



# Radio Luxembourg

Thank you 'Big L'

We owe you SO much...

Written by Andy Owen



There are certain sounds in life, that never truly leave you.

*A train whistle drifting across a night sky...*

*George's Fadd9 opening chord to 'A Hard Day's Night...'*

*The crackle of an old vinyl record...*

And for many of us who grew up in Britain during the late 1950's and early 60's, there was another sound entirely - a distant, fading voice arriving mysteriously through the darkness, from somewhere beyond the horizon.

**"Two-oh-eight... Radio Luxembourg..."**

Even now, all these years later, those words still carry something magical.

For younger generations raised in a world of instant streaming, twenty-four-hour music channels and unlimited choice, it is impossible to explain what Radio Luxembourg meant to so many people, in those unforgettable times.

It was not merely a radio station.

It was a magical doorway - a secret passage into another world.

A first glimpse of modernity arriving quietly through the speakers of a tiny transistor radio in a dark bedroom, under the bedclothes.

And as a growing 12-year old, there was a lot of wonderful things being discovered and experienced under those bedclothes.

Radio Luxembourg was right up there with the most memorable...

By the early 1960's, I was around twelve years old and music was already beginning to take hold of my imagination in a very serious way. Britain still felt restrained then - cautious, post-war, respectful of authority and tradition.

But something was beginning to change. You could feel it in the air even before you fully understood it.

Musically, America seemed impossibly exciting to us.

Rock and roll had exploded there first - and stories of Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Chuck Berry and The Everly's - filtered across the Atlantic like reports from another civilisation.



In Britain, access to that music was limited.

The BBC still treated popular music almost cautiously, as though too much of it might somehow damage public morals.

Music travelled largely by word of mouth. Friends passed records around. Older cousins introduced you to songs.

Somebody at school would suddenly mention a new American singer. A rare record would circulate like contraband.

But at night, if conditions were right and luck was on your side, there was Radio Luxembourg.

Broadcasting on 208 metres from the tiny Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, the station had already been transmitting into Britain since the 1930's, cleverly bypassing the BBC's monopoly on commercial broadcasting.

By the time my generation discovered it, Radio Luxembourg had become something far greater than merely a radio station. It was the soundtrack of restless youth.



The signal itself was terrible. It was, on many occasions, a frustrating listen, but that was part of the romance.

The reception drifted constantly. It faded in and out. Strange whistles and interference swept across the music.

European stations would suddenly emerge from nowhere - and then disappear again. You learned to adjust the tuning dial almost instinctively, delicately trying to hold onto the signal before it dissolved back into static.

Yet somehow, the poor reception made it seem even more magical.

Radio Luxembourg felt distant and forbidden, as though you were intercepting broadcasts never entirely intended for you. Listening became an act of discovery.

You hunted for the music. You discovered it.

*You.*

No one else.

Night after night, I would wait until the house fell quiet before carefully pulling the transistor radio from beneath the pillow. One small earphone would be plugged in. The blankets would be positioned carefully to prevent any sound escaping into the room.

Mom and Dad frowned upon these late-night listening sessions. Sleep was considered more important than rock and roll. So, there was always a slight sense of danger involved.

If I heard them coming up the stairs, or heard their footsteps outside the bedroom door, the radio disappeared instantly - and an Academy award-winning performance of deep sleep was delivered.

But once Luxembourg emerged through the crackle, sleep became the last thing on your mind.

Sunday nights were especially important, because Radio Luxembourg broadcast the current Top 20, presented by Barry Aldiss between 11 and midnight.



Barry was always announced as '*Your DJ - BA*'

Those evenings became ritualistic for countless teenagers across Britain.

In bedrooms from Birmingham to Glasgow, Liverpool to London, young people lay hidden beneath blankets, listening to the songs that would shape their generation.

And what a generation it became – with the best musical decade ever – the sixties.

Looking back now, what strikes me most powerfully, is not simply the music itself, but the overwhelming feeling that the world was changing around us.

*We knew* it.

*We felt* it.

Every hour of every day. Because, we were part of it...

Even at twelve years old, I sensed it instinctively. Britain was slowly moving away from the greyness of the post-war years. Fashion was changing. Movies were changing. Youth culture was emerging as a genuine force, for the first time.

The old certainties and rigid structures of British life were beginning to loosen.

And music sat at the very centre of it all.

We desperately wanted to be part of this new world that seemed to be arriving from America - and then beginning to grow here in Britain too.

Radio Luxembourg gave us access to that world. It was about far more than broadcasting. It represented a unique moment in time - a bridge between old Britain and modern Britain.

It was a station that carried excitement, rebellion, glamour and possibility across Europe, every single night. Even beyond Britain, Luxembourg's signal slipped quietly behind the Iron Curtain, bringing Western popular music into Eastern Europe and becoming part of youth culture there too.

The station's influence reached far beyond what most of us realised as children listening secretly beneath blankets in suburban Britain.

The station itself possessed a mythology that perfectly suited the imagination of young listeners. To many of us, Luxembourg felt impossibly exotic.

And, so exciting. But it was about to get better. *Much* better...

The Beatles arrived.



They opened up the flood gates. Don't let anyone tell you anything different.

They did not merely become astonishingly successful. They altered the emotional temperature of an entire country first - then the world soon after.

They changed my life. And everyone else's too.

That first excitement eventually became a lifelong love of the group. I later saw them live twice in Birmingham - experiences that remain among the defining memories of my life.

Like so many people of my generation, I can still remember the excitement surrounding them. Today, it is almost impossible to explain to younger readers what Beatlemania actually felt like, while it was happening.

Remarkably, Radio Luxembourg played a historic role in that story.

On 5th October 1962, Luxembourg became the first station to broadcast 'Love Me Do' nationally to British listeners. That moment now feels almost symbolic - as though modern Britain itself had quietly announced its arrival through a fading medium-wave signal in the darkness.

Like thousands of young men during that period, I ended up forming a rock band with local friends, driven by the same dream that suddenly seemed possible to ordinary working-class boys across Britain.

Music was in my bloodstream.

That then led to me working for RCA Records, including a stint in New York City, being sent over there, to help sort out major product issues and unprecedented demand, as a result of Presley's death.

And when I trace that path backwards, much of it leads directly to Radio Luxembourg. Without Luxembourg, many of us would have discovered the music and artists later, perhaps less intensely, perhaps without the same sense of wonder.

Of course, Radio Luxembourg itself was eventually overtaken by the very revolution it helped create. In 1964, the pirate stations arrived - most famously Radio Caroline - broadcasting from ships anchored off the British coastline.



Their signals were clearer, their output more modern and their music available throughout the daytime. Suddenly the monopoly Luxembourg had enjoyed, began to weaken.

Then, in 1967, the BBC finally responded with the launch of BBC Radio 1, staffed by many former RL and pirate radio DJs who soon became household names themselves.

The broadcasting landscape changed forever, as commercial radio followed - and local stations appeared. FM improved sound quality and music became endlessly available.

Slowly, inevitably, Radio Luxembourg faded into history. Yet strangely, it never truly disappeared.

Mention "208" today to people of a certain age and watch their faces change. Instantly they are transported back to darkened bedrooms, tiny transistor radios and the thrill of discovering new music while the rest of the household slept or were busy downstairs.

We were led to believe that the station was hidden away somewhere inside a grand European building, voices travelling mysteriously across the continent to reach British bedrooms after dark.

In reality, many of the programmes were actually recorded in London at the station's headquarters in Hertford Street, Mayfair, before being flown out to Luxembourg for transmission.

Few of us knew that at the time. The mystery remained intact.



Many of the later to become household names on Radio Caroline and then BBC Radio One - Tony Brandon, Paul Burnett, Dave Cash, Simon Dee, Noel Edmonds, Stuart Grundy, Tommy Vance, Peter Powell, Steve Wright, Mike Read, Emperor Rosko and David "Kid" Jensen - all recorded programmes there for Radio Luxembourg.

Radio Luxembourg also launched the careers of many UK presenters including Jimmy Savile, Hughie Greene and Michael Miles. A little-known fact, is that the popular TV game shows, *Double Your Money* and *Take Your Pick*, were first broadcast on Radio Luxembourg.

Disc-jockeys who recorded shows at 38 Hertford Street, included Sam Costa, Alan Dell, Keith Fordyce, Alan Freeman, Jack Jackson, David Jacobs, Brian Matthew, Pete Murray, Jimmy Savile, Shaw Taylor and Jimmy Young.



Many of these programmes were sponsored by record companies - and in order to include as many records as possible, most programmes played little more than half of each record.

Particularly from about 1960, the station's output came to be more explicitly targeted at the growing teenage market, with increasing emphasis on pop music. Drama productions, comedy, variety and sports programming disappeared altogether.

By about 1963, almost all the station's output was based around the playing of music on discs. This was because the mainstream evening audience for middle-aged 'family entertainment' had by this time largely migrated from radio to television.

Yes, Hertford Street was very important. Somewhere behind those walls, programmes were once recorded that shaped the lives of millions of young listeners like me, who would never see the building itself.

Tapes carrying Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison, The Beatles and countless others, once left that address bound for Luxembourg, before being transmitted back across Europe into waiting bedrooms after dark.

And somewhere among those listeners was a twelve-year-old boy from Solihull lying awake beneath the bedclothes, listening carefully to the future arriving through static and crackle.

No modern streaming service can ever truly recreate that feeling. Because discovery itself has changed. Everything today is immediate, available instantly at the push of a button. Perfectly clear. Effortless. But there was something deeply intimate about fighting to hear distant music in the darkness while the world slept around you.

Radio Luxembourg belonged to a time when music still felt magical.

And for many of us, it always will.

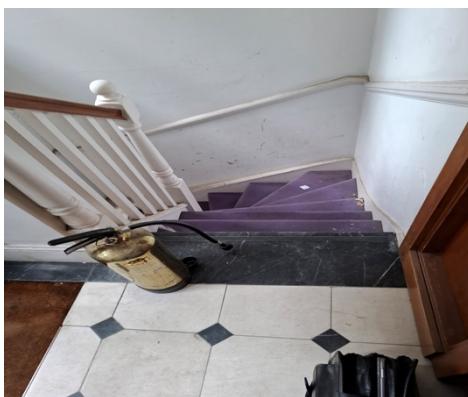
Last week, while in London, I visited 38 Hertford Street in London - the old headquarters of Radio Luxembourg. There is a commemorative plaque on the building, acknowledging its extraordinary place in British broadcasting history. I felt strangely emotional standing there...



The front door looked shabby and old. I wanted to try and get inside to see if there were any remnants of the studios – or anything else for that matter.

It was locked, but I got lucky. Some workmen came along and opened the door to go in. I chatted with them and they told me it was now all individual apartments.

So, my luck was out. Nothing to see. Except this unloved staircase from the front lobby, going down to pretty much nothing, as the wall at the bottom had been panelled.

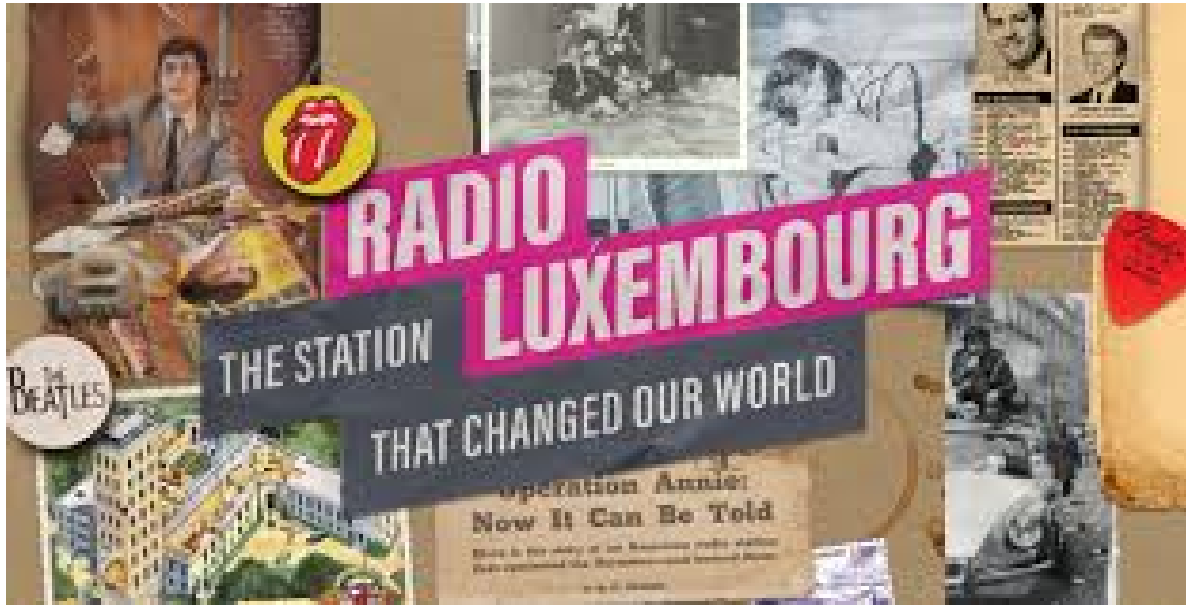


I would like to think that those legendary studios were behind this panelling and this was the staircase to that incredible piece of musical history.

It was, after all, a place, that created pure magic for me and countless others just like me - and, without doubt, shaped all our lives.

Thank you, 208. For *everything*...

You will *never* be forgotten...



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