dramatic aspects of the spoken word, in the form of podcasts?

Jackie and I spoke about the proliferation of podcasts; she listens to dozens – all recommendations from friends. That seems a good tip. While you can search for podcasts in apps, it's often hard to see beyond the popular content NPR, CBC, ABC and BBC and the other traditional broadcasters.

These certainly cannot be faulted for the quality of content and production, but there are also many more obscure and innovative podcasts being produced. I have three podcast series for you this month. I certainly plan to catch up with the many episodes I have yet to hear during the long dark nights. You will, of course, be able to find these podcasts via your preferred podcast app or search engine.

We start with two long-running programmes, set in fictional North American radio stations: *King Falls AM* is set at a mountain town's late night talk radio show and its paranormal happenings and inhabitants. Despite this supernatural element, I find the characters to be believable and well-constructed:

www.kingfallsam.com

Welcome to Night Vale is a podcast presented as a radio show for the fictional town of Night Vale, reporting on the strange events that occur within it. The series was created in 2012 by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor.

www.welcometonightvale.com

Finally, *What's the Frequency?* started in 2017. It is a 'psychedelic-noir' audio drama, set in 1940s Los Angeles.

<https://wtfrequency.com>

There is a ghostly unease that haunts all three of these well-assembled productions. For me, they highlight the way forward for audio drama: Quality, but on a small scale, and with low budgets.

'Traditional' state broadcasters' drama departments could be under threat from the rise of the drama podcast, or they could take inspiration from them. Which will it be ... ?

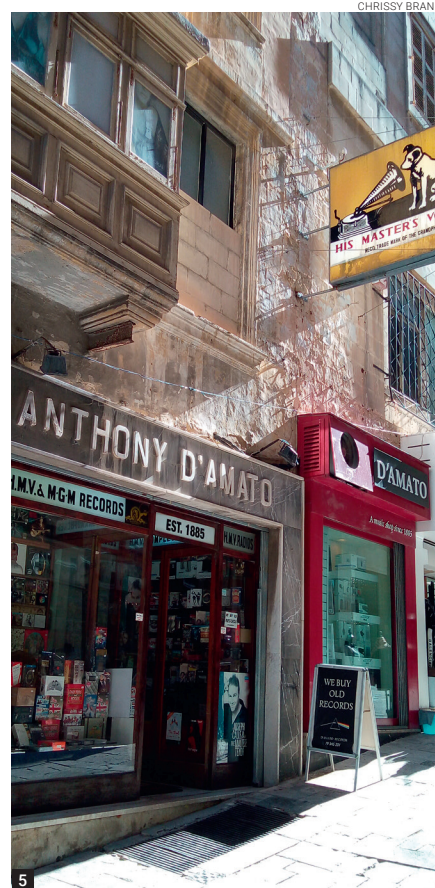


Fig. 5: Is D'Amato Records in Valletta the oldest vinyl stockist in the world?

Fig. 6: Paul Sylvester, Xanthe Fuller, Nicky Birch and Scott Cohen debate radio's future.

Radio Events

EUROPEAN RADIO SHOW AND DIGITAL AUDIO SHOW 2019

Paris, January 24th to 26th

UK INTERNATIONAL

RADIO DRAMA FESTIVAL

Herne Bay, Kent, March 18th–22nd

146TH AUDIO ENGINEERING SOCIETY CONVENTION

The Convention Center, Dublin, March 20th–23rd.